



Joint Legislative Hearing on Public Protection February 12, 2026

Good day. Thank you for giving us time today to discuss a topic that is important to all New Yorkers. My name is John D'Alessandro, and I have the honor of serving as the Association Secretary for the Firefighters Association of the State of New York, or FASNY. For more than 154 years our primary mission has been to advocate, educate and train volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel throughout the State.

Volunteer firefighters provide more than 90% of the fire and emergency response in the Empire State, including the eight volunteer fire departments in the City of New York. Volunteers are a cornerstone of public safety in our diverse State. Unfortunately, one of the greatest challenges the volunteer fire and EMS services face is the declining number of people who commit to being part of it.

In the early 2000s, there were approximately 120,000 volunteer firefighters in New York. Today, that number is down to 80,000. Over the last two decades, FASNY has been at the forefront of reversing that trend. One of the first things that we did was try to find out what the obstacles to volunteering were. The number one answer we were getting twenty years ago is the same answer we get today: the lack of time. As call counts go up in every department, as the type of calls get more complicated and as the State increasingly uses the volunteer fire service as a rapid deployment resource, we are asking far less people to do so much more. This results in compounded stress put on current volunteers as they not only have to respond to more calls in their service area but also provide coverage in neighboring communities. This additional stress has created a bridge that links a recruitment challenge on one side to a retention challenge on the other.

As of today, the shortage of volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel has not crossed from the significantly stressed level to the crisis level, but we are moving closer to that point every year. Through "traditional" means such as a statewide outreach campaign, train the recruiter classes at local departments and supplying promotional assets, FASNY's efforts have stopped the bleeding of volunteers. By this, we mean that we have been able to take in as many new members as the number of existing volunteers we lose every year. While we continue to fully pursue these activities, this stopgap approach will inevitably begin to lose ground. That is why the Association developed the Volunteer Optimization Legislative Initiative, or VOLI.

VOLI is a collection of 14 straightforward legislative initiatives that directly address the impediments to volunteering. In putting this list of incentives together, we tried to make them equitable and available to all volunteer departments. The more recruitment and retention tools



we give local departments, the greater their ability to fulfill their staffing needs. With close to 1,800 volunteer departments in the State, there is no magic bullet or singular solution to this problem. The demographics of these departments range from rural to suburban, from those adequately funded and staffed to those whose limited members chip in to pay for fuel and equipment. We must be careful that the things we put in place do not create an environment of the haves versus the have nots.

While it would be wonderful to put all 14 initiatives in place simultaneously, each of the 14 can stand on its own. Let me be clear, any one of these 14 incentives would be a useful tool for every volunteer department. By design, the 14 initiatives as a whole address the recruitment and retention problem at the State, county and local level. Some have a financial component, and some do not.

Since the VOLI program was unveiled a few weeks ago, FASNY representatives have traveled around the State to solicit grassroots feedback on each component. I want to highlight three of the recommendations that would provide immediate positive impacts and promote a state and local partnership to address the issue.

First, and foremost, is a meaningful increase to the State income tax credit that volunteer firefighters can claim under Tax Law § 606. Since its inception 22 years ago, the \$200 income tax credit has not increased. In this economy, a \$200 income tax credit is neither a recruitment nor a retention incentive. As a result, we would like to see that base tax credit for all volunteers increased to \$800. In addition, we would like to see a performance-based structure for active volunteers to earn additional tax credits up to \$7,500. This alone would be an extremely effective recruitment and retention tool.

Second, Tax Law § 606 unnecessarily restricts a volunteer to claiming either the income tax credit provided by the State or the partial real property tax exemption under Real Property Tax Law § 466-a. This limitation makes no sense, as one benefit is provided by the State and the other is provided at the option of local governments. At present, volunteers must choose one or the other. Removing this restriction provides direct economic relief to volunteers through all available State and local programs.

Third, the partial real property tax exemption under Real Property Tax Law § 466-a should be expanded to allow all local jurisdictions to exempt up to 100% of the property taxes of volunteer fire and EMS personnel. This incentive is a local opt-in incentive that would be a significant recruitment and retention tool in communities whose departments are dealing with personnel shortages and would help relieve the affordability crisis our volunteers face. We believe that communities providing significant property tax relief to volunteer fire and EMS personnel would help recruitment *and* retention by relieving the financial strain that families of



new and existing volunteers face. This incentive would also encourage current and future volunteers to set down roots in their communities, especially in high-cost jurisdictions.

As we are all aware, public safety is not a luxury, it is a necessity. The dedicated men and women who volunteer to serve their communities save New York taxpayers over \$4 billion every year in salaries and benefits alone. With almost 1,800 volunteer departments in New York, financial resources and personnel needs vary greatly. Yet one common thread is that most communities cannot afford to pay their way out of the negative public safety impacts created by the decreasing number of volunteers. To fundamentally turn around this growing negative trend, we must provide volunteer fire departments with meaningful, diverse and financially feasible incentives they can use to recruit and retain members. Every level of government must be a partner in this endeavor. The Firefighters Association of the State of New York has been fortunate to have the support of legislators on both sides of the aisle and also of the Governor. We ask our partners in this fight to support our VOLI recommendations to make New York a safer place for all its citizens.