



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' -- for the week of April 15, 2024 -- 'RecruitNY all about protecting the future'

THOMAS F. O'MARA April 15, 2024

| ISSUE: **EMERGENCY SERVICES VOLUNTEERS**



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Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column...

This week, "**RecruitNY all about protecting the future**"

This past weekend, local volunteer fire departments across the region and around the state opened their doors as part of the Firemen's Association of the State of New York (FASNY) annual "RecruitNY" campaign.

RecruitNY is a key public awareness initiative aimed at addressing one of New York State's most daunting challenges: the recruitment and retention of local volunteer firefighters and EMTs.

FASNY Secretary John D'Alessandro said, "Over the past 20 years, New York state has seen a significant decrease in the ranks of volunteer firefighters by approximately 40,000 individuals. It has become increasingly challenging to recruit new firefighters and retain existing ones due to factors such as the turbulent economy and busy schedules."

In fact, it is a critically important initiative for the future of this state. That's especially true for our rural, upstate localities where the local volunteer fire department has long been a foundation and mainstay of so many communities. We can't risk its demise.

Consequently, the challenge of recruiting volunteer firefighters and EMTs deserves all the attention it gets. Keeping our corps of emergency services volunteers strong must be a statewide priority. Volunteer fire departments have long been the foundation of public safety and security, and the center of community service and civic pride. It's a challenge that we need to keep working on and raising awareness about because in addition to the safety and well-being of our communities, the economic impact of volunteer emergency services is enormous.

RecruitNY sounds the alarm and accomplishes these goals very effectively.

According to FASNY, the number of volunteer firefighters statewide declined from 140,000 in the early 1990s to less than 90,000 just a few years ago. Volunteer emergency medical technicians (EMTs) experienced a decline from more than 50,000 to 35,000 during the same period, with some rural counties experiencing as much as a 50 percent depletion of their EMT ranks. FASNY recently noted that they have lost 4,100 volunteers over the past two years and, this year, are calling on state legislators to increase the state's income tax credit for volunteers from the current \$200 to \$800, a move I would strongly support. The \$200 level was established nearly two decades ago and has remained stagnant since 2006.

Together with regional state Assemblymen Phil Palmesano and Chris Friend, I have long sponsored legislation known as the "Omnibus Emergency Services Volunteer Incentive Act," to provide a

series of tax and other incentives to help address the recruitment and retention challenge. Our legislation has been part of ongoing state-level efforts by FASNY and others to keep drawing attention to a challenge that many believe poses a property tax crisis in waiting and other crises for many rural, upstate communities.

A FASNY study, "Tax Savings and Economic Value of Volunteer Firefighters in New York," found that the state's 100,000 volunteer firefighters save taxpayers nearly \$4 billion annually. Other specific findings included that:

--an additional 31,000 career firefighters would be necessary to convert to an all-paid service statewide;

--the annual cost of an all-career service would be \$4.7 billion;

--there would be a one-time cost of \$8.2 billion to acquire existing stations/structures, vehicles, and equipment -- approximately 1,300 stations would have to be built new or reconstructed; and

--property taxes statewide would rise an average of 28.4% statewide.

The FASNY report noted, "New York State as a whole relies heavily on volunteer fire departments. Of its 1,795 municipal fire departments, 89% are volunteer. Volunteer firefighters are most prevalent in smaller, suburban, and rural communities that have a lesser tax base than larger towns and cities. That these communities rely on volunteers testifies to cost savings from volunteer departments, and conversion to paid departments would be a particular burden for these localities."

Bright spots are on the horizon. A recent statewide survey from FASNY revealed that two-thirds of respondents planned to visit their local fire station to gain more information on becoming a volunteer while more than half, 55%, planned to seek more information online. The survey also reinforced the fact that volunteer firefighters and EMS providers -- and the essential role they perform in the community -- are held in high esteem with:

--79% of New Yorkers reporting that saving lives or helping people in need is the single most interesting impact of firefighting;

--98% agreeing that "Volunteer firefighters and emergency medical services are important for the health and safety of my community";

--and 94% responding that they look up to firefighters.

FASNY President Edward Tase, Jr., said, “This year’s annual RecruitNY campaign comes at a time when we continue to see a strong need for more volunteer firefighters. It is encouraging to see that almost half of our communities are interested in answering the call. We are very excited that so many New Yorkers surveyed have expressed interest in becoming a volunteer firefighter.”

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