



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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Weekly Column #2: Struggling fire departments deserve help from state to expand ranks, ensure safety

JOSEPH A. GRIFFO February 1, 2016

| ISSUE: **FIRE DEPARTMENTS, FIREFIGHTERS, FIRE SAFETY, VILLAGES, TOWNS OR COUNTIES**

Whenever the wail of a fire bell sounds off in your neighborhood, you may not give much thought to the deafening noise unless you're the one who called 911.

But behind each of these siren alarms are real people, men and women who put their lives on the line every time they are called to duty. Whether volunteer or paid, these firefighters immediately drop everything to make sure our homes and lives are spared from total destruction. Face to face with a raging inferno, in that moment they have no time to concern themselves with anything other than the flames in front of them.

Yet once the final embers are doused and the smoke clears, many of our fire departments still have much to be concerned about: They are struggling financially, as the price of fighting fires only continues to mount.

Volunteer fire departments in our communities and statewide are desperate to attract new recruits, while also searching out funds to help maintain the equipment and training necessary to protect their firefighters. At the same time, many local governments with paid fire departments are facing significant fiscal challenges to maintain their services.

I believe the Governor and Legislature can help ease this problem. As we prepare for budget negotiations over the next several weeks, I have called upon the Governor to direct at least \$100 million in grant funding to help these struggling fire departments across the state.

My proposed **Firefighter Investment, Retention & Equipment grant program – or FIRE** – would create a pool of \$100 million for those volunteer and paid fire departments most in need – split \$50 million for volunteer departments and \$50 million for paid departments. Each department could apply for this funding by stating their needs, and then the grants would be awarded through the New York State Office of Fire Prevention and Control.

The FIRE grant program would mirror the various federal grant programs currently available through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which includes assistance to firefighters, staffing for adequate responses and construction funding. But FEMA funding is limited in what it can adequately address, so I believe my proposed FIRE grants could be divided proportionately among fire departments in New York State.

There are 1,786 fire departments across the state, with more than 96,000 volunteers and 18,500 career firefighters. Volunteer fire departments, in particular – totaling 1,693 – provide a significant service to those rural and suburban communities that do not have paid professionals.

But as necessary equipment becomes more expensive, as the number of required training hours has increased and as the demands of fundraising are taking up more time, many volunteer fire departments find themselves pressured to address all these needs while also remaining focused on public safety. That is unfair.

Our firefighters have proven they will do whatever it takes to protect our property and save our lives, and we are grateful for it. In return, we as a state should do whatever we can to

ensure that these vital departments have what they need to expand their ranks while keeping their members and our communities safe.

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