



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Patty Ritchie

## Legislature OK's Ritchie Bill to Allow Out-of-State Firefighters to Join Local Companies

PATTY RITCHIE June 22, 2016



A measure that would allow out-of-state firefighters, including soldiers at Fort Drum and seasonal visitors to the Thousand Islands, Lake Ontario and the Adirondacks, to volunteer as members of local fire departments in New York won final approval by both the Senate and Assembly, and is now on its way to the Governor for his signature to become law.

The bill (S.6609), which has bipartisan support from every corner of the state, would allow local volunteer fire departments to accept out-of-state members, as long as their training and

experience meets the requirements set by state and local practice.

“With the start of summer, many communities, especially in tourism-heavy parts of our area, see a surge in the number of seasonal residents, and our dedicated volunteer fire departments see an accompanying rise in calls for assistance, from fires and accidents and all types of emergencies,” said Senator Ritchie.

“The increased demands can leave fire companies stretched thin, and this bill will give them the ability to recruit extra help from the ranks of trained volunteers—vacationers, tourists and others, including soldiers who may be posted to Fort Drum and other installations—with experience serving back home in other states, and who want to give back and get involved in protecting and serving their adopted communities.”

By law, volunteer firefighters must live in the community served by the fire company they want to join. Limited exceptions can be made for volunteers who live nearby, or work in the district, but not, generally, for residents of a different state.

Membership would have to be approved by the fire department’s officers, and out-of-state volunteers would not be eligible for length of service awards that are offered by many companies to long-serving volunteers.

There are currently 100,000 volunteer firefighters in New York, 10 percent fewer than just a few years ago. Yet volunteer fire departments remain critically important to protecting communities in emergencies, at considerable savings to taxpayers.

A recent study by the Firefighters Association of the State of New York (FASNY) concluded that replacing volunteer fire departments with paid service across the state would cost more than \$9 billion, mostly for salaries and equipment.

The FASNY study found that personnel costs for a completely paid fire service would cost St. Lawrence County taxpayers alone more than \$73 million; in Oswego County, it would cost \$41 million, and in Jefferson County, \$39 million, and would force an increase in local property taxes between 38 percent and 53 percent.

The bill was sponsored in the Assembly by Hudson Valley Assemblywoman Aileen Gunther (D-Middletown).