



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

## O'Mara: Deadline extended for volunteer firefighters to apply for college tuition assistance

THOMAS F. O'MARA October 11, 2016

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The challenge of recruiting volunteer firefighters and EMTs, especially in our rural, upstate communities, deserves all of the attention it gets. Keeping our corps of emergency services volunteers strong has to be a statewide priority. It's one of our most pressing challenges. FASNY HELP has proven to be an effective recruitment incentive as well as a very positive way for these student-volunteers to continue and complete their educations.

**Elmira, N.Y., October 11**—State Senator Tom O'Mara (R,C,I-Big Flats) today reminded area volunteer fire departments and firefighters that the deadline for submitting a Fall 2016

application for a valuable community college tuition assistance reimbursement program, the Firemen's Association of the State of New York's (FASNY) "Higher Education Learning Plan" (FASNY HELP), has been extended until Friday, October 28, 2016.

The prior application deadline was October 7th.

O'Mara said that the program was established as an incentive for people to join New York's volunteer fire service, which has experienced serious volunteer shortages over the past few decades. The program provides tuition reimbursement to student volunteers.

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FASNY HELP has proven to be an effective recruitment incentive as well as a very positive way for these student-volunteers to continue and complete their educations," said O'Mara, a member of the Legislature's joint, 10-member bipartisan Commission on Rural Resources.

"Our volunteer fire departments have long been the foundation of public safety and security, and the center of community service and civic pride, and we can't risk their decline. 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."

The FASNY HELP program, which is made possible through a Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant awarded by the Department of Homeland Security, allows community college students to receive up to 100-percent tuition reimbursement for up to 80 credit hours while serving as volunteer firefighters and maintaining their grades. According to FASNY, the goal of the program is to help recruit and retain volunteers. In order to be eligible, candidates must first complete their local fire department's volunteer

membership process and the Volunteer Fire Department Commitment form.

For more information or to apply for FASNY HELP, visit the FASNY website at:

**<http://www.fasny.com/index.php/resources/fasny-help/>**. Requests for additional information and applications can also be e-mailed to **[HELP@fasny.com](mailto:HELP@fasny.com)**, Attn: John D'Alessandro, Deputy Volunteer Programs Coordinator, or by calling FASNY toll-free at (855) 367-6933.

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. But FASNY notes that the FASNY HELP program, the annual RecruitNY campaign and other initiatives are beginning to make a difference and approximately 20,000 firefighters have been added to the ranks of departments statewide over the past few years.

Earlier this year a new FASNY study, "Tax Savings and Economic Value of Volunteer Firefighters in New York," found that the state's 100,000 volunteer firefighters save taxpayers more than \$3 billion annually. Specific findings include that:

- > an additional 30,822 career firefighters would be necessary to convert to an all-paid service statewide;
- > the annual cost of an all-career service would be \$3.87 billion;
- > there would be a one-time cost of \$5.95 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 between 3.3% and 123%, with an average increase of 26.5%.

The FASNY report notes, “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.”

For regional counties, the FASNY study estimates that the property tax increases that would result from moving from volunteer to all-paid fire services would be: Chemung (33.8% increase), Schuyler (36.1%), Steuben (40.3%), Tioga (48%), Tompkins (45.4%) and Yates (33.8%).

The full study can be found online at: <http://www.fasny.com/EconomicStudy/>