



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

O'Mara reminds area residents of 'Recruit NY' weekend on April 22-23: Statewide campaign focuses on challenge of recruiting volunteer firefighters

THOMAS F. O'MARA April 21, 2023

| ISSUE: **VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS**



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.

Elmira, N.Y., April 21—State Senator Tom O'Mara (R,C,I-Big Flats) today reminded area residents that the Firemen's Association of the State of New York (FASNY) will conduct its annual "RecruitNY" campaign this weekend.

“Recruit NY” is an annual public awareness initiative sponsored by FASNY to encourage the recruitment and retention of local volunteer firefighters and EMTs.

This year’s RecruitNY campaign is scheduled for Saturday, April 22 and Sunday, April 23. Throughout the weekend volunteer fire departments across the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions, and statewide, will conduct Open Houses and invite the public to come and learn more about becoming a volunteer firefighter.

For a county-by-county list of fire departments locally and statewide currently scheduled to hold a RecruitNY Open House, visit FASNY’s website at **www.recruitny.org/participants/**.

O’Mara said, “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. 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. 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 also notes, however, that RecruitNY 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.

O'Mara, together with local state Assemblymen Phil Palmesano (R,C,I-Corning) and Chris Friend (R,C,I-Big Flats) 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. They point to their legislation as 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 recent 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 include 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.”

