



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

## Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' -- for the week of April 21, 2025 -- 'RecruitNY is all about protecting the future'

THOMAS F. O'MARA April 21, 2025

| ISSUE: **VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER RECRUITMENT**



Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature.

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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 is all about protecting the future"**

Local volunteer fire departments across the region and statewide are once again highlighting one of New York's most daunting challenges: the recruitment and retention of local volunteer firefighters and EMTs.

**FASNY is launching a "Light Up NY Red" campaign this week**, from April 21-27, coinciding with the start of the annual RecruitNY weekend on Saturday and Sunday, April 26-27, when volunteer fire departments statewide open their doors to raise public awareness.

"We're working with state and local officials to get some of our biggest landmarks involved (in the Light Up NY Red campaign)," said FASNY President Eugene Perry, noting that New York's volunteer firefighter ranks have plunged by 33% over the last two decades, leaving roughly 80,000 active personnel.

Leading up to this week, the group has stressed the need for all firehouses statewide to "glow red" throughout the week ahead and urged firefighters to light their homes and businesses with red lights. The lights are intended to "symbolize their commitment to a tradition of neighborly help and the need for more volunteers." FASNY has also called on residents to join in the effort by switching on red porch lights to show their support.

It remains a critically important initiative for New York State's future, especially throughout our rural, upstate localities where the local volunteer fire department has long been a foundation and mainstay of so many communities. Its demise can't be risked.

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.

RecruitNY sounds the alarm and accomplishes these goals very effectively.

FASNY has called on state legislators to increase the state's income tax credit for volunteers from the current \$200 to \$800, a move that passed the Senate last year and one that I continue to 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."

There are bright spots on the horizon. A statewide survey last year revealed that two-thirds of respondents planned to visit their local fire station to gain more information on becoming a volunteer. 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 98% of respondents agreeing that "volunteer firefighters and emergency medical services are important for the health and safety of my community."

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