



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

George Winner

Recruiting Volunteers

GEORGE WINNER September 28, 2009

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It's an issue that's simply not going to go away, and so we just need to keep working at it.

I'm talking about an issue that I've been trying to keep alive in the Legislature since my election to the New York State Senate four years ago: the future of our local volunteer fire departments. Each and every one of us recognizes that government, at every level, has its hands full dealing with economic and fiscal challenges as deep-rooted and as difficult as we've ever had to face.

But that doesn't mean we can afford to stop looking ahead and on this issue the alarms have been sounding for quite some time. For example:

-- according to the [Firemen's Association](#), the number of volunteer firefighters statewide has declined from 140,000 in the early 1990s to approximately 110,000 today. Volunteer emergency medical technicians (EMTs) experienced a decline from more than 50,000 to 35,000 during the same period; and

-- in late 2005 the [Association of Towns](#), in what should have been an eye-opening report, "Volunteer Emergency Services: A System in Crisis," estimated that it would cost local taxpayers statewide more than \$7 billion annually to replace volunteers with paid fire and ambulance services.

To try to help, New York State has initiated valuable tax breaks, tuition assistance, and other incentives, like a new law last year to allow volunteers to participate in certain public employee health insurance plans.

For several years I've sponsored legislation known as the "Emergency Services Volunteer Incentive Act." This measure seeks to enhance a state income tax credit for volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers, exempt their on-duty vehicles from motor vehicle registration fees, and provide educational and other incentives to help recruit volunteers. It's part of a wide-ranging effort to help bolster the ranks of emergency services volunteers statewide, but especially in rural, upstate New York where the local volunteer fire department has long been a bedrock of community pride, service, and protection.

So we need to do a better job of recognizing the difficulty many companies still have to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of emergency services volunteers, and I'll continue to sponsor legislation to do so. There are factors outside of government's influence that

contribute to these declining volunteer ranks, we understand that. But there are actions that government can and should take to provide incentives that just might help reverse the decline.

Most recently, I was pleased to have the opportunity to give my support in the Senate to the creation of a “Volunteer Emergency Services Recruitment and Retention Fund” by allowing taxpayers to voluntarily contribute to the fund’s establishment through a state income tax check-off. Supporters of the measure, which has now been approved by the Senate and the Assembly and will go to Governor David Paterson to be signed into law, believe that it could make a difference – and I agree. The governor should sign it into law when the legislation reaches his desk in the near future.

We just need to keep focusing on ways, large and small, that recognize and reward the critical role emergency services volunteers play in our communities.