



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Area state legislators continue to sponsor legislation to encourage emergency services volunteers

THOMAS F. O'MARA April 10, 2014

| ISSUE: **FIREFIGHTERS**



Elmira, N.Y., April 10—As the nation observes **National Volunteer Week** this week, State Senator Tom O'Mara (R,C-Big Flats), Assemblyman Phil Palmesano (R,C,I-Corning) and Assemblyman Chris Friend (R,C,I-Big Flats) said today that they are continuing to sponsor legislation aimed at helping localities recruit and retain volunteer firefighters and other emergency services personnel.

The area lawmakers have reintroduced the legislation (S.3297/A.4781), known as the "Omnibus Emergency Services Volunteer Incentive Act," as part of ongoing state-level efforts by the Firemen's Association of the State of New York (FASNY, see www.recruitny.org for

more details on this year's annual RecruitNY event on the weekend of April 26-27) 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.

In a joint statement, O'Mara, Friend and Palmesano said, "We have to keep sounding the alarm on this volunteer recruitment and retention challenge, and we have to keep seeking solutions. This legislation helps us keep the challenge in front of the Legislature. Incentives aren't the only answer, but they can be an effective part of a broader response to a threat to one of the mainstays of many upstate, rural communities. The volunteer fire department has anchored so many of our communities for so long, and this crisis is real. It's a property tax crisis in waiting. It endangers the safety and security of cities, towns and villages throughout the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions, and statewide."

FASNY has estimated that it would cost local taxpayers more than \$7 billion annually to replace volunteers with paid fire and ambulance services. According to FASNY, the number of volunteer firefighters statewide has declined from 140,000 in the early 1990s to fewer than 90,000 today. 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.

The O'Mara-Friend-Palmesano legislation would:

- provide a \$400 state income tax credit for volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers who have been active for four or more consecutive years;
- exempt motor vehicles owned and used in the performance of duty by an emergency services volunteer from motor vehicle registration fees and vehicle use taxes;
- authorize local volunteer fire and ambulance companies to use state-administered funds, collected annually through a two-percent fire insurance premium tax on out-of-state insurers, to help offset the cost of health insurance for their members; and
- direct the state Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC) to create a volunteer recruitment service college loan forgiveness program.