



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Michelle Hinchey

## Coalition Calls for First-Ever Volunteer Fire Services Capital Fund in State Budget

MICHELLE HINCHEY March 23, 2023



**ALBANY, NY** – Today in Albany, Senator Michelle Hinchey led a bipartisan group of legislators, firefighters, and municipal leaders in support of her budget proposal to create the first-ever Volunteer Fire Services Capital Fund to help address the financial challenges facing volunteer fire departments in New York State. The Senate one-house released last week included Hinchey's proposal to create the Capital Fund, earmarked at \$50 million, and Hinchey is pushing for its inclusion in the final State Budget. Supporters of the Capital Fund include the Fire Association of the State of New York (FASNY), the Association of Fire

Districts of the State of New York, the NYS Association of Fire Chiefs, the NYS Conference of Mayors, the New York Association of Towns, the NYS Association of Counties, and a bipartisan group over 40 state lawmakers.

“Volunteer fire departments provide almost 80% of all fire protection services in New York State and face an ever-expanding set of responsibilities and regulations, despite deeply inadequate state and federal funding to keep up with the costs of providing those services. My proposal for the Volunteer Fire Services Capital Fund is a key part of the solution to this financial crisis,” **Senator Michelle Hinchey (D-41st District)** said. “We need to ensure that the men and women who dedicate their time to protecting our communities have the funds they need to update their equipment, their firehouses, and maintain pace with the increasing demands of fire safety. I am incredibly proud that our Volunteer Fire Services Capital Fund was included in both the Senate and Assembly one-house budgets, and I thank my colleagues for their help in fighting for this dire funding. With the backing of our bipartisan coalition, we will keep working to ensure our volunteer firefighters get the support they need and deserve.”

**Assemblymember Anna Kelles (D-125th District)** said, “We rely on volunteer fire departments to provide almost 80% of all fire protection services outside of New York City, and these departments are in crisis. They are experiencing major retention and recruitment difficulties compounded by a lack of capital funds to purchase new equipment and to meet safety standards at their buildings. These firehouses face yet another difficulty when their only funding mechanism is to raise taxes on small rural communities that cannot bear the astronomical burden that is needed to adequately fund these services. We need \$50 million in this year’s budget to create The Volunteer Fire Services Capital Fund to ensure volunteer fire departments will continue to be there when we need them.”

**Assemblymember Bill Jones (D-115th District)** said, "This is one of my budget priorities and I was able to get \$10 million into the Assembly One House Budget. I hear the same story in every North Country community I visit- their volunteer fire departments are struggling and desperately need help from the state for capital projects and recruitment. The capital funding included in the One House Budget proposal will go a long way in helping volunteer fire departments acquire the equipment and build the facilities they need to answer the call during emergencies as well as increase morale and impact retention and recruitment. This funding is absolutely critical for volunteer fire departments, and I will continue to push for more state resources for our local fire departments."

Aside from traditional fire services, volunteer departments across New York State assume a growing list of responsibilities, which can include mutual aid calls, EMS, vehicle accidents, and weather-related rescue operations. As the [Times Union recently reported](#), mutual aid calls alone in New York have increased by 151% between 2000 and 2020, while volunteer fire membership has significantly decreased. Bolstering capital funding for the volunteer fire services would also support a system that provides major cost savings to taxpayers. According to a recent [FASNY economic value study](#), volunteer fire services save New York taxpayers \$3.8 billion in salaries and benefits alone, and without volunteer departments, property taxes would rise an average of 28.4% statewide.

With Hinchey's advocacy, the Senate one-house also proposes tax support for volunteer fire and EMS providers, including a plan to increase the Volunteer Firefighter and EMS Income Tax Credit from \$200 to \$800, which has remained unchanged for over two decades. The one-house also proposes to allow volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers to receive both the \$800 Income Tax Credit *and* a 10% Property Tax Exemption, which they are currently unable to receive simultaneously due to State Law.

**Senator John W. Mannion (D-50th District)** said, “I strongly support a \$50M Volunteer Fire Services Capital Fund because many Central New York communities depend on local volunteers for their fire services. These departments continue to face retention and recruitment difficulties, as well as a crisis of capital funds, and this money would be a lifeline and an important investment in public safety.”

**Senator Pete Harckham (D-40th District)** said, “At a time when emergencies like natural disasters, electric battery fires, overdoses and hazardous material spills are on the increase, this means our volunteer firefighters need more support than ever before. With municipal budgets stretched to the limit, a capital fund for volunteer fire and emergency services in the State Budget is necessary to safeguard our residents.”

**Senator Kevin Thomas (D-6th District)** said, “I proudly support the creation of The Volunteer Fire Services Capital Fund that is needed to address challenges volunteer fire departments are facing. The unfair burden placed on firehouses due to increased demand for services, major recruitment issues and lagging repairs cannot be sustained. We can, and we must, do more to give back to those volunteering to put their lives in danger every day.”

“Volunteer fire departments across Upstate New York need our support,” said **Senator Leah Webb (D-52nd District)**. “In many of our communities, volunteer fire departments provide numerous services in addition to fire protection, including EMS, rescue operations, and mutual aid calls. I am proud to champion these efforts to deliver much-needed funds to our volunteer departments so that they have the resources they need to serve our communities.”

**Assemblymember Aileen Gunther (D-100th District)** said, “I want to thank Senator Hinchey for her work to create a capital fund to help address the financial challenges facing volunteer

fire departments in New York State. I have been a tireless advocate for volunteer firefighters throughout my time in the Assembly, and believe we need to provide them the resources they deserve. Our volunteers put their lives on the line to protect us, and it is only fair that we as a state return the favor. For years, fire departments have struggled with increasing costs, low recruitment, and increasing educational and training demands, all without increased assistance. This is unacceptable. I am proud to see Senator Hinchey and my fellow legislators working to correct this, and ensuring our firefighters have the funding they need to continue to save lives."

**Assemblyman Fred Thiele (D-1st District)** said, "Volunteer firefighters provide professional services that are critical to the safety of our communities. Their spirit of volunteerism is a substantial savings to taxpayers. Now more than ever, we must ensure that every effort is being made to strengthen our volunteer fire service, including supporting the capital needs of our fire departments. As Chair of the Assembly Local Governments Committee, I helped establish the New York State Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention Task Force, which recently issued its first report. The Volunteer Fire Departments Capital Fund, just like an expansion of the personal income tax credit for volunteer firefighters, should be part of the State's efforts to support volunteer first responders on the front lines of local and state emergencies and attract the next generation of volunteer firefighters across New York."

"Many communities across New York State are served by volunteer fire departments, and because of our heavy reliance on them, we as a Legislature recognize the urgent need for capital improvements," **said Assemblymember Karen McMahon (D-146th District)**. "Today, we are calling for the first-ever Volunteer Fire Services Capital Fund in the 2024 State Budget. The bipartisanship of this effort shows that the need to support volunteer fire services is not a political fight - it's a necessary and prudent step to ensure the organizations that protect

our communities have the resources they need to do their brave work effectively."

"Households across the Hudson Valley count on our volunteer fire departments to be there whenever we need them. Indeed, were we to pay for their services it would cost New York taxpayers five billion dollars every year," **said Assemblymember Didi Barrett (D-106th District)**. "I have always been proud to support our fire departments across the district with resources to keep them safe. This Fire Services Capital Fund is a long overdue tool to provide direct funding for critical building and infrastructure improvements to volunteer fire departments across New York State and it belongs in our final 2023-24 New York State Budget."

**Senator Peter Oberacker (R-51st District) said**, "I have served with my local volunteer fire company for a number of years and know full well the challenges our departments face, especially in rural areas. Training requirements are stringent, we lack volunteers, and equipment costs continue to rise. Albany needs to take immediate action before we lose this crucial line of protection for our communities. We can start by helping our departments pay for vital equipment and building upgrades by approving a special \$50 million Volunteer Fire Services Capital Fund. This funding will keep our firefighters safe and ensure they are able to do their job protecting life and property in our hometowns. I thank Senator Hinchey for advancing this line item and I stand with her in advocating for its inclusion in the final state budget."

"It is scary to think where our state would be without the courage, dedication and volunteerism of the men and women who serve in our volunteer fire companies and emergency medical services, especially in rural communities like those Senator Hinchey and I represent," **said Assemblymember Chris Tague (R-102nd District)**. "Our volunteer fire services save lives and property while also saving taxpayers billions of dollars annually. They do it all

on equipment that is often bought secondhand at auction, and they rely on fundraising to make ends meet. Their commitment to us has not waived, even during the pandemic. The very least New York state can do is to say 'thank you' by making this capital fund investment. Let's get it done in the final budget."

"While our 80,000 volunteer firefighters risk their lives for free, there are significant capital costs associated with providing the facilities and equipment they need to protect their communities and to do so safely," **said FASNY Association Secretary John D'Alessandro.**

"FASNY and the volunteer fire service strongly support Senator Hinchey's efforts to establish a fund where volunteer fire departments can access resources to assist them with critical capital projects that help our firefighters with their mission."

**Association of Fire Districts of the State of NY President Kenneth Preston said,** "We fully support Senator Michelle Hinchey and her fellow legislators on their proposal to include \$50 million dollars in a Volunteer Fire Services Capital Fund in the final budget. We would hope that other legislators and the Governor would recognize that this and other programs to support our volunteer firefighters are a cost-effective way to preserve a system that protects while keeping down costs. In a country founded on the principles of volunteering, we cannot lose our way and forget that volunteerism is still one of the things that makes this county the envy of others around the world."

**New York Association of Counties President Michael E. Zurlo said,** "Not only do volunteer firefighters save lives and protect property, but their selfless dedication to their communities also saves New York taxpayers millions of dollars every year. With all that volunteer firefighters do for us, the least we can do for them is ensure they have the resources they need to do their jobs safely and effectively. Counties commend Senator Hinchey for her leadership on this issue and are proud to support her efforts to secure this

needed investment in our volunteer fire departments.”

“The New York State Conference of Mayors (NYCOM) recognizes the fiscal challenges facing volunteer fire departments across New York State,” **said NYCOM Executive Director Peter A. Baynes.** “We, therefore, applaud Senator Hinchey’s efforts to establish the State Volunteer Fire Services Capital Fund, which will help ensure that the facilities and equipment that these departments need are available without overburdening New York’s property taxpayers. We look forward to partnering with Senator Hinchey and her colleagues in the State Legislature to ensure that volunteer fire departments are appropriately funded and remain viable long into the future.”

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