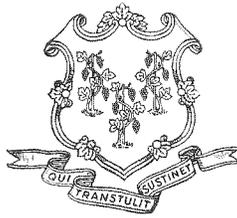


Bill



State of Connecticut
SENATE

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Senator Winfield, Representative Butler, Senator Hwang, Representative Kupchick and members of the Housing Committee. I am Sen. Kevin Witkos, and I am testifying in favor of **Proposed S.B. No. 55: AN ACT CONCERNING AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS.**

I first want to thank you for holding a public hearing on this proposed bill today. I believe Senate Bill 55 addresses a very serious issue for any municipality in Connecticut who relies on volunteer firefighter and EMS service. In many of these municipalities they face a shortage of members for a variety of reasons and struggle to have adequately trained volunteers ready to respond when their community needs them most. I represent eleven towns in my district where they all in some way or another depend on volunteer firefighters with only a couple also employing paid firefighters as well. I have had the opportunity to meet many of the great volunteers across my district and I feel this legislation would help with their efforts to attract new recruits along with retaining current members.

Under this proposal, a municipality which has a volunteer service would be allowed to establish a project to provide affordable housing with priority given to the members of the department so long as they are in good standing and with the department for more than a year. This concept is commonly referred to as firefighter villages and has been used in other states as a tool to not only encourage residents to volunteer, but also prevent losing members who the department takes a lot of time to properly train. As close as Westchester County, New York you can find volunteer firefighter villages established by towns to help address losing membership who may move because of rising cost housing. In 2012, the town of Greenburgh, NY had a twenty-two unit of affordable housing initiative with the first five of the units being offered to the Village of Ardsley Volunteer Fire Department members.

Presently in Connecticut we allow municipalities the option to offer tax abatements to volunteer firefighters for their property taxes. While I support this municipal option, the abatement can only be offered up to \$1,000.00 and departments still struggle with attracting new recruits and maintaining their current roster of members. As a former volunteer fire chief I can personally attest volunteers who serve our community take time at the expense of their personal and professional lives, they go through continuous training requirements and at a moment's notice risk their lives to save others. We owe it to the volunteers across this state to

do all we can to support them and make sure their departments are full of members to provide adequate fire coverage for their community.

Proposed Senate Bill 55 is another way we can reasonably support our dedicated volunteer departments. I look forward to working with the leadership of the committee this session to craft legislation to provide affordable housing possibilities for volunteer firefighters. I thank you for your consideration and would be happy to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

Kevin D. Witkos, Senate Minority Leader Pro Tempore, 8th District