

# Public Safety and Security Committee

## JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

**Bill No.:** HB-6841

**Title:** AN ACT CONCERNING FIREFIGHTER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION.

**Vote Date:** 3/16/2023

**Vote Action:** Joint Favorable Substitute

**PH Date:** 3/9/2023

**File No.:** 370

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### **SPONSORS OF BILL:**

Public Safety and Security Committee

Rep. Patrick S. Boyd, 50<sup>th</sup> District

Rep. Gary A. Turco, 27<sup>th</sup> District

Rep. Raghiv Allie-Brennan, 2<sup>nd</sup> District

Sen. MD Rahman, 4<sup>th</sup> District

Sen. Herron Gaston, 23<sup>rd</sup> District

Rep. Ben McGorty, 122<sup>nd</sup> District

Rep. James Sanchez, 6<sup>th</sup> District

Rep. Joseph P. Gresko, 121<sup>st</sup> District

### **REASONS FOR BILL:**

The proposal involves several measures to enhance the Fire Service in Connecticut. Firstly, it aims to create a Youth Advisory Board for the Fire Service. Additionally, the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection (DESPP) will be required to employ two positions to support Youth programs and fire recruitment specialists in every emergency preparedness region. The bill also mandates an increase in access to candidate physical ability testing and the number of recruit fire academy class deliveries. Furthermore, dependents of firefighters and firefighters who have served their communities will have their tuition waived for UCONN, community technical colleges, and the CT State University (CSCU) System. The bill also provides funding to reduce the cost of attending the Connecticut Fire Academy and the regional fire schools for fire departments and firefighters, authorizes funding for a new paramedic scholarship program aimed at improving opportunities for students to receive specialized training and enhancing patient care statewide, and creates a new tier within the Connecticut Municipal Employees Retirement System that includes firefighters and police officers to provide them with greater benefits.

### **SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE:**

- In Section 1 of the raised bill, Subsections (c) and (d) stating that "the board" shall employ a full-time youth program coordinator and a full-time cadet or career explorer were moved to section 3, subsection (b)(2) in the adopted amendment. They were amended in both sections to state "The Office of the State Fire Administrator" shall employ a full-time youth program coordinator and a full-time cadet or career explorer. This change was made to reflect that the Office of the State Fire Administrator would be charged with administrative duties, which includes hiring the youth program coordinator and cadet/career explorer positions.
- In Section 8 of the raised bill, subsection (d)(10), line 272 the phrase "as documented by the chief of such department" was added for consistency in verification of qualifications for tuition free attendance of regional community technical colleges outlined in this bill.
- This change was also made in line 335 and line 395 for clarity.

#### **RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:**

Connecticut Housing Finance Authority (CHFA), Chief Executive Officer, Nandini Natarajan: offered comments on Section 7 of the bill that would require CHFA to develop and administer a mortgage assistance program to uniformed members of paid or volunteer fire departments for purchasing a firefighter's principal residence. It is stated that CHFA is appreciative of the goals of this bill but maintains that Section 7 of the bill is not necessary and may have unintended consequences. It is also stated that CHFA already offers many loan programs for first-time homebuyers and presenting too many programs can be overwhelming and confusing for prospective homeowners.

Department of Emergency Services & Public Protection (DESPP), Commissioner, James C. Rovella: supports the intention of this bill in identifying ways to improve recruitment and retention among first responders but, further discussions are necessary to address the financial burden associated with the bills as they are currently written. It is stated that DESPP offers its assistance in ensuring that any proposals that move forward are cost-effective and promote efficient agency operations.

#### **NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:**

Avon Fire Department, Fire Police Captain, Andrew Bloom: supports this bill, stating that as a 10-year member of a volunteer fire department, he has met members from throughout the State who serve as first responders and put their lives in jeopardy to protect others. It is stated that promoting development of firefighters at a young age can help fuel interest in this profession, and additional benefits for those who serve are always helpful for recruitment and retention.

C.H.I.P. Certifyfit.com, Owner and Operator, Sean Cassidy: supports this bill because of the challenges faced by Connecticut fire departments and volunteer fire departments in recruiting and retaining individuals, and the importance of having accessible and up-to-date testing facilities and recruitment technologies. It is stated that their company plans to create a state-of-the-art facility for testing, training, wellness, recruitment, and retention for public safety officers, and expressed support for all efforts that advance the cause of recruiting and retaining individuals for this critical service.

[Firefighter and Instructor, Scott Saalborn](#): supports this bill as it dedicates efforts to increasing youth recruitment into the profession but is concerned with the fact that Volunteer Fire Departments are not mandated reporters. It is stated that the Chief, Assistant Chief, line officers, and executive officers of these departments are not Mandated Reporters and not required to have youth protection training, unlike coaches, teachers, police officers, and Scout leaders who work directly with youth. It is also stated that the CFPC Junior Firefighter memo provides direction for fire ground safety, but there is no state statute protecting Junior Firefighters from hazing, bullying, discrimination, or sexual harassment. The testimony urges adding Volunteer Fire Department officers to the Mandated Reporter list to give Connecticut's youth a safe fire service training environment.

[Joint Council of Connecticut Fire Service Organizations, Delegate, Connecticut Fire Chiefs Association, Vice President, Greg Priest \(joint testimony\)](#): supports this bill as it aims to improve firefighter recruitment and retention. It is stated that the legislation includes several measures such as establishing a Fire Service Youth Advisory Board, requiring the hiring of two positions to support Youth programs and fire recruitment specialists in each emergency preparedness region, increasing access to candidate physical ability testing, and waiving tuition for dependents of firefighters and firefighters who have performed a period of service to their communities at UCONN, community technical colleges, and the CSCU System. Additionally, the bill allocates funding to reduce the cost to fire departments and firefighters for attending the Connecticut Fire Academy and regional fire schools and authorizes funding for a newly established paramedic scholarship program.

[Police Officers Association of Connecticut \(POACT\), President, Florencio Cotto Jr](#): supports this bill as it increases recruitment efforts and provides incentive pay to further education, as well as a college benefit to officers or their dependents. It is emphasized that recruiting and retaining high-quality individuals to serve on the police force is vitally important, especially in the current climate of polarizing debates relating to accountable policing, criminal justice reform, and community protection.

#### **NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

[Connecticut Conference of Municipalities \(CCM\), Mike Muszynski](#): supports improving and properly funding Connecticut's fire schools, enhancing instructors, and providing tuition and housing assistance. However, CCM expresses concerns regarding Section 13, which establishes a new tier for public safety officials within the Connecticut Municipal Employee Retirement System (MERS), as it may provide higher benefits on top of already lucrative benefits. It is stated CCM recommends a 1% surcharge be placed on the net direct premiums of homeowners and renter's insurance policies to fund regional fire schools, training costs, and fire equipment purchases. It is also stated that CCM encourages support for SB 1017 in lieu of this bill which proposes a statewide task force to address firefighter and EMT shortages without implementing such costs on municipalities.

[Connecticut Council of Small Towns \(COST\), Executive Director, Betsy Gara](#): supports some provisions in the bills aimed at creating incentives to encourage people to pursue careers as police officers and firefighters, such as tuition and mortgage assistance. However, it is stated their strong opposition to the provisions mandating that municipal police and firefighters be

enrolled in the Connecticut Municipal Employees Retirement System (CMERS) due to the fiscal hardship it places on towns and taxpayers. It is stated the Committee should explore ways to assist municipalities in controlling pension costs under the CMERS program instead of mandating enrollment in it, possibly by establishing a new benefit plan for new hires within CMERS modeled after the state's Tier 111 program.

**Reported by: Lukas Houle**

**Date: 3/24/2023**