

Public Safety and Security Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: SB-422

Title: AN ACT CONCERNING FIREFIGHTER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION.

Vote Date: 3/19/2024

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 3/12/2024

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Rep. Gary A. Turco, 27th District.

REASONS FOR BILL:

This bill's purpose is to enhance firefighter retention and recruitment. It seeks to require CHFA to develop and administer a mortgage assistance program to uniform members of paid or volunteer fire departments in the state. This program will utilize down payment assistance or any other appropriate housing subsidies and allow CHFA to realize a reasonable portion of the equity gain upon sale of the mortgaged property.

Substitute language:

Language in Sections 2 and 4, explains uniformed member of a paid or volunteer department and number of years of service and family member to receive payment and support.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Nandini Natarajan, CEO/Executive Director – CHFA: Testified in opposition to this bill and stated on behalf of the authority that these sections (Section 1) of the bill are not necessary and may even have some unintended consequences based on the bill's current text. Along with the myriad of home loan programs for first time buyers, CHFA already offer a Police Homeownership Program. Though they support incentivizing and regarding those who serve as officers, teachers and military members they are concerned about whether the offering of additional programs provides the meaningful benefits as everyone would like to see. She also testified that moving from one community to another may be problematic as a condition to obtain this incentive. She requests that Section 1 of the bill be eliminated and stated the agency is wiliness to work with the legislature on ways that CHFA can better provide its loan products to firefighters and police officers.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Gary Vumbaca, Firefighter – IAFF Local S-15: Testified in person in support of this bill. He testified that free college tuition would make the profession of firefighting more attractive. Eliminating the need to pay for college, regardless of socioeconomic background would open the profession to individuals who have previously been deterred. He testified that higher educational backgrounds would lead to a more effective and cohesive department. This will motivate firefighters to stay in the profession long term, leading to a more qualified, and committed force.

Chief Anthony Fabrizi – Milford Fire Department: Testified in support of this bill via correspondence. The Fire Chief testified that many Fire Chiefs are struggling to manage firefighter recruitment and retention which has become a difficult challenge in recent years. He testified that he has seen a shift in age demographic and mindset of young firefighter candidates regarding their commitment to a singular department for the duration of their career. Salary and benefits and a pension structure are factors. Firefighters' departure from town-to-town places a significant burden on the organization in which he or she departs and with no monetary recourse for departments within the State. He asks the legislation to support fire departments with the same legislation that the police departments have to recoup 50% of the city's investment if an officer seeks employment with another department within the first 2 years of service, and that supporting this legislation enables fire departments to recoup a fair portion of their monetary investment from competing departments.

Betsy Gara, Executive Director – COST: Testified on behalf of COST in support of this bill via correspondence. She testified that her organization supports the provisions in the bill which provide incentives to encourage people to pursue careers in these fields as well as ensure they remain in these positions. She says that as a society we must do more as a state, as well, to recognize and appreciate the services that our police officers and firefighters provide to our communities.

Michael Muszynski, CCM: Testified in support of this legislation via correspondence. Michael testified that this bill would enhance recruitment and retention of firefighters throughout CT. He testified that the towns have struggled to attract and retain these volunteers to adequately meet the needs of residents. He suggests funding for the regional fire schools as without such funding the local costs associated with training for firefighters would almost double. He stated that CCM also continues to advocate for the establishment of a 1% surcharge on the net direct premiums of homeowners and renter's insurance policies. Revenue generated would be used to fund the operating budgets of regional fire schools, certain training costs and purchases of fire equipment.

Francis Pickering, Executive Director – Western CT Council of Governments (West COG): Testified via correspondence in support of this bill and stated that it corresponds to item 6.2 in the region's 2024 Policy Agenda. This bill, in their opinion, would improve the recruitment and retention of firefighters, paid and volunteer. They suggest that *"the mortgage assistance program apply to all homes that are located within a reasonable travel time of a fire station, even if they are in another municipality."* This will allow departments to attract a much larger labor pool.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None Expressed

Reported by: Michelle Adams

Date: March 21, 2024