



POLK COUNTY FIRE DISTRICT NO.1

1800 Monmouth St., Independence, OR 97351

Phone: 503-838-1510 Fax: 503-838-1235

Ben Stange, Fire Chief

Central Fire Station
Station #90
1800 Monmouth St
Independence

Airlie
Station #80
14775 Airlie Rd
Monmouth

Pedee
Station #70
12485 Kings Valley
Monmouth

Buena Vista
Station #40
11350 Church St
Independence

April 14, 2023

Good morning Co-Chairs Meek and Nathanson, and members of the Committee,

For the record, my name is Ben Stange and I'm the Fire Chief for Polk County Fire District No.1. We are a combination paid and volunteer Fire District with 48 fire suppression volunteers serving out of four fire stations. We protect 28,000 residents of our Fire District and routinely respond to neighboring jurisdictions and even across the State and beyond.

I became a volunteer with our District in the year 2000. When I started, volunteers would receive \$5 when they responded to an incident or attended a drill. It was in no way a money maker. It was more like a reimbursement for the meals that volunteers would leave cold on the table, gas in the tank to get to and from the station, and wear and tear on their personal clothing that at times would return incidents soaked in blood or perminiating with smoke so bad that it would need to be disposed of.

In 2013, a comprehensive task force including the IRS, Oregon BOLI, the US Department of Labor, and PERS determined that the “pay per call” system that we were using violated policies of more than one of their groups. I remember the meeting at our Fire District when our volunteers were told they would no longer receive cash compensation for their service.

A few years ago, now as the Fire Chief, I started distributing coffee cards to our firefighter of the month. It was a nice way to show some appreciation. I was taken aback last July when one of our most active volunteers approached me with a request. “Chief, instead of coffee cards, can we get gas cards?” For me, this once again highlighted the sacrifices our volunteer firefighters are making across the State.

I participated in the Firefighter Capacity workgroup in 2022 and heard first hand the challenges agencies are having. As a part of the workgroup, LPRO conducted a survey of chief and volunteer firefighters from across Oregon. Of the volunteer firefighters who responded, 70% said their departments struggle to retain volunteers. When volunteers from across the State were asked what may impact retention, the leading answer was to “provide financial or scholarship compensation.” The survey specifically cited “compensation” and “state tax deductions, benefits, or credits” as the most popular way to do this among our volunteer firefighters.

When questioned about personal difficulties encountered volunteering, nearly 50 of the respondents referenced “finding or the cost of childcare” and over 100 indicated “increased financial demands” as difficulties in volunteering.

“Serving Because We Care”



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As a Fire Chief, I was very pleased to see that SB 728 includes a crucial component - specific, quantifiable standards that volunteers must meet in order to qualify.

Volunteer retention is a complex issue and SB 728 will not fix everything. But this issue does not have a singular solution. This is a good step. I hope you'll support Senate Bill 728.

Thank you for your time and I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you,

Ben Stange, Fire Chief
Polk County Fire District No.1