



OREGON STATE FIRE FIGHTERS COUNCIL

International Association of Fire Fighters
AFL-CIO CLC

February 6, 2024

House Committee on Emergency Management, General Government and Veterans
Chair Dacia Grayber
Vice Chair Thuy Tran
Vice Chair Rick Lewis
2024 Short Session
HB 4505 Testimony

Chair Grayber and Committee,

For the record my name is Karl Koenig, from the Oregon State Fire Fighters Council, we represent over 3700 career fire fighters, paramedics, prevention, and wildland fire fighting professionals throughout Oregon.

Today we are testifying in favor of HB 4045. The Bill addresses four important but different groups of employees and their desire to identify and enact improvements in the Oregon Public Service Retirement Plan. (OPSRP)

As pointed out to us by PERS itself that just lumping more groups into Police and Fire Category could jeopardize our "legal" status as a pension program, our labor partners, SEIU and AFSCME conceptualized a "High Hazard Category" that met the Federal law recognizing that group as a legal definition. This group currently serves as 911 dispatchers and Oregon State Hospital employees all over Oregon. These two groups of hard-working professionals are employed in careers that the ability to attract and retain is next to impossible. If you had the opportunity to observe or even do one of these groups of occupations, the ease of supporting this concept becomes infinitely easier. Not many of us go to work and are "locked in" with our patients. On the same hand answering a 911 line is one of the most difficult occupations as a public safety professional. Every caller is having their worst day and somehow the communications specialist need to find out who and what is needed to send help to. Then only get through with that call to do it again the entire shift. This proposal increases the retirement multiplier to 1.8% from 1.5% for each year working at these high hazard occupations.

The next occupation covered in the bill are our elected District Attorney's and their inclusion into Police and Fire pension category to match their Assistant District Attorneys inclusion into Police and Fire Bill that passed last session. The explanation on this Bill is simple, the elected DA's should not have a lower multiplier for the following reasons; some of our elected DA's are not just administrators but actually are prosecuting attorney's where they serve as the lead law enforcement official and therefore should get the same recognition as their Assistant District Attorney's. In at least five Counties in Oregon the ADA is running to fill the retiring District Attorney position. Less is rarely more, attracting ADA's to advance is good policy.

The final group seeking a increase in benefit, actually a decrease of time served to retire is those having police and fire fighters pension designation. The current law requires a retirement age of 60 years old if you don't have minimum years of service in Police and Fire. Our proposal is to decrease the allowable age to retire at 55 years regardless of time served.

I have the privilege of representing our members in matters regarding wages, hours, working conditions retirement security and safety. We call it the "Big 5". My advocacy on this specific issue is centered around my 30 years of experience as a Captain Paramedic. I began my career in Canby at age 25 and retired from Clackamas at age 56. Being a fire fighter is a rewarding, exciting career with immediate feedback on how your performance can improve other people's emergencies. I can personally attest that takes a toll on your mind and body over time. I cannot imagine being 60, my current age and having to work on a fire engine providing a high level of care or perform rescues, including firefighting. Being a public safety professional is a very physical occupation. It is very difficult ask for those who answer others call for help and be required to reach age 60 before being eligible to retire with a full pension. When enacted in 2003 OPSRP had no 60-year old's in ORS 238A and subsequently the retirement age was not debated. Fast forward 20 years. We as fire service professionals in Oregon find ourselves defending a "early" retirement up until we answer with, we die early too! Life expectancy is 67 years old for our profession, 66 for our police officer family members. Too young when life expectancy is over 10 years older for those in the public.

My colleagues in fire and our police family occupations give their all every single day. A difficult career choice that is not the easiest to convince people to try. The Oregon Fire Service has approximately 900 members eligible for retirement. To compound the issue is our staffing is 1000 fire fighters short of national standards, putting more stress on an already stressful career. Police departments and Sheriffs are under severe hiring strain and similar retirement numbers. We must make this change as one piece of the strategy to bring more into public safety professions. If you're leading with health information to attract able bodied people to our profession you cannot lead with occupational cancer, hypertension, heart conditions and early death.

This proposal is not free. The estimates we were given from PERS for the Police and Fire portion of this bill are estimated at 0.86% of payroll. This proposal is about people, not money alone, specifically those who choose to serve others, whether confined to a hospital, court room, dispatch console, police car or fire engine. Unique careers that require investment to retain the very best throughout their career.

We have tremendous support in both Chambers and from both sides of the aisle. Please join your colleagues regardless of party affiliation in voting yes in Committee on HB 4045.

Respectfully

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