



SB 545: Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention Proposal

Senate Committee on Finance and Revenue – Josie Koehne – 1.29.2025

I am a small forest owner speaking on behalf of Tax Fairness Oregon, an all-volunteer advocacy group dedicated to supporting a rational and equitable tax code. In preparing these comments, I consulted with Matt Aalto, **Battalion Chief and Training Officer for the Estacada Fire Department**. His comments are attached at the end.

Problem: Declining Volunteer Fire Fighters

Faced with the increasing threats from catastrophic wildfire, Oregon needs to attract new volunteer firefighting recruits. Volunteers feeds the pipeline to paid professional fire department careers. [SB 545](#) is one proposal trying to address this issue by offering a \$1000 tax credit reward to all volunteer firefighters. But we feel a tax credit is not the best tool to attract and retain volunteer firefighters. Tax credits are costly and cumbersome to administer, deprive the state of future revenue and require a long wait period by the recruit before receiving the tax benefit, which has little attraction for recruitment. But most importantly, a tax credit does not address the main reasons research has shown for why fire departments are seeing reduced volunteerism.

- Spreading \$1,000 in a tax credit to the 8,760 existing volunteers costing \$8.760 million will not solve this problem. John Calhoun from Tax Fairness Oregon will be testifying about why tax credits are not the best use of taxpayer dollars.
- Proposal - provide \$10,000 per volunteer to pay for Training and PPE - total cost for 500 volunteers is \$5 million

The barriers to volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention across the state born by both rural and urban fire departments. Costs for recruits are exorbitant for the required training and the high cost of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) The legislatively appointed **Firefighter Capacity Workgroup** and the **Legislative and Policy Research Office**, (LRPO) completed a study in November 2022 [“Recruitment and Retention of Volunteer Firefighters in Oregon”](#) with *“Options for Impacting Retention”*. Three of the nine recommendations are:

- Provide financial or scholarship compensation
- Provide improved resources for fire departments
- Provide flexibility in training requirements

Our proposal addresses these recommendations.

Our Solution:

We believe a direct appropriation is an equitable way to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters by using state revenue to support Oregon’s 288 registered volunteer fire departments, allowing them to reimburse new recruits for their training and PPE costs.

Most taxpayers pay for their local fire protection through an assessment on their property taxes, which is used in part to pay for initial and ongoing training. New recruits undergo extensive initial training of approximately 370 hours of firefighter training (NFPA 1001) and then an additional 144 hours of training to become certified EMT's (OHA), which typically costs \$1,500 to complete. In addition, the cost for each recruit's PPE is \$5000. Currently, firefighter training and expensive PPE costs must be borne by either the individual recruit or paid for from the small budgets of individual fire departments.

Why should the state, rather than local property tax assessments compensate fire departments for training and personal protective equipment (PPE) for their recruits? The answer is that new volunteer firefighters will reduce the General Fund's' growing costs of wildfire mitigation with rapid boots on the ground throughout the state. A stronger volunteer workforce saves taxpayers millions annually by reducing the state's firefighting budget for personnel expenses and by preventing losses from families and business property damage. This proposal would be far more efficient, equitable and less time-consuming than each fire department applying for individual grants, such as the Fire Marshall's [2023 Wildfire Season Staffing Grant](#) and the BOLI Apprenticeship and Training grants, each with various reporting requirements.

PROPOSAL

We suggest that the General Fund or All Funds provide a compensation package that would consist of a reimbursement to the volunteer fire departments or combined fire departments for the hours of recorded training in a fire academy of up to 370 hours at the current Oregon Minimum Wage of \$14.70 per hour in most areas for a total capped at \$5,000 per firefighter. This compensation package could be given to the fire department directly if they already have a funded line-item budget for recruit academy training. Volunteer Firefighters who complete a recognized fire academy and are cleared to respond to calls, would also receive funding to outfit their personal protective equipment (PPE) for both structural and wildland firefighting operations. This PPE cost would be limited to \$5000 per new firefighter. **The total would be \$10,000 per recruit. If 500 new firefighter recruits were to complete their initial training and receive the proper PPE to become active firefighters, the maximum financial impact to Oregon's All Funds would be no more than \$5 million,** far less than the \$8.7 million proposed in this bill. With this funding, we anticipate a 10% or more annual growth in new volunteers, and better retention of the firefighters we have. This funding goes directly only to recruits who have completed the training and served combatting fires and not for other less dangerous duties such as public education that is allowed in SB 545. The funding could be contingent upon at least one community engagement by recipient department, plus 20 hours per year of public education service delivering information about home hardening, fire safety, and prevention. Additional incentives to be considered might include a length of service bonus for volunteers who have maintained their certifications and who help support the retention of Oregon's volunteer workforce by training recruits. The financial package could expire after four or five years and be evaluated as to its effectiveness.

Only recruits who completed the training and serve on fires would be eligible for the compensation package from the fire department. The benefit of this funding helps both extremely rural areas where population and resources are limited where departments must send their personnel out for continued academy training, as well as in more suburban locations where initial training may be local, but it helps academies bear the costs of new members. Volunteers feeds the pipeline to paid professional fire department careers.

It is in *all* taxpayers' best interest to have a strong volunteer fire force.

We read the bills and follow the money