
Ky. bill to offer tax credit for volunteer firefighters filed

Legislators prefiled the bill in an effort to retain and recruit volunteer firefighters

Jul 23, 2016

By Don Wilkins
The Messenger-Inquirer

OWENSBORO, Ky. — A Kentucky lawmaker has prefiled a bill for the 2017 General Assembly that would allow volunteer firefighters to claim a \$1,000 tax credit.

State Rep. Rick Nelson, a Middlesboro Democrat, filed the bill on July 15. The legislation is meant to help volunteer departments recruit and retain firefighters.

According to the Kentucky Fire Commission, there are 17,000 volunteer firefighters statewide who make up 658 volunteer departments. That's compared to 129 combination departments, which are a mix of paid and volunteer firefighters, and 34 that are strictly paid departments.

Ronnie Day, executive director of the Kentucky Fire Commission, said his agency has been trying for years to get the tax credit bill passed.

"We're hoping by prefiling early that it will get some attention this time," Day said. "It's really not that much money but it's something."

In Daviess County, there are 10 volunteer fire departments and one paid department with two stations — one on Kentucky 54 near Country Heights Elementary School and the other at the Owensboro-Daviess County Regional Airport. The city of Owensboro has a paid department with five stations.

Dan Matthews, chief of the Utica Volunteer Fire Department, said there are more deterrents than incentives for volunteer firefighters.

"Daviness County's volunteer departments have experienced it at different levels and at different times," Matthews said about the difficulty in recruiting and retaining firefighters. "...There are a lot of expenses that don't get paid. We don't get reimbursed for our gasoline, for the wear and tear on our vehicles or for the lights and sirens that we're required to have on our vehicles. That's all out of the volunteers' pockets."

Daviness County Fire Chief Dwane Smeathers, who acts as the liaison between the volunteer and paid departments, agreed that an incentive such as a tax credit would be welcomed by the volunteer firefighters.

"It's an excellent bill because retention is a nationwide problem," Smeathers said. "So many volunteers have families and both parents work. They have kids who play all kinds of sports that take up time. It's very trying on families."

Ohio County depends solely on its nine volunteer departments that cover the state's fifth largest county.

David Himes, chief of the Cromwell Volunteer Department, said rural counties seem to have an even harder time with recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters.

"It's a big problem," Himes said about recruiting and retaining volunteers. "What can you do? I'm open for suggestions. We don't have the money to pay anybody or give bonuses. Every once in awhile we'll have a cookout and we'll do Christmas gifts. But that's basically it."

In the state of Kentucky, volunteer departments must have at least 12 certified firefighters, a chief and one operational fire apparatus or one apparatus on order.

A new volunteer firefighter must complete 150 hours of fire and rescue training within two years of joining a department. And then to remain compliant, each member of the fire department is required to complete 20 hours of state training a year.

Matthews said his department does try to give training bonuses between \$200 to \$400 to volunteers who meet a certain number of training hours a year.

"Anything the fire departments or the state can do to get people involved or to stay involved is a good thing," Matthews said.

Copyright 2016 the Messenger-Inquirer

McClatchy-Tribune News Service

Copyright © 2016 FireRescue1.com. All rights reserved.