



North Dakota Firefighter's Association
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March 15, 2023

House Appropriations, Government Operations Committee

RE: Support for SB 2010

Chairman Monson and Members of the House Appropriations, Government Operations Committee

For the record, I am Robert Knuth, Training Director of the North Dakota Firefighter's Association. I stand before you in support of SB 2010, specifically concerning the appropriation to the North Dakota Firefighter's Association.

The ND Firefighter's Association (NDFFA) was first organized in Dakota Territory on June 4, 1884. In 1893 the North Dakota Legislature appropriated funds to promote the improvement and growth of an Association of Volunteer Firemen (S. L. 1893, Ch.65). The NDFFA was incorporated on January 20, 1901. In 2001 the North Dakota Firemen's Association was renamed North Dakota Firefighter's Association.

The NDFFA is identified in Century Code; Chapter 18-03-01.1 states that the association shall: (1) develop and adopt a statewide fire education and training plan; (2) coordinate fire service training at all levels; and (3) establish procedures to govern the certification process for firefighter training.

Century Code, Chapter 18-03-02, states, "Fire schools must be held annually under the direction of the North Dakota firefighter's association. The schools must be held at such times and in such places in North Dakota as may be designated by the North Dakota firefighter's association executive board."

During the last weekend of February, the NDFFA held its annual fire school in and around the State Fair Center in Minot, ND. We had 783 students travel to Minot to attend in person, and 64 attended virtually for 847 students. Considering the 40+ instructors, approximately 78 members who attended the ND Fire Chief's Association's meeting, vendors, executive board members, and family members, we hosted over 1000 people at this annual event. I want to thank Representative Bellew for coming down and touring the school. Hopefully, we answered your questions, and you were impressed with the dedication to learning that the students and instructors demonstrated. We are still finalizing paperwork and compiling costs for this year's school; however, we average approximately \$150,000.00 to \$160,000.00 to put this 3 ½ day training on annually.

Approximately 6,000 first responders are trained annually by the NDFFA's cadre of adjunct instructors. Most of these are from fire departments throughout the state; however, there are times when we bring in instructors from out of state as well. These classes are offered in numerous ways. Many are held at the individual departments requiring us to travel extensively across the state, some are held regionally where students travel to attend, and we also offer a few virtually.



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Currently, the NDFA offers various fire-related courses ranging from entry-level to advanced management for chief officers. In addition to fire suppression classes, as the fire service is an all-hazards response service, there are courses in various technical rescue, hazardous materials, terrorist response, and instructor qualifications. The NDFA also provides courses in specialized training through partnerships with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the National Fire Academy. Classes are conducted throughout the state, as well as online. Some larger fire departments with their own local academies request to use the specialized training props through the ND Firefighter's Association for the most realistic training experience possible. The National Board on Fire Service Professional Qualifications accredits the NDFA's certification programs.

To provide you with more specific information, I have brought two reports. These show the total number of students, listed by department, who received initial or recertification in automobile extrication for 2021 and 2022. This class is required every two years to maintain their certification. In 2014, to ensure continuity in the program, the NDFA inherited the state Auto Extrication program from the Health Department when the grant they had received to fund the program expired. NDFA funds this program from our appropriation as it is not eligible for grants. In 2021, NDFA taught 1,425 students at the cost of \$43,152.38. In 2022, we taught 1,148 students for \$29,616.85. It takes one instructor per 5 students to put this class on. It also requires actual equipment to use and vehicles to cut up. This is just one example of the cost of providing the necessary training our first responders must attend.

The NDFA's funding comes from numerous sources. Member departments pay annual dues, and occasionally, we receive funds from donations. However, our two most significant funding sources currently are the Insurance Tax Distribution Fund, which accounts for approximately 43% of our budget, and federal and state-level grants. These grants are competitive, and we must apply for them months before they may be awarded. The outcome of a competitive awarding process is not predetermined. These funds are dedicated to the proposed project and cannot be used to fund any other item within our budget. NDFA also goes through the extra steps to ensure that the grants we apply for do not adversely affect any grant opportunity to any fire department in the state. Many of these grants come with a matching funds requirement of as high as 50%. This limits our ability to apply for and/or accept specific grants. Finally, these grants are reimbursable. If awarded these funds, I must first spend the money, considering the cost share we are responsible for, and apply for reimbursement from the grant source.

SB 2211, currently moving through the House, identifies a change in funding source for the NDFA from the Insurance Tax Distribution to the Insurance Regulatory Trust Fund. This change will benefit not only the Association but all fire departments in the state. While funded by the Insurance Tax Distribution Fund, NDFA received approximately 5.5% of the appropriated amount before any fire department received their distribution. Returning these funds to their budgets will allow the fire departments to improve their abilities to provide emergency services to their citizens and hopefully enable them to decrease their ISO rating, which would benefit their communities by facilitating lower premium costs. It would also allow



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the Association to continue providing the training and certification we currently do with minimal financial impact on the individual fire departments.

Standing before you today, stating that these amounts are insufficient for the NDFA to conduct the training and certification testing we are directed to do in the century code may seem hard to believe. However, I ask you to consider the following. As we do not have full-time instructors on staff, we contract with firefighters from across the state or bring instructors in from out of state to provide training or evaluate certification tests. Very few grants we are eligible for cannot be used to pay these instructors for their time, mileage, or lodging cost. These grants also cannot pay the rent or utilities for our office and storage facility, fuel to transport our training props, pay our utilities, or fund additional staff we need. These funds must come from our annual appropriation.

This funding will allow the ND Firefighter's Association to have a more stable budget. It will allow us to continue applying for grants without the concerns of the matching fund requirements while allowing us to await reimbursement, which may take up to 30 days. It will enhance our ability to offer a broader range of instruction to the fire service of North Dakota, including more technical rescue and officer-level classes, without adversely affecting the individual fire departments. Finally, it will enable the association to build better programs to stay at the front of the ever-changing fire service technological advances making the North Dakota fire service an effective, safe, and reliable member of the state's emergency services.

I thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony today and would welcome the opportunity to answer any questions you may have.

Robert Knuth, Training Director
North Dakota Firefighter's Association