

69TH LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

House Bill 1112 - "Relating to membership of the NDPERS Public Safety Defined Benefit Retirement Plan."

House Government and Veterans Affairs Committee

January 9, 2025

Testimony Submitted by:

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Chairman Schauer, members of the committee, my name is Ryan Melin and I serve as the Fire Management Officer for the North Dakota Forest Service (NDFS). In this role I lead the agency's wildland fire response program. I am extremely fortunate to call myself a firefighter. Every day I get to walk into a fire station and remember the hero's that I looked to up as a kid. I vividly remember my mom dropping me off after my father responded to wail of the town siren and walking into the Mohall Fire Department. The smell of smoke and watching what I believed at the time giants within my small town preparing themselves and their equipment for the next call for service. Many years later I am lucky enough to find myself in their shoes. This career has taken me from a small town in northern North Dakota to assignments across the country, its created friendships that will last a lifetime, I have received honors from Governors and Congressman and women and the fire service has given me opportunity to stand humbly in front of you today. I believe we all have a role in making the world a better place and the fire service has given me that gift. As I speak about the challenges I and others face please understand I hold the fire service profession in the highest regard and I could not imagine myself in another profession.

Chairman Schauer, members of the committee, my purpose for testifying this morning is to further support the request to broaden the definition of firefighter within North Dakota Century Code to include state employed firefighters. As it has been explained the current language does not provide the opportunity for state employed firefighters, to participate in the NDPERS Public Safety Defined Benefit Retirement Plan.

NDFS firefighters help ensure the protection of lives, property and natural resources by responding to fire suppression assistance requests, training and equipping North Dakota's fire departments. NDFS provides support to local fire departments through its cooperative fire agreement which acts similar as a mutual aid agreement or through activation of the state emergency operation plan. As NDFS has increased its capacity through the years local fire departments have looked to NDFS for its expertise in wildland fire. NDFS routinely prepositions firefighters in high fire danger areas and responds to requests across North Dakota.

NDFS firefighters work alongside federal, state, tribal and local firefighters in and outside of North Dakota. We are a state and national shared resource, who regularly work for extended periods of time with national assignments regularly last 21 days not including travel. During these assignments' firefighters are often exposed to extremely hazardous environmental conditions. Wildland firefighters are regularly exposed to hazards on the job and during off-hours while sleeping outdoors at the incident, many times this is right along the fire edge. Some of these hazards include smoke and silicate inhalation, off-gassing from burning structures/vehicles, and chemicals used during the suppression fires. It is estimated wildland

firefighters with five or more years in service who have spent at least 50 days (annually) exposed to environmental hazards are:

- Up to 43% increased risk of mortality from lung cancer
- Up to 30% increased risk of mortality from cardiovascular disease

Given the continued increase in intensity and duration of wildfires and the increased proximity to the urban interface and communities, wildland firefighters will continue to be exposed to environmental hazards and harmful chemicals. In 2024, NDFS firefighters worked 10,978 hours on fire assignments.

Wildland firefighting is difficult for those in their 20s, 30s and 40s, it becomes progressively more difficult in their 40s and 50s and now as I am in my mid 40s I have a front row seat to that. This October fires were a reminder that my fellow colleagues in their 20s have a little bit more in the tank than I do. The cumulative effects of sleep deprivation and arduous work were very evident along with the extended recovery time. It is a hard pill to swallow, but I can honestly tell you that I cannot do at 44 what I could do at 30. Offering earlier retirement opportunities than they currently have ensures that, as a state, we don't place an extraordinarily risk on firefighters in their late 50s and 60s. We recognize that placing an older firefighter on fire ground during a wildland fire emergency to protect individual lives and property, dramatically increases the risk to their own life.

I appreciate the opportunity to share this information with you for your consideration of including state employed firefighters, into the NDPERS Public Safety Defined Benefit Retirement Plan.

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