

Senate State and Local Government

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Testimony on Senate Bill 2332

Submitted by: Ken Wangen, Fire Chief Carrington Volunteer Fire and Rescue

Chairwoman Roers and the Senate State and Local Government Committee

I want to thank you for considering Senate Bill 2332.

Finding a way to help all our public safety and emergency services in the state of North Dakota needs to be priority one, if you travel the state there is a chance you would need one or all these services if something was to go wrong.

Here is an excerpt from Firehouse Magazine

How do you operate a fire department on \$10,000 a year with half of the money eaten up by insurance?" That was the lament of the chief of a small fire department as he leaned against the second-hand 1970s-era truck, its once-gleaming paint having long ago lost its luster, a puddle underneath evidencing a water tank that was ready to give out. Beside the old engine in its death throes sat a functional volunteer-built wildfire unit sporting military drab for paint, one of the many government-surplus vehicles handed down to needy fire departments.

This was written in 2003, 22 years ago, yet in my travels throughout the state conducting trainings that very scenario is prevalent today.

The situation has not gotten better, in many ways it has gotten worse. Basic new fire trucks have seen extreme increases in prices. In 2000 a truck that cost \$200,000 with equipment now is being quoted at \$600,000 with no equipment. A water tanker bought in 2014 cost \$230,000, today costs \$407,000. Grass units are the same story. Regardless of the type if I was to sign an agreement for a new truck today it would be a minimum of 2 ½ years before I could expect delivery.

In 2020 the used equipment market went nuts; all used apparatus seen upwards 50% increases. Apparatus 10 years old or less almost became nonexistent, when they do come up you need to be ready to buy in short order. This issue happened because availability of new chassis, prolonged deliveries, and prolonged cycles for departments to replace their units took the supply and demand ratio through the roof in the wrong direction for Fire Departments. We have tried to enter negotiations on 2 used trucks only to find out they were sold.

Of the trucks I listed none are a luxury, they are the basic configurations needed by all fire departments to meet NFPA standard and ISO 9 the minimum requirements for the Certificate of Existence all North Dakota Fire Departments file.

Nothing has gotten cheaper turnout (the protective gear we wear), air packs, keeping the lights on, paying insurances, paying fuel bills and everything that is required to simply operate an entity and meet a minimum standard. Don't get me started on SIRM capable radios but again another increased cost and in this case a expenditure many will not be able to utilize for what another 1 to 3 years. Let's not forget pagers as Rural Fire Departs must have paging to meet the minimum standards. The pager to phone apps do not comply, NFPA standards clearly states primary notification cannot have the internet as part of the transmission circuit. So, we will need to add pager to the mix of expenses we will also see.

I would love to say this is not happening in North Dakota, but it is. As North Dakotans we are resourceful and often find ways, often trading reliability and safety for something that works. We will make do is often heard and something is better than nothing is the prevailing attitude, we can do better. For the safety of firefighter and the public we need to do better.

Having a grant fund available and forward thinking would be a vital injection to stretched budgets that often have to make the decision of paying utility bills vs. costs that train, improve services and make it safer for all involved.

We are seeing an epidemic in North Dakota and the nation concerning Public Safety and Emergency Service struggling to survive let alone better serve the public. Since the last legislative session we have lost 5 Fire Departments. That means people with those areas now have longer wait times and the remaining departments have increase coverage pressures.

The one key component is personnel. volunteer, full time paid staff it doesn't matter. Public Safety is seeing a reduction in applicants throughout all 3 legs of public safety (Law Enforcement, EMS and Fire). Why is this happening? As volunteers time commitment, increase training, unknown schedule of need would be the most often answer given. But it is more complicated than that. Draws on our time have multiplied with kids in activities/sports, other community organizations, you name it if it takes your time, you must give up somewhere. Full time jobs expect more because of pressures. For the full time staffed departments it often falls back on pay and benefits.

For volunteer base organizations you add the business aspect as well as the operational. If they can't meet budgets, they end up having fund raisers (negotiating the web of restrictions now in place to do it legally), pancake feeds, fill the boot campaigns all of this takes up time and most do it willingly but we do something for free and must also give more time so it can continue to exist. If not, we must choose between bad and worse decisions of not replacing outdate equipment, not having training or in some cases paying out of pocket for either. Don't get me wrong the true volunteer will do it because it is our passion to serve and provide but that only goes so far.

This bill is a great first step to help us solve the money aspects that should allow for innovated ways to bring in the volunteers. Please give it a do pass.

Ken Wangen

Fire Chief Carrington Fire and Rescue