

Professional Fire Fighters of North Dakota

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Senate Transportation Committee

Re: Support of SB 2132

Chairman Clemens and members of the Senate Transportation Committee.

My name is Darren Schimke, President of the Professional Fire Fighters of North Dakota representing 420 professional firefighters throughout our State. We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 2132,

Every day in the United States firefighters, police officers, and other first responders navigate busy highways and roads to respond to car accidents, 911 calls, active fires, crime scenes, and other emergencies. While most Americans know that responders face danger as a daily part of their jobs, most aren't aware of how much danger they face from just the other drivers around them. The danger doesn't stop when they reach their destination, either. An average of 12,200 roadway responses occurs every day in the United States, where responders are under the threat of everyday drivers hitting, clipping, or colliding with them as they drive by.

In 2017 alone, more than 15,000 fire department vehicles were involved in collisions nationwide.

That figure does not reflect poorly on the safety record of emergency responders. For perspective, 15,430 fire truck collisions occurred in 2017 while departments responded to a total 34.7 million incidents, putting the collision rate at a very low 0.04 percent overall. Emergency responders are trained to be extremely careful and vigilant in transport and when responding to roadside incidents, and their vehicles are equipped with lights, reflective striping, and sirens that are intended to alert other drivers to their presence. Most states even have "move-over laws" in place to encourage drivers to avoid passing near emergency vehicles they see on the side of the road. Despite these precautions, however, the rate of these collisions in recent decades has remained relatively unchanged, with fatal consequences.

Today, fire truck accidents are so frequent and fatal that they rank as the second-leading cause of on-the-job deaths for firefighters. Up to 25 percent of annual line-of-duty firefighter fatalities are attributable to motor vehicle crashes and collisions. Traffic accidents kill more firefighters than smoke, flames, or building collapses; in fact, the only cause for more line-of-duty firefighter deaths is heart attacks from overexertion. Approximately 500 firefighters are involved in fire truck crashes annually, and 1 out of 100 of those fire truck occupants dies as a result of the crash. Even as regulations have changed in recent decades to make fire vehicles safer, the average fatality rate remains relatively unchanged. These fatalities are not limited to collisions between fire trucks and other vehicles. In fact, in 2017, of the 18 firefighters who died in vehicle-related incidents, 10 were cases of firefighters being directly struck by other vehicles.

The ripple effect of a single collision can be far reaching and remarkably expensive. Fire truck collisions are costly, even when they do not result in injuries; fire trucks alone can cost millions of dollars to repair or replace.

Professionals in firefighting and law enforcement accept that their jobs carry risk. But of all the dangers they face in the line of duty, from gunshots and illnesses to burning and collapsing buildings, the one danger that we are best positioned to reduce here today is the potential of being struck by another driver.

The Professional Fire Fighters of North Dakota respectfully request a Do Pass on SB 2132.

Darren Schimke