



North Dakota Firefighter's Association
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January 24th, 2023

Senate Appropriations Committee

RE: Support for SB-2211

Chairman Bekkedahl, and Members of the Senate Appropriations Committee

I am Robert Knuth, Training Director of the North Dakota Firefighter's Association. I stand before you in support of SB 2211.

The ND Firefighter's Association is dedicated to meeting the needs of a complex and dynamic fire service by providing programs of the highest quality. The ND Firefighter's Association's objectives and goals are: (1) to provide training programs designed to develop the basic and advanced skills necessary for students to be more influential members of the fire service and society; (2) to provide the best instruction and training possible in all areas of the fire service; (3) to serve the public at large by providing education services, training, and progression counseling; and (4) to provide a means to allow firefighters to demonstrate their ability to meet professional qualification standards.

The ND Firefighter's Association 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 North Dakota Firemen's Association was incorporated on January 20, 1901. In 2001 the North Dakota Firemen's Association was renamed North Dakota Firefighter's Association.

The ND Firefighter's Association is identified in Century Code, Chapter 18-03-01.1. It 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.

Approximately 6,000 first responders are trained annually by the ND Firefighter's Association's cadre of adjunct instructors from fire departments throughout the state. Although most of the students are members of the 360+ fire departments in the state, many come from other states and the private sector. Currently, the ND Firefighter's Association offers a broad array of fire-related courses ranging from entry-level to advanced management for chief officers. In addition to fire suppression classes, there are courses in various technical rescue, hazardous materials, terrorist response, and instructor qualifications. The ND Firefighter's Association 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



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request to use the specialized burn props through the ND Firefighter's Association for the most realistic training experience possible.

The National Board on Fire Service Professional Qualifications accredits the ND Firefighter's Association's certification programs.

In addition to assisting the fire department's ability to provide qualified emergency responders, the ND Firefighter's Association's efforts also directly benefit the state's citizens regarding their insurance costs. The cost of fire insurance for a local area is often based on the rating provided by the Insurance Services Organization (ISO). Much of that rating decision relies on the ability of the fire department to provide an adequate response with fire suppression capabilities, and training records are reviewed in the grading process.

The North Dakota Firefighter's Association's funding comes from numerous sources. Member departments pay annual dues of \$100.00 a year, and we also receive funds from donations from time to time. 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 other items within our budget. ND Firefighter's Association also goes through the extra steps to ensure that the grants we apply for do not adversely affect any grant opportunity to any fire departments in the state. Many of these grants come with a 10 - 20% matching funds requirement, which limits our ability to apply for 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.

The ND Firefighters Association's end-of-year expenditures for the last three years have been \$1,331,274.40 (2020), \$862,987.99 (2021), and \$856,994.03 (2022). As you can see, the pandemic and a decrease in grant awards have recently limited our activities. Still, we have already seen more requests to provide firefighter training and certification testing in 2023 compared to previous years at the same time, proving the fire service is returning to pre-pandemic normalcy.

Standing before you today, stating that these amounts are insufficient for the North Dakota Firefighter's Association to conduct the training and certification testing that we are directed to in century code may seem disingenuous. Still, I ask you to take the following into consideration. As we do not have any full-time instructors on staff, all our instructors are firefighters from across the state whom we contract with to conduct training or evaluate certification tests. Very few grants we are eligible for can be used to pay these instructors for their time, mileage, or lodging cost. They also cannot pay the rent for our office, pay our utilities, fund additional staff we need, or pay for fuel to transport our training props. These funds come from our annual appropriation.



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SB 2211 identifies a change in funding source for the ND Firefighter's Association 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. 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 the Association to continue providing the training and certification we currently do without having to charge the individual fire departments. It will allow us the funding to continue to apply for grants without the concerns of the matching fund requirements and give us the ability 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. And it will allow the ND Firefighter's Association to have a more stable budget moving forward, which will enable the association to build better programs to stay at the front of the ever-changing fire service technical advances making the North Dakota fire service an effective, safe, and reliable member of emergency services.

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

Robert Knuth, Training Director
North Dakota Firefighter's Association