



Testimony

Douglas Nelson, State Fire Marshal
Emergency Response Services Committee
October 23rd, 2025

Good morning Chairman Grueneich, and members of the Emergency Response Services Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on the fire service in our State.

After the last meeting on August 20th, I was asked to follow up with further information for the committee on a number of topics.

I have included our full fire department and firefighter statistics report that our office collects each year. The attached report is for 2024.

I was able to contact ISO/Verisk and worked with them to provide the attached information. The information provided includes an outline of the items needed for a fire department or district to qualify as a class 9 property protection classification with their office. I do want to highlight that our office has worked with the Insurance Department and ISO to reduce the number of class 10 fire departments/district within North Dakota from 73, to our most recent information showing less than 20. This has been done through working with the Insurance Department to carry-out the century code, partnering with ISO to produce lunch and learn opportunities to highlight how departments can improve, and pushing further information out with both partners.

I was asked to identify firefighter death benefits that were in place through worker safety insurance and the national fallen firefighter foundation. I was unable to gather specific information as to what WSI provides, but would suggest that this is most likely better information to get directly from that agency. The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation (NFFF) does provide benefits for line of duty deaths involving firefighters. The full list of benefits is linked in the attached information. Please note, the document in the link does indicate that the benefits are dependent upon situations, may not be available to help and/or may not be immediately available due to processing times.

The following firefighter benefits are currently in century code. Please note, that the state fire marshal's office does not qualify for any of these benefits as we are not considered firefighters under century code or in our job descriptions. Therefore, the fire chiefs association or other entities may be better positioned to describe or define these benefits further.

- WSI Presumptive Coverage (Firefighter heart and lung bill) NDCC 65-01-15.1. Allows full-time paid firefighters to be covered under presumptive clauses if certain conditions are met.
- Public Safety Pension NDCC 54-52. Allows firefighters employed by the state or a political subdivision to be covered under the public safety pension.

- Volunteer Emergency Responder (red) license plates. NDCC 39-04-10.16. This allows for one free registration red license plate that serves as an entrance pass to all ND State Parks for eligible volunteer responders.
- ND Firefighter Death Benefit NDCC 18-05.1. This was originally passed in late 2000's, and updated for inflation in 2025. This is a one-time payment to help families cover immediate costs and recover from a loss. This payment requires minimal paperwork, and can be delivered relatively quickly during the process. Most states that I am aware of provide a one-time (or continuing) benefit to survivors of firefighters who have died in the line of duty.

The estimated cost of providing fire response service is difficult for the State Fire Marshal's Office to calculate as we do not have authority or qualify as employed firefighters. I do recommend following up with the North Dakota Fire Chiefs Association for this information as to what the cost comparison and savings are for a volunteer fire department.

Training and certification in North Dakota is legislatively assigned to the North Dakota Firefighter's Association. I have passed on to the North Dakota Firefighter's Association that there were questions about firefighter training at the last meeting. I would suggest any further information regarding their organization to come directly from them.

During the last meeting, I presented a framework for an idea on where the study to evaluate the evolving fire service operational and response needs could start. After further communication and meetings with fire chiefs, this idea does not have widespread support among fire chiefs nor state agencies at this point. However, I do believe that there are opportunities for collaboration among state agencies, and solutions for further support from within the fire service that could be applied during long duration, complex, or challenging response operations.

The state fire marshal's office consists of 10 total staff spread out throughout the state. We have a deputy fire marshal located in the following areas: Fargo, Jamestown, Bismarck, Dickinson, Minot, Devils Lake, and Grand Forks. We do have an eighth position that we have been trying to fill in Williston, but have not been able due to lack of competitive salary.

The strategies to assist local fire departments and serve the state in fire prevention consist of fire investigations, new construction fire plans examinations, fire safety inspections, public education and community risk reduction. We have had success in partnering with other federal, state, and local agencies to increase our capabilities by working together on fire investigations, fire inspections, and community risk reduction. Our staff are primarily from the fire service, some currently still serve as volunteer firefighters, and those that do not already have firefighter I and II training, are sent through for it's applicability to fire investigation and fire safety understanding.

Our deputy fire marshals are committed to their jobs for the state and have full workloads. We do not have spare time to take on additional duties on a typical day. However, I would suggest that when the state is in an emergency or when conditions for a local fire department are challenging, our office would be happy to take on additional responsibility where needed if we can help alleviate some of the challenges local fire departments are experiencing in some way.

I do want to say thank you to the legislature for looking into this and other critical issues facing the North Dakota fire service. The North Dakota State Fire Marshal's Office is prepared to assist in any way we can.

This concludes my testimony and I will stand for any questions.

Additional Information provided for the Emergency Services Response Committee:

Full Certificate of Existence fire department and firefighter report 2024:

North Dakota State Fire Marshal

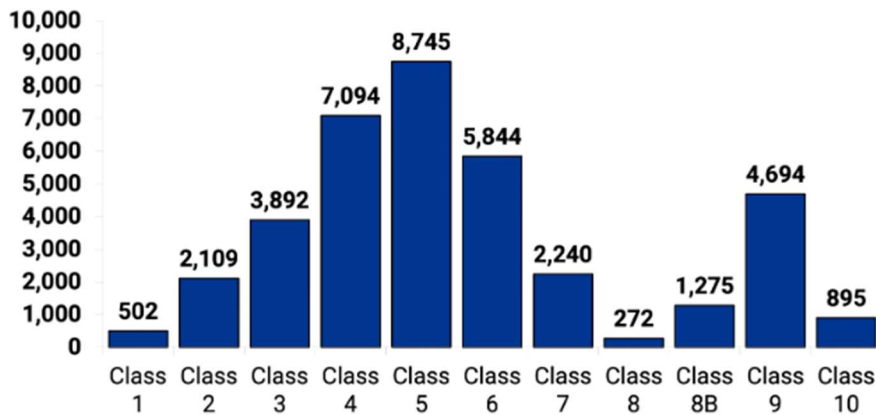
Total number of certified fire departments in North Dakota	357	
• CAREER	9	
• COMBO	14	
• VOLUNTEER	334	
Fire departments/districts reporting to meet Insurance Service Office Public Protection Classification rating of 9 or better		336
Reported number of vacant positions	223	
Active Firefighters	7,681	
Firefighters	7,265	
Full-time Firefighters	714	
Inactive Firefighters	244	
Vacant positions	223	
volunteer/paid on-call Firefighters	7,434	
Fire Departments that have minimum training or certification standards/requirements		161

ISO requirements by category:

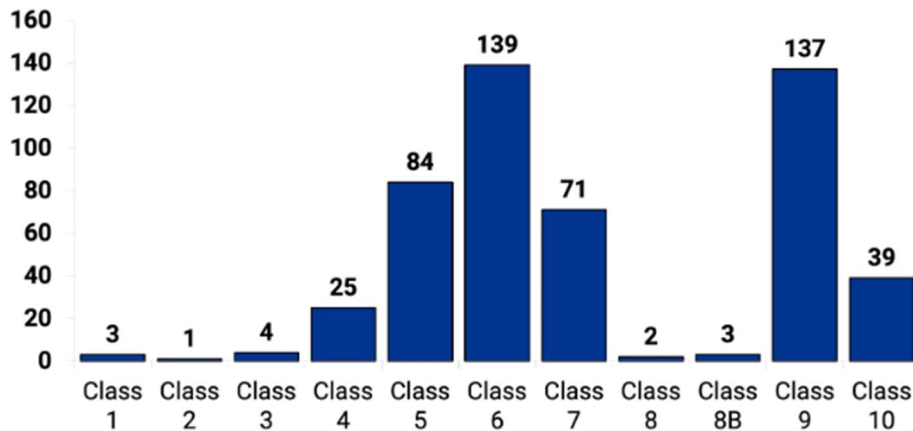
- The following is information given to our office by ISO on the rating schedule:
 - o There have been many questions throughout the state regarding the minimum class 9 standards for ISO as it pertains to funding from the North Dakota State Fire Marshal's office. Following is an outline that a community needs to achieve to qualify as a class 9 community. This information can be found within the Fire Suppression Rating Schedule (FSRS).
 - Organization – There must be a fire department that is organized under state law. The organization must include one person responsible for the operation of the department (Chief). The organization must have defined boundaries that they protect.

- Firefighter Response – The department must respond a minimum of 4 firefighters (from their own roster/department, not counting auto-aid) to all reported structure fires. The Chief can be counted as one of the 4 responders.
 - Training – The fire department must document 12 hours of structure fire training in a 12-month period. At minimum, this can be broken up into quarterly sessions of 3 hours each.
 - Communications – The department must receive alarm notification with no delay.
 - Apparatus – The department must have an apparatus that meets the general criteria of NFPA 1901 and must include at least a 250 GPM pump and a 200 gallon tank. This apparatus will have equipment needs as well to meet the minimum criteria of an engine.
 - Housing – The apparatus must be housed in a station with heat providing protection from the weather and freezing.
- Once the minimum criteria are met, then the community can be evaluated for a class 1-9. To be recognized as better than a class 9, a community must meet the requirements listed above AND have an engine with a 750GPM (instead of 250 GPM) pump, and a water system capable of delivering 250 GPM for a 2-hour duration. Any portion of an activity the community captures with records will be prorated and proper credit applied.
- For more information on the PPC program or your PPC survey, please reach out to your local Field Representative, David Schneibel (dschneibel@verisk.com) or the Field Manager, Randy Downs (rdowns@verisk.com).
- Link to look up states ISO Fire Department breakdown [Facts and Figures about PPC Codes around the Country | How the Program Works | PPC | Verisk's Community Hazard Mitigation Services](#)
- Charts as of 8-21-25:

Countrywide



North Dakota



Firefighter Death Benefits in place through WSI and Federally (NFFF):

- WSI, there were questions to what the WSI death benefit and timeline was, and the number of fire departments/districts that are currently covered. I have been unable to find the time to get this information at this time.
- National Fallen Firefighters Foundation (NFFF), offers guidance on benefits available to survivors of line of duty death firefighters. A guide to these benefits can be found here [Microsoft Word - Survivor Benefits Guide - Formatted.doc](#). Please keep in mind these benefits are dependent upon situations and may not be available to help and/or may not be available due to processing for some time.

Benefit changes and improvements for FF's in ND:

- WSI Presumptive Coverage (Firefighter heart and lung bill) NDCC 65-01-15.1. Allows full-time paid firefighters to be covered under presumptive clauses if certain conditions are met.
- Public Safety Pension NDCC 54-52. Allows firefighters employed by the state or a political subdivision to be covered under the public safety pension.
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Cost of Providing Service:

- This is difficult for the State Fire Marshal's Office to calculate as we do not have authority to be firefighters, nor do we qualify as employed firefighters. I do recommend following up with the North Dakota Fire Chiefs Association for this information as to what the cost comparison and savings are for a volunteer fire department.

NDFA Information:

- I have passed on to the North Dakota Firefighter's Association that there were a question or two about their budget and what they are accomplishing through training. I would push any further information regarding their organization to come directly from them.