

March 12, 2024

Esteemed Chairs Boyd and Gaston,
Members of the Public Safety and Security Committee:

The Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG) appreciates the opportunity to comment on Raised Bill 422, *An Act Concerning Firefighter Recruitment and Retention*.

WestCOG **supports** this bill, which corresponds to item 6.2 in the region's 2024 Policy Agenda:

Provide state incentives to recruit and retain volunteer first responders – Fire and paramedic services are at risk of losing capacity as volunteers retire at a faster rate than they are replaced. While municipalities provide incentives to recruit and retain volunteers, the most significant of these incentives – tax abatements – are only available to their own residents. This limits the ability of municipalities to attract first responders from neighboring jurisdictions, including ones that have larger, younger populations. The state should identify options to support volunteering across the state, regardless of jurisdiction. State-level incentives for volunteering may include state tax credits, tuition support, and access to state plans (e.g., Partnership, 457b).

Bill 422 would improve the recruitment and retention of firefighters, both paid and volunteer by:

- Providing mortgage assistance in the community of service.
- Granting tuition waivers for firefighters who have served a minimum duration in the state and for their dependent children at public universities and colleges in the state.
- Establishing a retirement plan for volunteer firefighters.
- Convening a task force to make recommendations on how to alleviate the shortage of firefighters and emergency medical services personnel in the state.

WestCOG supports these initiatives but **suggests that the mortgage assistance program apply to all homes that are located within a reasonable travel time of a fire station, even if they are in another municipality**. This will allow departments to draw on a much larger labor pool, improving the probability that vacancies can be filled, as well as respecting that firefighters and their families may have reasons that may lead them to live in a neighboring community. (For instance, households may need to live near relatives who can provide childcare, near elderly relatives who need care, or their children may be in educational programs they do not wish to leave.)

I urge your Committee to advance this bill. Thank you for your consideration.



Francis R. Pickering
Executive Director