

VIRGINIA STATE FIREFIGHTERS ASSOCIATION

Charles Singleton, Legislative Chairman

Mr. Chairman and members of the Joint Subcommittee, I appear before you today on behalf of volunteer firefighters.

Let me say as you begun your study that we appreciate your efforts, and we sincerely hope that what you determine to be helpful will meet with your colleagues approval in the 2008 Session.

However as I look back almost a decade now, the General Assembly and the Governor enacted into law an ambitious plan to help in the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters and rescue squad members.

I refer to the "Volunteer Firefighters' and Rescue Squad Workers' Service Award Fund" which was created in 1999. We all were enthusiastic and knew that this was potentially what was needed to help enlist and keep volunteers.

However, we have experienced very little help for eight years. Why? Money has never been appropriated in the budget from the General Fund as the Act states will happen.

With your permission, I'd like to review a portion of the Act.

§ 51.1-1201. Volunteer Firefighters' and Rescue Squad Workers' Service Award Fund Board.

A. The Volunteer Firefighters' and Rescue Squad Workers' Service Award Fund Board is hereby created and is to be composed of 10 members. The Director of the Virginia Retirement System shall be a member and act as chairman. The Governor shall appoint three members of the Board from a list provided by the Virginia State Firefighter's Association and three members from a list provided by the Virginia Association of Volunteer Rescue Squads. Such appointees shall be confirmed by the General Assembly and shall serve for six-year terms. No Board member appointed

by the Governor shall serve more than two full consecutive terms. The Speaker of the House of Delegates shall appoint two members of the House of Delegates and the Senate Committee on Rules shall appoint one member of the Senate. Legislative members shall serve terms coincident with their terms of office.

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§ 51.1-1204. Application for membership in Fund; quarterly payments by members; matching payments from the general fund; payments credited to separate accounts of members.

Eligible volunteers, and all persons who subsequently become eligible volunteers, may apply to the Board for membership in the Fund. Upon becoming a member of the Fund, each eligible volunteer shall pay an amount to be set by the Board per quarter into the Fund. Each quarterly payment made by a member shall be supplemented by such contribution from the general fund of the state treasury for a period not to exceed twenty years as shall be determined by the Board and as may be appropriated by the general appropriation act. The quarterly payments shall be credited to the separate accounts of the members, and the matching contributions shall be credited to the Fund. The member contribution or any additional contribution to the Fund may be made by (i) the individual fire department or rescue squad, provided it is paid for all eligible members of the Fund within the particular fire department or rescue squad; (ii) local government, provided it is paid for all eligible members of the Fund who are volunteers for fire departments or rescue squads within the jurisdiction of the local government; or (iii) any other source provided it is paid for all eligible members of the Fund. Such accounts shall be kept so that they are available for payment on withdrawal from membership or upon receipt of the service award. No eligible volunteer shall maintain more than one membership in the Fund. In the event an eligible volunteer is in more than one eligible position, he must choose the position upon which his membership will be determined.

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§ 51.1-1205. Equivalent distribution.

Any member who has attained the age of sixty and who has ten years of creditable service as an eligible volunteer shall be entitled to a distribution from the Fund equivalent to the contributions that he has made, the

appropriate matching contributions made on his behalf, and any investment gains on such contributions less any losses, provided that such amount shall be reduced by the amount of any distribution to such member under § 51.1-1206. The Board may provide alternative methods of distribution in lieu of a lump sum distribution to members entitled to a service award under this section.

The distributions provided shall be in addition to all pensions or other benefits under any other statutes of the Commonwealth or the United States.

In discussion with some leading officials, we hear this comment:

“Without a state matching contribution, VOLSAP really provides little benefit beyond what the volunteer firefighters could do for themselves.”

Whatever you decide during this study, please determine to work to see funds in the next budget to get VOLSAP working to recruit and retain volunteers.