

**Remarks to Joint Subcommittee to Study the Virginia Retirement System &
Benefits for Public Safety Officers Injured in the Line of Duty (HJR 34)--
Public Hearing regarding VaLORS membership, October 19, 2004**

Inclusion of HazMat Response Specialist Officers

My name is David Bailey and I am here to speak on behalf of the Virginia Association of Hazardous Materials Response Specialists. This association is primarily composed of individuals who respond to emergencies involving hazardous substances within their own localities. This is among the most hazardous occupations with extreme and varied personal health and safety risks to those performing such tasks.

We, the Virginia Association of Hazardous Materials Response Specialists, are asking that the Virginia Department of Emergency Management HazMat Response Specialists be included in VaLORS. Without this improvement in the retirement package, we see the Commonwealth continuing to be a "training ground" for the best and brightest, who then take their skills to other sectors and to other states. The system was instituted nearly 25 years ago, yet no officers have stayed for the duration. They are accepting positions elsewhere and getting better salaries and better retirement options.

The cost for fully training and equipping personnel as mandated for these highly hazardous positions is well into the thousands of dollars. This is an investment which is not returned if the VDEM HazMat officer does not remain in that capacity for a full career. The authorized staffing is currently 11 personnel. Every time an officer leaves, it is necessary and costly to fill his or her vacancy.

Some communities in the Commonwealth are served by full-time career public safety personnel, who are eligible to retire after 25 years of service, with full benefits, and there is no age restriction. The justification for this eligibility is the high risk to the personnel.

Likewise, the VDEM HazMat Response Specialists Officers are subject to hazardous mobilizations 24/7 throughout the state. Terrorist events of the last few years have made these mobilizations even more likely and even more hazardous.

As we indicated, there has been a high attrition rate in the ranks of the VDEM HazMat Response Specialists Officers. We believe that the rate of attrition is due, to a significant extent, to the lack of a competitive retirement incentive.

I'd like to introduce Chief Paul Mauger, President of the Virginia HazMat Specialists, who is here in support of adding HazMat Officers to the VaLORS system. Chief Mauger is available should you have questions.

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