



TREIG E. PRONSCHINSKE

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 92nd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony on Assembly Bill 469: Tax Credit for Volunteer Emergency Responders

Thank you members of the Assembly Committee on Ways and Means for allowing me to speak on this important bill today and how it will benefit the citizens of Wisconsin.

I'd like to start by setting a scene for you all. Picture yourself being a volunteer firefighter. It's Christmas Eve. You're sound asleep when suddenly your pager goes off and you are urgently needed. You arrive on scene at 3am to find a car that has been flipped over. You rush in to help without a second thought towards the accident desperately searching for someone. You find a child who is not breathing. It's a family member of someone you went to school with. But in the heat of the moment you have a job to do.

Scenes like this are not uncommon and accidents don't take holidays. Especially in volunteer departments for both firefighters and EMTs that are often in small and rural communities where people have to leave their full time jobs and often family functions. And it doesn't stop there. These thoughts and images will stay with you for the rest of your life. We have discussed mental health frequently, but our first responders put theirs aside to save lives every day.

Most people expect when they dial 911 someone will be there to help in minutes. But with a dwindling number of volunteers, it could take hours.

I'm here today because I have introduced legislation that would create a nonrefundable tax credit of \$100 annually to any volunteer firefighter or EMT that has five or more years of service in the State of Wisconsin. While I realize this is not a large number to many volunteers, it is the least we can do. Can you imagine if our nurses and doctors were volunteers? Every volunteer I have ever met does not do this job for tax credits. They do it because it is what is right and they have a passion for helping their fellow mankind.

As can be seen from the numerous bills, meetings and discussions held on this issue, we can all agree that there is a coming volunteer emergency responder crisis and it is not just our state but across the nation.

According to the National Fire Protection Association, in 2015 there were 814,850 volunteer firefighters in the United States. In 2017 there were 682,600. In two years we lost 132,250 volunteers. With volunteer responders having an aging demographic, it is vital to put forth efforts to attract and retain these people. If we do not, the cost to go 100% professional would be astronomical. Especially since more than 90% of Wisconsin's fire departments are staffed mostly or entirely by volunteers according to the U.S. Fire Administration and 53% of EMS agencies are in rural areas. Governor Evers even noted at the WI State Fire Association



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Memorial Service this year that his father in law was a Plymouth volunteer firefighter. I bet every committee member here today either knows someone, has a family member or has been a volunteer themselves at some point or maybe even has needed emergency services.

With an estimated 23,194 volunteer firefighters and EMT's in Wisconsin, we owe it to these heroes to start finding ways to help them thrive and to help our citizens get the help they need.

It is important to be proactive rather than reactive on this issue.

Again, I appreciate your time and consideration of this important legislation.

NEW NFPA REPORT FINDS SIGNIFICANT DECLINE IN VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER NUMBERS

April 16, 2019

Last month, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) published its 2017 U.S. Fire Department Profile report (<https://www.nfpa.org/News-and-Research/Data-research-and-tools/Emergency-Responders/US-fire-department-profile>). The report, which is based on data collected via a national survey of fire departments, estimated that there were 682,600 volunteer firefighters in the United States in 2017. That is down significantly from the 814,850 and 729,000 volunteer firefighters that the NFPA estimates were active in the U.S. in 2015 and 2016, respectively.

The volunteer firefighter numbers for 2016 and 2017 are the lowest recorded levels since the NFPA began the survey in 1983. There was no NFPA U.S. Fire Department Profile report released in 2016, and the 2017 report is the first time that the data for 2016 or 2017 has been made available.

Number of Firefighters in the U.S., 1983, 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2015-2017

Year	Total	Career	Volunteer
1983*	1,111,200	226,600	884,600
1990	1,025,650	253,000	772,650
2000	1,064,150	286,800	777,350
2010	1,103,300	335,150	768,150
2015	1,149,300	345,600	814,850
2016	1,090,100	361,100	729,000
2017	1,056,200	373,600	682,600

**Note, this is the first year for which firefighter numbers are available from the NFPA.*

Source: NFPA Survey of Fire Departments for U.S. Fire Experience

"This report should be a wake-up call for everyone who serves in, is protected by, or cares about the volunteer fire service," said National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) Chair Kevin D. Quinn. "We know many volunteer fire departments are struggling to maintain adequate staffing. However, the scale of the loss of volunteer firefighters estimated in this report is really disturbing and something that we need to work as a community and a nation to address."

It is important to note that these numbers are estimates based on responses to a survey of a sample of U.S. fire departments that is designed to be representative of the overall U.S. Fire Service. Approximately 8.7 percent of fire departments surveyed responded to the survey. Any annual differences reflect both actual changes in what is being measured as well as year-on-year statistical and sampling variability.

According to the report, 83,550 of the 132,250 reduction in volunteer firefighters between 2015 and 2017 occurred in fire departments protecting communities with populations of 2,500 or fewer residents. The NFPA estimates an overall decline of 83,900 firefighters (career and volunteer combined) in those communities, a reduction of more than 20 percent over a two-year span. It should be noted that cross sections of data tend to produce less reliable estimates, statistically speaking, than the dataset as a whole because the sample size is smaller. That is particularly true for data in these reports related to smaller communities, where response rates tend to be lower than for communities with higher populations.

In addition to the decline in the number of firefighters serving in the smallest communities, the average age of those firefighters continued to increase in 2017. Fifty-three percent of firefighters serving communities with populations of 2,500 or less were over the age of 40, and 32 percent were over the age of 50 in 2017. This continues an aging trend that has been happening for years among the population of firefighters in small communities.

Age Range of Firefighters Protecting Communities with Populations of 2,500 or Less

Year	Under 30	30-39	40-49	Over 50	Under 40	Over 40
1987	29.7% (132,908)	33.5% (149,913)	20.9% (93,528)	15.9% (71,153)	63.2% (282,821)	36.8% (164,681)
2000	24.4% (100,601)	29.9% (123,278)	26.8% (110,496)	18.9% (77,925)	54.3% (223,879)	45.7% (188,421)
2010	23.7% (89,497)	24.5% (92,500)	23.1% (87,214)	28.7% (108,357)	48.2% (181,997)	51.8% (195,571)
2015	23.9% (96,687)	23.6% (95,474)	21.6% (87,382)	30.8% (124,601)	47.5% (192,161)	52.4% (211,983)
2017	24.0% (90,804)	23.0% (76,383)	21.0% (69,741)	32.0% (106,272)	47.0% (156,087)	53.0% (176,013)

Source: NFPA Survey of Fire Departments for U.S. Fire Experience

In 2015, at the request of the NVFC, the NFPA added a question to the survey about the tenure of active volunteer firefighters. While it is difficult to extrapolate very much from just two years of data, having information about volunteer firefighter tenure combined with the other data in the report will be useful in helping to identify trends in volunteer service moving forward.

Volunteer Firefighter Tenure Profile

Year	1 year or less	1-5 years	6-10 years	10 or more
2015	77,450 (9.5%)	207,950 (25.5%)	189,200 (23.2%)	340,250 (41.8%)
2017	71,000 (10.4%)	179,600 (26.3%)	148,000 (21.7%)	284,000 (41.6%)

Source: NFPA Survey of Fire Departments for U.S. Fire Experience

Although the 2017 report contains new data suggesting a troubling trend in volunteer firefighter staffing, it has been clear for years that recruitment and retention of volunteers is a public policy challenge that all levels of government have a role in helping to address. This year, the federal government will award more than \$40 million to local fire departments to help pay for volunteer recruitment and retention efforts through the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program, funded out of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Efforts are underway in Congress to make volunteer fire and EMS personnel eligible for student loan forgiveness and housing assistance, as well as to modify the tax code to make it easier for local communities to offer incentives.

"We need to redouble our efforts to help local communities bolster volunteer staffing levels," said Quinn. "We should also start thinking about the practical implications of lower volunteer numbers, and how fire protection and emergency medical services are delivered by agencies that are struggling to maintain volunteer staffing. Finally, it is important to recognize that the staffing needs in every fire and EMS agency are unique. Departments in super rural areas are going to have very different challenges than departments that are in or near a large population centers, for instance. There is no such thing as a 'typical' fire department, and I would caution against making assumptions about the circumstances of any particular agency based on the data in this or any other national- or state-level report."



A Rural EMS Taskforce

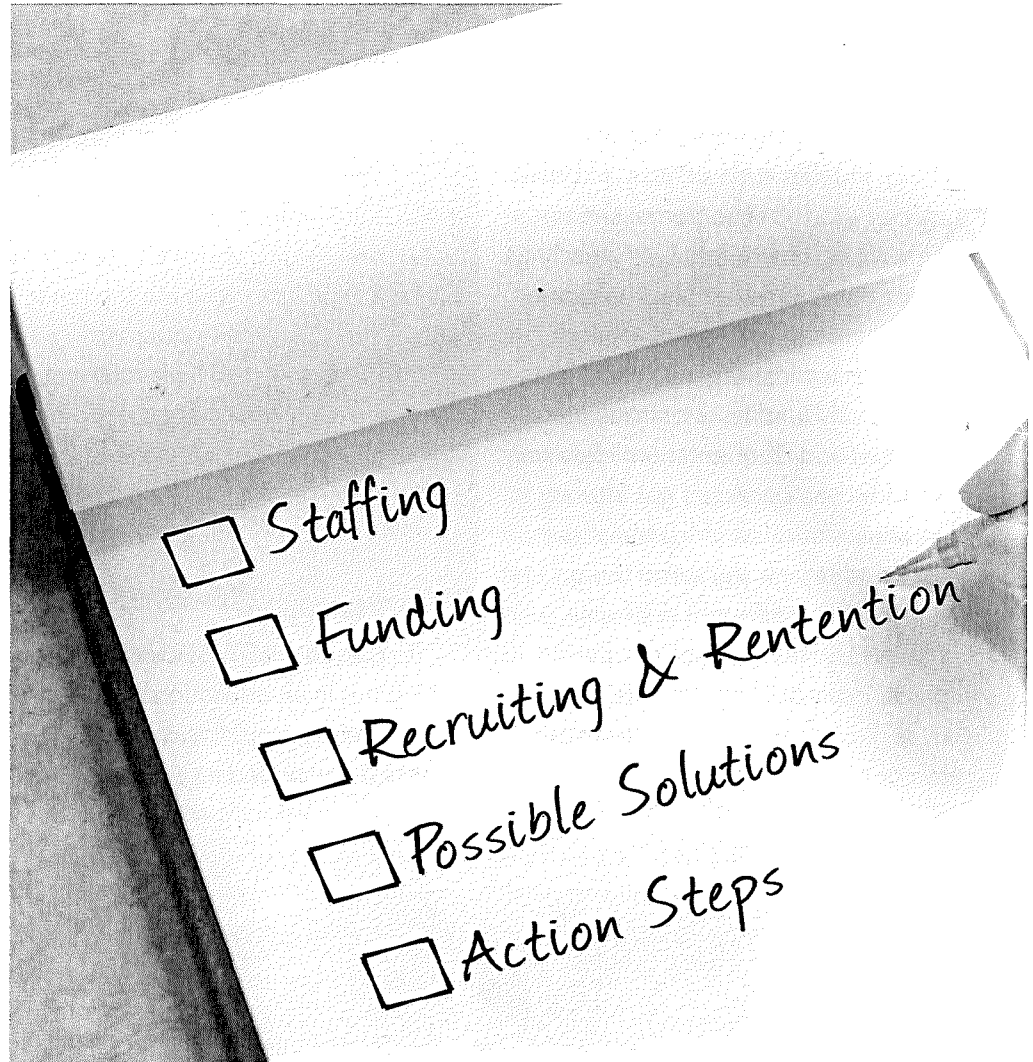
Over the last few months, the Office of Rural Health organized a series of five listening sessions in rural towns around the state: Arcadia, Spooner, Woodruff, Oconto Falls and Boscobel. The purpose was to hear directly from rural services on their challenges, as well as their ideas for solutions. WEMSA, the State Fire Chiefs Association, and DHS sent representatives to almost all of them. Local hospitals hosted the meetings, and services sent their staff and their ideas.

Staffing

There were common issues in all five sessions. Staffing was the greatest concern, especially among volunteers, but also in paid positions. A variety of reasons were given – dwindling volunteerism, generational differences, and job migration (leaving rural areas for city jobs, or driving to another town for work, which limits shifts one can take back home.) The pay, when an option, also doesn't compare well to other jobs. Many entry-level jobs requiring no education or special training often pay close to (or more than) entry-level EMS jobs.

Recruiting and retention

Recruiting and retention barriers were also described. The burdens of



initial and continuous refresher trainings on volunteers were cited, along with other "costs to participate." Also noted was the stress of feeling "always on call" in a small service (vs. a shift in which one can leave), and the unexpected challenges of the National Registry test.

Everyone expects the National Registry test to be tough, but the types of questions asked (some were called "trick questions") led many to

feel it did not match the training. This was primarily centered on EMRs. For an entry-level, first responder role, people that passed the training with flying colors felt the test was too great a challenge. This trickled back to the community and kept others from trying.

There are, of course, important reasons for qualifying someone who wants to provide healthcare, and in every conversation the need for

testing was acknowledged. But there was a general sense that the National Registry test needed to be tweaked to bring it in alignment with the training and expectations for the role of an EMR.

Funding

Funding was next on the list of challenges. At the municipal level, city and town managers have to stretch levy-limited dollars from roads and schools to police, fire and EMS. At the reimbursement level, heavier rates of Medicare and Medicaid in rural populations don't adequately cover costs.

There was an overriding sense that the public – from community and state leaders to the average citizen – has no idea what goes into providing Emergency Medical Services. Their expectations for service are wildly disconnected from the resources allocated to it. "Just call 911 and those (paid) paramedics show up to your door for free, because that's where my taxes go."

Comparing the average rates per capita for EMS vs. garbage collection, as Dana Sechler of PAAW likes to state, often creates a look of confusion and disbelief on the faces of those outside EMS.

Possible solutions

There were lengthy discussions on possible solutions at each meeting. On funding needs, removing levy limits on Public Safety was often suggested, so communities could decide for themselves how to balance costs with services that fit their

specific needs. EMS/Fire Districts were proposed, as well as unofficial affiliation and pooling of resources. Also discussed were reviving the "Dollar for Life" initiative, expanding the Funding Assistance Program (FAP) to pay for education and training for all volunteers, as well as tax incentives for volunteering.

On recruiting/retention, adding resources to help students pass the National Registry test was suggested, as well as using the State's position as a customer to pressure the company to remove the "Critical Thinking" questions at the EMR and Basic levels, and otherwise reign in the EMR "trickiness." Creating bridge courses from EMR to Basic, so staff (especially volunteers), don't have to waste hours going back over the sections they've learned (and practiced) already.

It was suggested to create promotional materials, like short videos, social media and brochures, which could be shared with the public, community and state leaders to educate them on the realities of EMS. Also discussed was working with partners to push rural broadband and cell service expansion, because many of our northern counties have large dead zones where an ambulance is unable to communicate for more information or share data on the patient. And finally, it was suggested to add the rural voice to statewide EMS discussions and decisions. There was a general sense that decision making happened in Madison and Milwaukee, primarily assisted by larger, urban services.

Action steps

As a first step, our office will be starting a quarterly conference call with representatives from rural services across the state, and it will be attended by the EMS Section at DHS. WEMSA, PAAW, and the State Fire Chiefs Association (WSFCA) have also offered to listen in, and the EMS Board is considering how this rural group could be added to their work. Our hope is that this continues bringing rural perspectives to EMS decision making, well beyond this listening session tour.

Preliminary meetings with DHS, WEMSA, PAAW and WSFCA have already occurred to share takeaways from the listening sessions, and the reception has been very positive. Our office will be releasing a full report, which will be shared with every state and federal legislator, as well as video highlights from each meeting. Check out <http://worh.org/ems-listening-sessions> for more information as it emerges.

Thank you to all the participants in Arcadia, Spooner, Woodruff, Oconto Falls and Boscobel for taking the time to have these discussions. ♻️

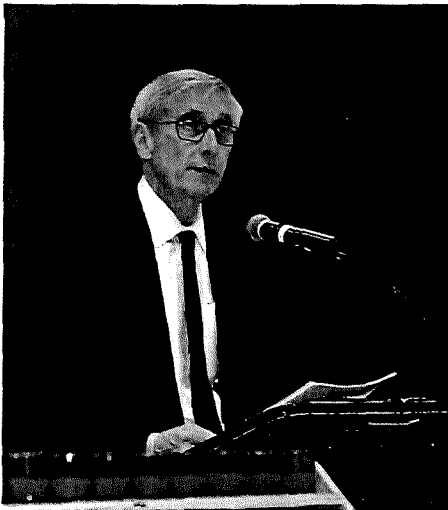
John Eich is the executive director for the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health. John can be reached at 608-261-1890. Penny can be reached at 608-261-1887. Both can be reached through the Office of Rural Health website at www.worh.org.

Dignitaries extend greetings, advice to WSFA membership

By Pete Wicklund

The WSFA was fortunate on March 8 to have three VIPs share salutations and words of encouragement following the annual WSFA Memorial Service at the 2019 convention in La Crosse.

Gov. Tony Evers took time from his busy schedule of negotiating the 2019-2020 state biennial



Governor Tony Evers

budget to pay tribute to the state firefighters, active and retired, who have passed since the 2018 convention and to thank WSFA members for their service to their

communities.

“Tonight, we honor and remember their service and sacrifice,” the governor said.

Evers noted that his father-in-law was a longtime volunteer with the Plymouth Fire Department.

“You often see people on the worst of days in their lives,” Evers said. “We are grateful for all of you.”

The governor was followed at the podium by host Fire Chief Ken Gilliam, who has been at the helm of the 92-member La Crosse Fire Dept. since June 19, 2017. A former deputy chief of training for the St. Paul, Minn., Fire Department and former director of fire and rescue training at Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College, Gilliam mentioned that the WSFA convention allowed him the opportunity to reconnect with many in the fire service from the northern half of the state.

“It’s always fun having those family reunions and getting to see everyone,” Chief Gilliam said.

Gilliam also used his time at the podium to advocate for the mental health of those serving in the fire service.



Chief Ken Gilliam

“As we’re learning more from the military about things like post-

traumatic stress disorder and look at firefighter suicide rates, there’s almost like an epidemic coming at us recently,” Gilliam said.

He noted that in 2017, 103 firefighters died from suicide, surpassing the 93 line-of-duty fatalities that year.

“I think the (suicide) numbers are even higher than that, but those are the ones they connected the dots on,” Gilliam said.

(continued on page 20)



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We Need Volunteers



The Williams Bay Rescue Squad is committed to serving the greater Williams Bay community with the best possible 911 emergency medical care available. The Rescue Squad operates with our members trained as EMR, EMT-B and A-EMT level certifications, providing the best emergency care to our residents. The Rescue Squad operates one A-EMT equipped ambulance out of the Fire station located in Downtown Williams Bay.

YOUR COMMUNITY IS CALLING

Mondovi Herald-News

Serving Buffalo County for 143 Years

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\$1.00

Roof collapse, massive fire destroy portion of Naples Swine facility

by Beth Kraft

Billed as the largest facility of its kind in Wisconsin at the time of its opening in 2014, a large hog barn on the Naples Swine complex suffered a roof collapse and devastating fire last week that reduced the barn to rubble.

Nine fire departments from five different counties responded to the fire at W20 Gonty Road, located between Mondovi and Eleva, at about 5:40 a.m. on Wednes-

barn, and slippery road conditions reaching the site.

Two fire trucks, one each from Eleva and township fire services, slid off the icy road into the ditch and had to be pulled out. The Buffalo County Highway Department was called in to sand the area.

Keeping such a large scene involving so many firefighters and vehicles organized was certainly a hurdle—one the Mondovi Fire Department took in stride.

balance Service, the Buffalo County and Trempealeau County sheriff's departments, and the Eleva Police Department.

Heavy equipment then went to work on Thursday, March 14, to begin tearing down what was left of the charred barn.

The fire was likely caused by electrical wiring/components that sparked after the roof collapse, Anderson said.

The entire barn was lost



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day, March 13. Firefighters arrived to find flames visible from the middle of the facility's gestation barn, which measures roughly the length of two football fields.

The east half of the barn had collapsed due to excess snow load the previous evening. That's where the fire broke out less than 12 hours later, the UW-Extension's Buffalo County office reported.

Mondovi Fire Chief Steve Anderson said hazardous conditions created by the partially-collapsed roof made entering the facility to attempt any sort of rescue of the hogs trapped inside too dangerous for firefighters.

An estimated 4,000 sows perished as a result of the roof collapse and fire.

"Our biggest concern when we got there was to contain the fire," Anderson said.

All three of the sprawling facility's barns are connected by hallways, Anderson said, so fire crews focused their efforts on keeping the fire from spreading to the barns on either side of the gestation barn.

Aside from the sheer size of the structure involved, fighting the fire was made all the more challenging by deep snow cover, which limited access to all sides of the

"It was chaotic, but overall it went pretty good," Anderson said of response efforts.

The MFD set up an incident command center and staging for tenders bringing water to the fire.

Fire crews went through somewhere around 100,000 gallons of water to bring the blaze under control, Anderson estimated.

The barn is so large fire crews couldn't reach the middle to fully knock down the fire. Anderson predicted flare-ups would be a concern, and the MFD was called back out to the scene later that evening to assess flames that were again leaping from the wreckage.

"It was burning in the middle, but the other two barns were not going to be involved; they were far enough away," he said.

Still, a stand-by crew remained on-scene until 6 a.m. the next morning to ensure the fire remained under control.

Crews from Eleva, Strum, Osseo, Eau Claire, Durand, Township fire, Alma and Rock Creek also responded to the initial fire call. Firefighters remained on scene for 12 hours, Anderson said.

Also responding to the scene were Mondovi Am-

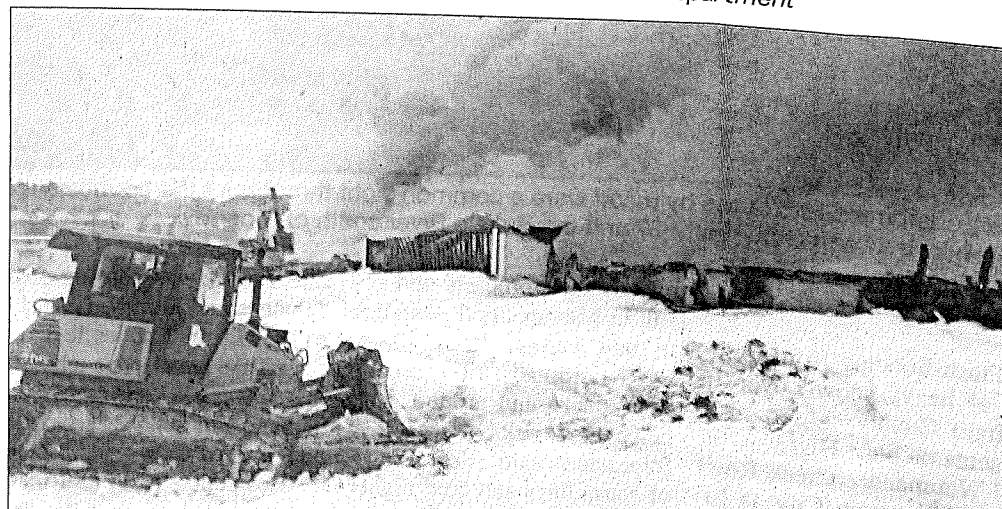
due to the roof collapse and fire, the UW-Extension reported. All of the swine in the barn either died outright or were humanely euthanized. Veterinarians from Mondovi Vet Service working together with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) were on site to assist. Mortalities were transported off site under the direction of the DNR's Division of Environmental Management.

"Everyone involved in the incident had the same goal of balancing human life and risk with animal safety and welfare," the UW-Extension release stated.

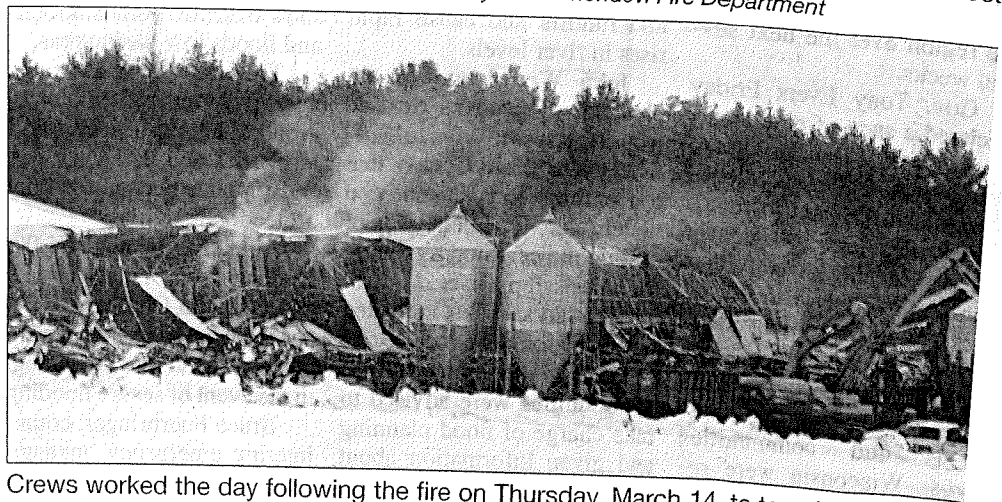
The Naples Swine facility is operated by Ross Kruger via a partnership with Holden Farms, based in Northfield, Minn. The farm near the Buffalo/Trempealeau County line produces swine replacement breeding stock with separate buildings for gilt development and farrowing/weaning in addition to the gestation barn.

Holden Farms operates three turkey farms, owns 55,000 sows, and has nearly 200 contract partners throughout southern Minnesota and northern Iowa, according to the company's website.

Fire trucks from multiple departments responded to last week's fire at Naples Swine between Mondovi and Eleva. —Courtesy of the Mondovi Fire Department



Heavy equipment was called in to help move deep snow to help firefighters gain better access to the burning structure. —Courtesy of the Mondovi Fire Department



Crews worked the day following the fire on Thursday, March 14, to tear down the wreckage that remained of the facility's swine gestation barn as the fire continued to smolder. Authorities say around 4,000 sows perished due to the roof collapse and fire.



WISCONSIN STATE
FIRE CHIEFS ASSOCIATION
Together We Make A Difference

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DATE: September 26, 2019
TO: Assembly Committee on Ways and Means
FROM: Wisconsin State Fire Chiefs Association
RE: Support AB 469

Nationwide, volunteer fire departments save municipalities, and taxpayers, \$139.8 billion per year in firefighting costs, according to a 2014 report from the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). About 70 percent of America's firefighters are volunteers, and 85 percent of the nation's fire departments are all or mostly volunteer, according to NFPA. The smallest communities — those with fewer than 10,000 residents — are almost always served by volunteer departments, also, according to NFPA.

Across the country, small, rural fire departments are struggling to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters. But even where the number of volunteer firefighters is holding steady, the number of calls is exploding. The nationwide tally of the calls departments respond to each year has tripled in the last 30 years, according to NFPA. These numbers influence a community's ability to deal with emergencies, both large and small.

"Career and volunteer firefighter and emergency services are the infantry in every community when disaster strikes," said Denis Onieal, acting U.S. Fire Administrator. "There is no force at the state level or at the federal level, with the exception of the National Guard, that can provide a community with rescue, mitigation and recovery services like the fire and emergency services community."

Volunteer fire departments once depended on local employers who offered full-time jobs with benefits to their volunteers and were willing to have employees leave work to fight fires. Today a typical job is as a per-hour worker with unpredictable shifts for a national or international company with no ties to community. The nation's top employer is Walmart. Second on the list: McDonald's, according to stock market information analyzed by 24/7 Wall St. and reported in USA Today.

According to an analysis of Federal Reserve data by the nonprofit group Young Invincibles, reported in *USA Today*, millennials (born from 1982 to 2004) earn 20 percent less than baby boomers did at the same age, and millennials have more student loan debt. The millennials making less than baby boomers 20 years ago can be attracted to a \$100 dollar tax credit that will help cover their expenses, such as fuel and clothing, when serving as a volunteer firefighter.

Because the number of volunteer firefighters nationwide has declined 15 percent between its all-time high in 1984 and its all-time low in 2011 and, because over that same period, the number of calls has increased nearly 300 percent, existing firefighters are suffering from burnout. (Most of that increase is in medical calls). It may not seem like much but a \$100 tax credit will help cover some of the volunteer's expenses. The WI State Fire Chiefs ask that you consider supporting Assembly Bill 469.

If you have questions please contact:

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*Testimony before the Committee on Ways and Means
State Senator André Jacque
September 26th, 2019*

Chairman Macco and Members of the Assembly Committee on Ways and Means,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today in support of Assembly Bill 469. The Legislature has for some time now been seeking solutions to help address the concerns facing the volunteer firefighter and EMS Community across our state, including convening a Legislative Council Study Committee on Volunteer Firefighter and Emergency Medical Technician Shortages in 2016. While many proposals have been suggested to try and combat the growing shortages in rural Wisconsin, which is predominantly served through volunteer services, those communities continue to face these distinct challenges and struggle to provide adequate and responsive public safety services.

AB 469 works to help assist volunteer Fire and EMS personnel by alleviating some of the financial burden of the equipment and training through the creation a nonrefundable income tax credit equal to \$100. This credit would be eligible to volunteer fire fighters, emergency medical responders, and emergency medical services practitioners. That individual must be in good standing with the department for which he or she serves and must have served as a responder for at least five years. An individual who has served as a responder in more than one department may combine the time served in those departments when determining whether the five-year time frame has been met.

This legislation is supported by the League of Wisconsin Municipalities and the greater volunteer Fire Fighter and EMS Community. Please join my colleague Representative Pronschinske and me in supporting the creation of this tax credit and recognition of service by Fire & EMS volunteers to our rural Wisconsin communities. Thank you for your consideration of Assembly Bill 469.

September 26, 2019

To Our Elected Officials In Madison,

My name is Sarah, and I am writing you as a volunteer firefighter wife. My husband Jason joined the City of Brillion Volunteer Fire Department 5 years ago. He felt a strong pull to help in his community and found this to be a perfect fit. We talked, and I supported his volunteerism and sense for community with this choice. But it is a choice.

So many things pull at people: family, career, and life in general. Being a volunteer fire fighter means you aren't always at dinner with your family; in our case, myself and two little girls. You might be gone for 14 hours, and you count on your spouse to continue the day to day while you are away. Emergencies aren't always convenient. Nights, holidays, and weekends are all times when these men and women are pulled to help.

There is a huge need for volunteer fire fighters across the state. I can talk about the obvious: having a local fire department offers safer communities, lower insurance rates for area businesses, and better response times in the event of an emergency. None of these goals can be achieved without fire fighters. But how do you get more fire fighters?

The departments are doing what they can, but they need help. I support this tax credit for volunteer firefighters. It doesn't replace the person missing at the family event, but it does help acknowledge, at the end of the year, the time commitment to something bigger than ones self. And in our case, it would also help a bit if I need to find a babysitter in a pinch because of my career as a funeral director.

I ask that you also support this tax credit to help our volunteer fire departments keep and grow their staffs.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Sarah Pielhop