

Press Release

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Chief Bumgarner Supports Bill to Provide Health Insurance to Volunteer Firefighters

Larkspur Fire Chief Jamey Bumgarner appreciates his volunteer firefighters. That's why he testified today in front of a Colorado Senate committee in support of a proposed bill that could provide health insurance to volunteer firefighters who don't have such coverage.

"The District can provide health insurance for its career firefighters," Bumgarner said. "However, current law prohibits extending this coverage to volunteer firefighters."

The bill, HB08-1334, was initiated by State Rep. Rob Witwer and State Sen. Mike Kopp. The bill would allow local governments to provide group health care coverage to emergency services volunteers and the authority to participate in a health insurance pool for such volunteers.

The idea for the bill was brought forward by the Colorado State Fire Chiefs' Association (CSFCA) in response to concern expressed by fire chiefs of volunteer and combination fire departments across the state that more tools were needed to recruit and retain qualified volunteers.

According to CSFCA Executive Director Paul Cooke, "across the state, the number of volunteer firefighters has been declining for years." Cooke added that "while local governments have recognized the decreasing numbers of volunteers, they have been hard pressed to identify specific measures to control the decline and recruit new volunteers." "This bill will provide one more tool in the tool chest to help address this issue," Cooke said.

According to the fire chiefs association, 62% of the fire departments in the state are all-volunteer. An additional 27% of the fire departments are combination career and volunteer, relying on volunteer firefighters to supplement the paid staff. There are an estimated 9,450 active volunteer firefighters in the state (about 63% of all firefighters).

In presenting his bill, Sen. Kopp told the members of Senate Local Government Committee that "it addresses two important issues, the need to provide tools to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters and the need for affordable health care." Kopp said that "this is something we (the legislature) should have done long ago."

The Larkspur Fire Protection District employs 20 career firefighters and currently has 40 volunteers. Bumgarner indicated that he is unsure how many of his volunteers do not have access to group health insurance, but he said that "this bill will at least authorize the District to provide this benefit to members that don't have insurance, if it chooses to."

The bill passed the committee unanimously and is headed to the full Senate for consideration.