



March 11, 2026

Memorandum in Support Nominal Compensation for Volunteer Firefighters

The Association of Fire Districts of the State of New York, the NYS Association of Fire Chiefs, and the Fire Coordinators Association of the State of New York strongly endorse the introduction of legislation authorizing nominal compensation for volunteer firefighters. This would address acute shortages in volunteer ranks, bolster retention efforts, and strengthen department readiness — all while avoiding the prohibitive costs of converting to fully paid professional staffing models.

Volunteer firefighters deliver indispensable fire suppression, rescue operations, and emergency medical services to communities across New York State. These dedicated individuals routinely bear significant personal expenses, including fuel for travel to incidents and drills, personal protective equipment upkeep, childcare during call-outs, and forgone wages from time away from jobs. As emergency call volumes surge—particularly in rural and suburban areas—and mandatory training hours multiply to meet evolving safety standards, departments across NYS struggle with recruitment and retention, leaving some stations unable to consistently staff full crews for timely responses. Modest stipends paired with reimbursements for mileage, fuel, or gear—directly alleviate these out-of-pocket burdens without reclassifying service as paid employment.

Nominal compensation aligns seamlessly with the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) "20% rule," which permits payments up to 20% of comparable full-time firefighter wages while preserving true volunteer status—exempting departments from overtime obligations, health benefits, or mandatory workers' compensation premiums beyond existing volunteer protections. Nominal compensation can include small per-call, per-shift or stand-by stipends, annual stipends, LOSAP benefits, and reimbursement for out-of-pocket costs, so long as the total remains truly nominal and does not approach employee wages. Doing so does not convert a volunteer into a "paid firefighter" nor constitute "remuneration or a gratuity" under the Volunteer Firefighters' Benefit Law. This protects existing benefits and lines-of-duty coverage while ensuring authorities having jurisdiction retain control over program rules, eligibility, recordkeeping, and funding.

With reliable staffing, departments achieve faster response times, sustained 24/7 coverage, and lower risks from overworked crews. This is vital as New York confronts escalating demands with no feasible short-term alternative to its volunteer backbone. By enacting such legislation, the state can secure its fire service infrastructure cost-effectively, honoring volunteers while protecting lives and property.