



SHAE SORTWELL

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 2nd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Hearing Testimony
Assembly Committee on Local Government
May 7, 2025
Assembly Bill 187

Chairman Novak and members of the Assembly Committee on Local Government – Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on AB 187, relating to training completion awards for volunteer firefighters.

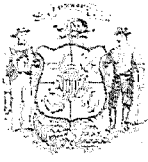
Volunteer firefighter departments are integral to the health and safety of the Wisconsinites they serve. Roughly 92% of Wisconsin fire departments are volunteer or mostly volunteer. Unfortunately, these departments have faced waning membership for decades. It is not an easy task for prospective and current volunteers to dedicate their time and money to serve, notably to pay for their own education/training.

The legislature has made multiple attempts in the last decade to fix this problem, but no policy was able to get broad support to be signed into law. My office has worked with various firefighter organizations for the last few years to find a different angle on policy that would move through the legislature. Senator Jacque and I hope the legislation before you today fits that notion to help our fire departments.

In an attempt to boost recruitment and retention, AB 187 creates a financial incentive to serve a department by providing a stipend to cover training time. An applicable municipality that has an ordinance to provide a 100% match would receive a grant from the Department of Administration to cover training time up to \$250 per volunteer firefighter. Individuals could then receive up to a \$500 stipend, with the other half coming from the municipality.

Every second counts in an emergency. With fewer volunteers, response times can be slowed, increasing the risk of an event being fatal. There is no silver bullet to completely fix low volunteer numbers, but this legislation is a step in the right direction to maintain quality public safety around the state.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify on this legislation and would gladly answer any questions the committee may have.



ANDRÉ JACQUE

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Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Local Government

Senator André Jacque

Assembly Bill 187

May 7, 2025

Thank you, Chairman Novak, and committee members for holding this public hearing on Assembly Bill 187 and the opportunity to appear before you in support of our volunteer firefighters and the communities that depend on them.

Smaller, mostly rural localities rely on volunteer firefighter departments to safeguard the health and safety of their citizens. In fact, approximately 92 percent Wisconsin fire departments are volunteer or mostly volunteer.

At the same time, departments that provide these critical services have been experiencing declining numbers of volunteers who do this life-saving work. Having fewer members puts additional strain on an already-stressful vocation. Adding to this burden, current volunteers who dedicate their time to serve are also expected to pay for their own education and training.

This legislation attempts to lighten this load - and boost retention and recruitment - by providing a stipend to cover training costs for these selfless public servants. To qualify their volunteers for this financial incentive to serve, a municipality would pass an ordinance providing a 100 percent match to receive a grant from the Department of Administration to cover training costs up to \$250 per volunteer firefighter. Members would then receive a stipend of up to \$500, split between the state and the municipality.

Wisconsin citizens should not face greater risk in emergency situations based on where they live. But the reality is that fewer volunteers could mean greater response times. This legislation is a first step toward ramping up recruitment efforts to reduce the enhanced risk to public safety associated with a potentially delayed emergency response.

Thank you for your consideration of Assembly Bill 187. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

MEMORANDUM

TO: Honorable Members of the Assembly Committee on Local Government

FROM: Marcie Rainbolt, Government Affairs Associate

DATE: Wednesday, May 7, 2025

SUBJECT: Support of Assembly Bill 217: Local Government Competitive Bidding Thresholds

Assembly Bill 217 updates the 26-year-old competitive bidding threshold in Wisconsin. Existing thresholds fail to account for the increasing costs of labor and building materials in local government construction projects

Current law requires counties to use competitive bidding for any project over \$25,000. These thresholds have remained at this level since 1999. A \$25,000 project in 1999 is now worth \$48,000 in 2025. Projects at these price points are small and less time consuming, however, counties cannot begin these projects without following competitive bidding laws.

AB 217 makes the following changes:

- Allows bids between \$10,000 and \$50,000 to be addressed with existing Class I notice under Chapter 985
- Raises the threshold for "Request for Proposal" requirements from \$25,000 to \$50,000
- Leaves the "public roads projects" threshold at \$25,000
- Adds a 5-year escalator clause tied to the Consumer Price Index to have thresholds reflect current dollar values

AB 217 gives local governments flexibility in small construction projects while maintaining appropriate use of taxpayer dollars. WCA asks for your support for AB 217 and the needed update to the competitive bidding process.

Contact: Marcie Rainbolt, Government Affairs Associate
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WI Legislative Hearing AB – 187 May 7, 2025

Thank you. GOOD MORNING everyone.

I am Chris Klahn, President of the Wisconsin State Firefighters Association. The WI State Firefighters Association represents 10,000 volunteer Firefighters from across WI. These Firefighters are members of the over 800 fire departments serving WI. Of those 800 Fire Departments, 95% or 773 fire departments are volunteer or mostly volunteer. The WI volunteer fire fighting force consists of 20,000 men and women who voluntarily step up to assist their communities during emergencies.

These Firefighters are the reason I am here today to express support for Assembly Bill -187, which establishes training completion grants for entry level volunteer firefighters. The financial incentive provided by these grants will encourage the RECRUITMENT and RETENTION of new volunteer firefighters.

The ranks of volunteer firefighters have been reduced 30% nationally. That means there are fewer volunteer firefighters doing much more work. That trend holds true in Wisconsin and continues today. This plays out as inadequate staffing for emergencies leading to unsafe and ineffective responses to emergencies. The average age of a volunteer firefighter is 47 years old. We MUST increase the RECRUITMENT of new firefighters to ensure the viability of the volunteer fire service that serves most of WI.

To account for a shortfall in staffing, volunteer fire departments in WI have begun to pool resources to meet the emergency call volume. Some fire departments have established automatic aid with neighboring fire departments to obtain sufficient manpower. Others WI fire departments have begun to consolidate, that is combining two or more fire departments into a single entity to ensure adequate staffing. Other WI fire departments have begun to convert from volunteer firefighters to some career full time firefighter's positions to fill voids. All these solutions involve increased costs and delayed response times. None of these solutions solves the need for increased RECRUITMENT and RETENTION efforts to supplement the volunteer firefighting staffing needs.

Assembly Bill 187 is one step in the right direction to encourage and support the volunteer fire service in WI. I believe providing incentives such as this training completion grant will assist local volunteer fire departments to offset costs and reward new members. I commend this effort and hope that it can be part of larger solution of increased RECRUITMENT and RETENTION of volunteer firefighters in WI to keep citizens safe in their communities.

Volunteer Firefighters in WI dedicate their lives to the protection of life and property. That dedication is in the form of countless hours volunteered and time sacrificed to achieve training in order to serve their communities. On behalf of the WI State Firefighters Association, I want to thank the sponsors of Assembly Bill 187 for their dedication and hard work in our common goal of preventing and protecting our communities from the ravages of fire. I am confident that the passage of this bill will assist in assuring the viability and endurance of Wisconsin's Volunteer Firefighters. THANK YOU!