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Testimony before the Senate Committee on Transportation and Local Government

Senator André Jacque

Senate Bill 186

May 27, 2025

Thank you, Chairman Tomczyk, and committee members for holding this public hearing on Senate Bill 186 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 Senate Bill 186. I'd be happy to answer any questions.



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Hearing Testimony
Senate Committee on Transportation Local Government
May 27, 2025
Senate Bill 186

Chairman Tomczyk and members of the Senate Committee on Transportation and Local Government – Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on SB 186, 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, SB 186 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.