

HEALTH INSURANCE INITIATIVE

<i>Scorecard Bill:</i>	Health Insurance Initiative
<i>Bill Numbers:</i>	Senate Bill Number: S.4617-A Assembly Bill Number: A.7699-A
<i>Bill Sponsors:</i>	Senator James Seward (R – Cortland, Greene, Herkimer, Otsego, and Schoharie Counties and portions of Chenango and Tompkins Counties) Assemblywoman RoAnn Destito (D – Oneida County)
<i>Purpose of Bill:</i>	To establish a volunteer firefighter and ambulance worker health insurance program in order to assist with the recruitment and retention of volunteers.
<i>Analysis:</i>	<p>The number of volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers in New York state is declining rapidly. At the same time, the call volume for fire and emergency services has increased. In order to maintain a satisfactory level of fire protection service, additional incentives are required to retain existing volunteers and recruit new volunteers. Because the cost of health insurance is so high for volunteers, access to lower cost health insurance is one such incentive.</p> <p>Typically, the cost of health insurance in a municipality's health insurance program is much less expensive than the cost of health insurance that a volunteer is able to obtain in the private market. Unfortunately, under current law, volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers are not authorized to participate in the health insurance program offered by the volunteer's municipality. Consequently, many volunteers remain uninsured simply because the cost of health insurance coverage is too high.</p> <p>To solve this problem, this bill amends §92-a of the NYS General Municipal Law. Section 92-a of the NYS General Municipal Law authorizes local governments to provide health insurance for certain municipal personnel. Specifically, this bill adds a new paragraph to §92-a that authorizes the participation of volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers in these health insurance coverage plans. Under this bill, coverage would be made available to a volunteer and his or her family. Payment for the health insurance coverage would be the responsibility of the volunteer.</p>

Since the cost of coverage in a municipality's health insurance program is less expensive than in the private market, this legislation will provide an affordable health insurance option to the volunteer firefighter and ambulance worker. The availability of affordable health insurance coverage will entice existing volunteers to remain active and it will attract new and younger recruits.

Background/History: According to the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), the number of volunteers in the United States has dropped over 10% in the last 20 years. This trend is even worse in New York. According to the New York State Office of Fire Prevention and Control (OFPC), there are now less than 100,000 volunteer firefighters in the state – this represents a decline of nearly 20% in the last 10 years. The number of volunteer ambulance workers is also declining at a similar rate. These figures are even more troubling with the realization that fire protection for most of New York's geographic area is provided by the volunteer fire service.

In response to the declining number of volunteers, an emphasis has been placed on volunteer recruitment and retention. Various studies have concluded that more incentives are required in order to maintain (and preferably increase) the number of volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers. Because the cost of health insurance is high and continues to rise, access to lower cost health insurance for volunteers is often considered by government decision makers as a possible solution.

Here in New York, the NYS Legislature has been contemplating the possibility of health insurance for volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers for several years. In fact, in 2004 a new law was enacted that established a task force to examine the effectiveness of using health insurance benefits as a method of volunteer recruitment. The task force was required to make recommendations on this issue, but has not yet released its report. In the meantime, the NYS Legislature has continued to examine the issue. As a result, S.4617-A/A.7699-A was introduced to address the on-going recruitment and retention problem.

In the 2007 Legislative Session, this bill advanced to the calendar in the Senate but remained in the Insurance Committee in the Assembly.

Key Points:

1. Most fire protection service in NYS is provided by volunteer firefighters. However, the number of volunteer firefighters and

ambulance workers in NYS is declining - and the call volume is increasing.

2. Many volunteers do not have access to affordable health insurance coverage. This may be because the volunteer's employer does not offer a health insurance benefit, or because of the volunteer's status as a student or a part-time employee, or because of other reasons. Access to lower cost health insurance will help maintain and attract volunteers.

3. The average age of volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers is getting higher. New incentives are needed in order to attract younger recruits. Since many students do not have health insurance coverage, access to affordable coverage would be a viable approach to attracting the younger volunteer.

4. The approach to providing health insurance coverage proposed in this legislation already exists for others in their respective communities. Section 92-a of the NYS General Municipal Law already authorizes health insurance coverage for active and retired employees and officers of the municipality. Section 92-a also authorizes coverage for active and former school board members. Much like these individuals, volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers are integral parts of their respective communities and provide valuable services. Volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers should be able to participate in these health insurance programs as well.

5. Under this legislation the cost of the volunteer's participation in the municipality's health insurance plan would be the responsibility of the volunteer. Therefore, there are no negative financial implications to the municipality or the State.