



Senate Bill 1092

Vehicle Registration - Emergency Medical System Surcharge - Increase and Distribution of Funds

MACo Position: **SUPPORT**

To: Budget and Taxation Committee

WITH AMENDMENTS

Date: February 29, 2024

From: Dominic J. Butchko and Kevin Kinnally

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **SUPPORTS SB 1092 WITH AMENDMENTS**. This bill, among other actions, increases the motor vehicle surcharge, which funds the Maryland Emergency Medical System Operations Fund (MEMSOF). This fund is already the central source for State assistance to fire companies, and counties urge that the funding and mission of SB 1092 be amended to additionally target urgent needs of fire service employees.

Today, when Marylanders dial 9-1-1, there is an expectation that first responders will arrive within a matter of minutes and instantaneously deliver care. Marylanders have rightfully grown to rely on this service as it has become a core pillar of a functioning society. However, that pillar is eroding and in more and more pockets of the state, emergency response times are starting to creep up. No one is more cognizant, or more concerned with this growing trend, than Maryland's 24 counties.

For two years, MACo has spearheaded an all-hands-on-deck, multistakeholder collaborative effort - to call attention to and find solutions for Maryland's fire and EMS recruitment and retention crisis. This effort led to the 2023 creation of the Commission to Advance and Strengthen Firefighting and EMS Within Maryland, which included the Maryland Association of Counties, Maryland Municipal League, Maryland State Firemen's Association, International Association of Firefighters, Maryland Fire Rescue Institute, Maryland Institute for Emergency Medical Services Systems, Metropolitan Fire Chiefs Association, and the Maryland Fire Chiefs Association.

In December 2023, the Commission delivered a detailed report outlining the current state of fire and EMS recruitment and retention and outlined several recommendations to reverse these startling trends. While it is easy to create policies and establish programs, without resources, Marylanders will continue to be put at a greater and greater risk. **Counties request that, through amendments to SB 1092, an additional \$2.00 be added to the motor vehicle surcharge and reserved specifically for the recruitment and retention incentives outlined in HB 899/SB 692, the Commission's programmatic recommendations.**

Counties request that \$2.00 be added to the motor vehicle surcharge in order to implement fire and EMS recruitment and retention incentives. For this reason, MACo urges the Committee to give SB 1092 a **FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS** report. Additional information on MACo's firefighter and EMS recruitment and retention initiative is included on the next page, for reference.

Broad Overview of MACo's Firefighter and EMS Recruitment and Retention Initiative

MACo's Fire and EMS initiative implements several of the recommendations from the 2023 report of the Commission to Advance and Strengthen Firefighting and EMS Within Maryland.

#1 – Strengthens the Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue Squad Member Scholarship Program

- **Expands** the program to cover 100% of the cost of tuition and mandatory fees at in-state community colleges and for undergraduate education, and 50% of tuition and mandatory fees for graduate education.
- **Expands** the universe of programs which qualify for funding, reflecting the needs of our modern emergency response networks.
- **Clarifies** that funding for the program is to be utilized after all other grants, scholarships, and financial aid (excluding student loans) are awarded.
- **Clarifies** that funding is available on a first-come first-serve basis.

#2 - Creates the Maryland Loan Assistance Repayment Program for Firefighters and EMS Providers

- **Establishes** a new program for awarding student loan assistance to firefighters and EMS personnel based on years of service, rank, and other criteria established by MHEC.
- This new program is modeled after the Maryland Loan Assistance Repayment Program for Police Officers.

#3 – Explores additional recommendations from the Commission related to childcare and healthcare

- Second to education, the Commission also identified access to childcare and healthcare as a critical barrier to recruitment and retention. These areas present a greater level of complexity and deserve additional study to develop next steps. The bill asks the Department of Budget & Management to evaluate the feasibility of:
 - a program to extend coverage through health insurance offerings for State employees to qualified firefighters who do not receive comparable coverage through their employment in that capacity. The evaluation should consider a fully employee-paid option without direct cost effects on State premiums.
 - a program to extend limited childcare coverage to career and volunteer firefighters through a cost share program where counties and the State split all costs equally.