

**Appropriations Committee
Delegate Ben Barnes, Chair**

**Written Testimony – SUPPORT - House Bill 899
Higher Education – Firefighters and EMS Recruitment and Retention –
Scholarship and Loan Repayment Assistance**

**Mr. Paul Edwards, Chairman
Board of Garrett County Commissioners
February 14, 2024**

On behalf of the Board of County Commissioners for Garrett County, I wish to offer our support for HB 899 – Higher Education – Firefighters and EMS Recruitment and Retention – Scholarship and Loan Repayment Assistance.

This Bill is the work product of the *Commission to Advance & Strengthen Firefighting & EMS Within Maryland* (the Commission), which is comprised of nearly all stakeholders within Maryland’s firefighter ecosystem. The Commission’s final report provided data on the current state of Maryland firefighter and EMS personnel recruitment and retention, as well as several recommendations to fortify Maryland’s emergency response capacity.

Aggressive recruitment and retention efforts for Maryland’s firefighter and EMS workforce are needed to ensure these essential functions are fully staffed including:

1. Strengthens the Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue Squad Member Scholarship Program
 - Expands program to cover 100% of the cost of tuition/mandatory fees at in-state community colleges and undergraduate education, and 50% of tuition and mandatory fees for graduate education.
 - Expands the programs which qualify for funding, reflecting the needs of our modern emergency response networks.
 - Clarifies that funding for the program is to be used after all other grants, scholarships, and financial aid (excluding student loans) are awarded and 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 the Maryland Higher Education Commission (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 to qualified fire fighters who do not receive comparable coverage through their employment in that capacity.
 - 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.

Garrett County strongly supports House Bill 899 and urges the Committee to give a **FAVORABLE** report. Thank you for your time and consideration in this very important matter. Please let me know if you have any questions or need further information.