



## WICOMICO COUNTY, MARYLAND

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### WICOMICO COUNTY COUNCIL

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February 20, 2024

Appropriations Committee  
Attn.: Delegate Ben Barnes, Chair  
Room 121  
House Office Building  
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: House Bill 899/ Senate Bill 691 – Higher Education – Firefighters and EMS Recruitment and Retention- Scholarship and Loan Repayment Assistance

Dear Honorable Ben Barnes and Committee Members:

This letter is in support of House Bill No. 899/Senate Bill 691. This bill is the work product of the *Commission to Advance & Strengthen Firefighting & EMS Within Maryland* (the Commission), which comprised nearly all stakeholders within Maryland's firefighter ecosystem, including: the Maryland Association of Counties (MACo), the Maryland Municipal League (MML), the Maryland State Firemen's Association (MSFA), the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF), the Maryland Professional Fire Fighters Association (PFFM), the Maryland Fire and Rescue Institute (MFRI), the Maryland Institute for Emergency Medical Services Systems (MIEMSS), the Metropolitan Fire Chiefs Association, and the Maryland Fire Chiefs Association. 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.

While Maryland's average 9-1-1 response times are above the national average, there are a growing number of Maryland communities where this is not the norm. [Insert county-specific details here, or delete this text] If current recruitment and retention trends continue, very soon many Marylanders may not receive the timely response to a 9-1-1 call that they rightfully expect. Aggressive recruitment and retention efforts for Maryland's firefighter and EMS workforce are needed to ensure these essential functions are fully staffed.

**HB 899/SB 691 can protect Maryland communities by bolstering the firefighter and EMS workforce in the following ways:**

*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 used 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 the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC).
- This new program is modeled after the Maryland Loan Assistance Repayment Program for Police Officers.

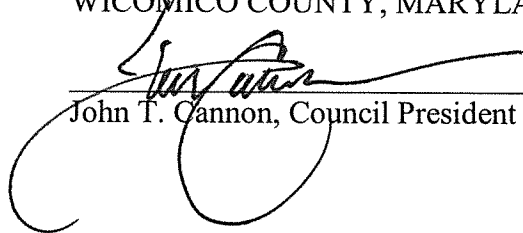
*3 – Explores additional recommendations from the Commission related to childcare and healthcare*

- 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 for State employees to qualified fire fighters 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.

HB 899/SB 691 is the first step in increasing the capacity of Maryland's fire fighter and emergency services workforce, which in turn, will keep our communities safe. The Wicomico County Council strongly supports this bill and urges the Committee to give HB 899/SB 691 a **FAVORABLE** report.

Sincerely,

WICOMICO COUNTY, MARYLAND

  
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John T. Cannon, Council President

cc: Wicomico County Council  
Eastern Shore Delegation