



Senate Bill 691

Higher Education - Firefighters and EMS Recruitment and Retention - Scholarship and Loan Repayment Assistance

MACo Position: **SUPPORT**

To: Education, Energy and the Environment
Committee

Date: February 28, 2024

From: Dominic J. Butchko

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **SUPPORTS** SB 691. This bill is one of MACo's top legislative priorities and seeks to implement several of the recommendations from the 2023 Commission to Advance and Strengthen Firefighting and EMS Within Maryland.

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 emergency medical services (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. 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.

SB 691 seeks to implement several of the recommendations from the Commission. Specifically,

#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 that qualify for funding, reflecting the needs of 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.

Sponsor Amendments

MACo has worked with stakeholders on a set of sponsor amendments which clarify the intent of the bill due to a number of drafting errors, as well as to streamline implementation.

Amendment #1 – Corrects drafting error related to intent.

Amendment Language:

On page 3, in lines 28-29, strike line 28 and line 29 through “undergraduate student” and INSERT:
“(2) 100% OF THE EQUIVALENT ANNUAL TUITION AND MANDATORY FEES OF A RESIDENT UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT AND 50% OF THE EQUIVALENT ANNUAL TUITION AND MANDATORY FEES OF A RESIDENT GRADUATE STUDENT...”

Amendment #2 – Clarifies that the first \$400,000 allotted to the program shall be prioritized for certain emergency responder-specific degrees. This was requested by the Maryland Fire-Rescue Education and Training Commission (MFRETC).

Amendment Language:

On page 4, in line 11, INSERT the following as subsection (e):

“FOR THE FIRST \$400,000 DISTRIBUTED IN SCHOLARSHIPS EACH FISCAL YEAR, MHEC SHALL PRIORITIZE STUDENTS MAJORING IN SERVICE TECHNOLOGY, EMERGENCY MEDICAL TECHNOLOGY, FIRE SERVICE MANAGEMENT, OR PUBLIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION.”

Amendment #3 - Corrects drafting error related to intent.

Amendment Language:

On page 4, in line 13-14, strike and INSERT:

“(F) EACH RECIPIENT OF A SCHOLARSHIP UNDER THIS SECTION TAKING A COURSE AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE MAY HOLD THE AWARD SO LONG AS THEY MEET ALL QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE SCHOLARSHIP.

(G) EACH UNDERGRADUATE RECIPIENT OF A SCHOLARSHIP UNDER THIS SECTION MAY HOLD THE AWARD FOR 5 YEARS OF FULL-TIME STUDY OR 8 YEARS OF PART-TIME STUDY.

(H) EACH GRADUATE RECIPIENT OF A SCHOLARSHIP UNDER THIS SECTION MAY HOLD THE AWARD FOR 5 YEARS OF FULL-TIME STUDY OR 8 YEARS OF PART-TIME STUDY.”

SB 691 is the result of two years of work aimed at ensuring that when Marylanders call 9-1-1, they continue to receive a timely response. Without state and county coordination to address this crisis, counties are left with few tools to stop the critical decrease in our emergency response ranks. For this reason, MACo urges the Committee to give SB 691 a **FAVORABLE** report.