

**Testimony Submitted by the
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**Before the
Committee on Education and Labor
Subcommittee on Health, Employment, Labor and
Pensions**

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Chairman Andrews, Ranking Member Kline and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I'd like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here today to speak with you about the need for employment protection for volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel. I am Chief Philip C. Stittleburg of the La Farge Fire Department in Wisconsin and Chairman of the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC). The NVFC is a nonprofit organization representing the interests of the more than 1 million volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel in the United States.

Volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel serve in more than 20,000 communities across this country. Their services save local taxpayers more than \$37.2 billion each year. Without volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel,

many communities, particularly in rural areas, simply could not afford to provide effective emergency services to their citizens.

Volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel receive the same training as their career counterparts and are professionals in all aspects of the word other than the fact that they receive little or no pay for their services. Volunteer emergency responders work full time jobs just like everyone else in order to pay the bills. For instance, I work as an assistant district attorney representing the State of Wisconsin.

The vast majority of emergency response in this country is handled locally. Many states, understanding the value to public safety provided by volunteer emergency responders, have passed laws allowing volunteers to be late or miss work because they are responding to an emergency. Some states even authorize paid leave for government employees who miss work to respond to an emergency.

When a major incident occurs that overwhelms the ability of local agencies to respond, state and, in the most extreme cases, federal assistance can be brought to bear. This process is initiated by a request for assistance by a local agency to the state, and states can request assistance from other states through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC). Hurricane

Katrina and the terrorist attacks on 9/11 are extreme examples in which significant non-local assistance was required for a sustained period of time, but on average more than 50 incidents occur each year that are severe enough to be declared federal emergencies.

When non-local firefighters and EMS personnel are dispatched to a major disaster they are expected to be able to serve for an extended period of time – in the case of federal disasters, up to 14 days. For many volunteer emergency responders, absence from their employment is a major impediment to responding to a disaster for this amount of time on relatively short notice.

Currently, volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel are not protected against termination or demotion should they miss work when called upon to respond to a major emergency or disaster. Volunteer emergency responders have been known to return home after responding to a major disaster to find that they no longer have jobs, even in cases where they notified their employer that they would be absent. More frequently, volunteers will check with their employers and either be told that they can't go or that they have to take vacation time in order to respond. My fellow volunteer firefighter John Alchevsky is here today to tell you about the difficulties that he has had getting time off from work to respond to major disasters.

Volunteer emergency responders who travel to a different part of the country to dedicate their time and energy assisting fellow citizens in desperate need of help don't deserve to be rewarded for their efforts with a pink slip. The federal government should provide up to 14 days of job protection per year for volunteer emergency responders who respond in an official capacity to a major disaster. This would not only benefit first responders personally, but with employment protection for volunteers in place, thousands of well-trained firefighters and EMS personnel who volunteer for their local community would be added to the pool of personnel that pre-emergency planners will be able to count on as available to respond in case of a major disaster.

In order to prevent abuse of this system, volunteers should be required to inform their employers that they will be absent and provide reasonable notifications over the course of their absence. Employers should be able to obtain written verification from the agency supervising the response to the major disaster that the employee responded in an official capacity and the dates during which that response took place. Additionally, employers should not be required to compensate employees for the time that they are absent from work.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify here today. I look forward to answering any questions that you might have.