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HARRISBURG - Faced with a steady decline in the numbers of **volunteer firefighters**, state lawmakers have been championing legislation to provide greater financial assistance and other incentives to volunteers.

As part of this year's budget agreement, Gov. Rendell signed into law a \$100 tax credit for volunteers. In June, a group of lawmakers began pushing a package of four bills to help firefighting recruitment efforts, including one by State Sen. Andrew Dinniman (D., Chester).

Tom Savage, who runs the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute, pointed out that Rendell's tax credit lasts for only one year, and "that doesn't solve the problem long-term."

Dinniman's bill would let municipalities offer a local earned-income tax credit of up to \$400 annually to active members of their volunteer fire and emergency medical services organizations. Dinniman said many municipalities have expressed an interest in providing the tax credit if it becomes law.

Other bills would help student volunteers with tuition and give employers a tax credit for hiring volunteers under the condition that they allow the volunteers to leave work to fight fires.

The bills have been approved by the Senate, and await action in House committees. The House is scheduled to return from recess on Sept. 15.

In step with a nationwide trend, the number of **volunteer firefighters** in Pennsylvania has fallen by more than 50 percent over the last two decades. Firefighters across the state numbered 152,000 in 1986, according to a report compiled by a special Senate committee. By 2004, that figure had dropped to fewer than 70,000.

The cost of instituting the tax package is advantageous to replacing the volunteers with paid firefighters, Dinniman said. A recent study estimated that making that switch would cost taxpayers at least \$6 billion a year, he said.

"The problem is one that is quite serious across the state," Dinniman said.

Volunteer fire departments are typical in rural communities, but Philadelphia's Second Alarmers Association, which has provided on-site support to the city's firefighters for 87 years, also has felt the crunch.

Today, the group has 23 members, Chief Greg Masi said. Decades ago, he said, there was a waiting list to get onto the Second Alarmers' 50-man roster.

Like many, he struggles to pin down just what has slowed recruitment. Americans have more social networks to connect through, he said. He thinks the growth of cable television hasn't helped, either.

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Tom Sander, executive director of Harvard University's Saguro Seminar, which studies American civic engagement, agreed with Masi's assessment, saying social networking for the greater good declined rapidly from the mid-1960s to 2000 and has plateaued.

"We're out of free fall, but we're not in an era when social capital has gone up," he said.

However, Sander said, volunteerism might get a boost from a new generation of young people - many hoping to bolster college resumes - who are volunteering more than ever.

Whether that younger generation - or the tax package being discussed in the Capitol - makes enough of a difference remains to be seen.

On Aug. 4, State Rep. Marguerite Quinn (R., Bucks) watched in admiration as members of the Plumsteadville Volunteer Fire Company worked through the night to put out a blaze in an abandoned farmhouse across from her office. It was the volunteers' second fire in 24 hours.

The next day, Quinn contacted a marketing firm, hoping to push interest in the recruitment incentives package.

"We really have to put it on the front burner when we get back - no pun intended," she said.

Bills to Boost Volunteerism

The four bills, approved by the state Senate and awaiting action in House committees:

Senate Bill 1169: Lets municipalities offer a local earned-income tax credit of up to \$400 to active members of their volunteer fire and emergency medical services organizations.

Senate Bill 1314: Establishes a \$500 personal tax credit for active members of volunteer fire and emergency medical services organizations who are certified by the state fire commissioner or the director of the Emergency Medical Services Office of the Department of Health. The tax credit would be \$100 for the 2008 calendar year, and increase by \$100 each year until it reaches \$500 for 2012.

Senate Bill 1315: Create an undergraduate tuition reimbursement program for active volunteers, with a 50 percent reimbursement for each course credit.

Senate Bill 1316: Establishes a \$1,000 tax credit against an employer's taxes for each fire or emergency services volunteer employed full time. In turn, the employer agrees to allow volunteers to respond to emergencies on company time.

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