



Prince George's County
Volunteer Fire & Rescue Association

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For Immediate Release

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Prince George's County Fire/EMS Department Climate Destroying Volunteer System

County Fire Chief Brags of Largest Combination System While Undermining Volunteers

January 31, 2024 – Since the start of the current administration, volunteer fire departments have suffered the unreasonable and unsupported decisions of the County Fire Chief. From taking away State and County financial support to impeding volunteer recruitment, volunteer fire departments are suffering violations of law and untenable actions. Volunteer fire departments own 31 of the 45 fire stations in Prince George's County, of which 8 are operated 100% by volunteers. Beltsville Volunteer Fire Department is just the latest victim of the coordinated plan to destroy the volunteer firefighter system.

According to Division 5 of the Prince George's County Code of Ordinances, the Fire Commission is responsible for reviewing the financial needs of volunteer fire department and formulating annually one capital budget, one capital improvement program, and one current expense budget for all volunteer fire companies and must submit the budgets and program with justification to the County Executive. The County Fire Chief, however, took over the Fire Commission and budgeting for volunteer fire departments by and through the Volunteer Services Office. See, General Order Number 01-28 (November 2023).

In April 2023, the County Fire Chief directed the Volunteer Services Office "to develop a fair and equitable formula for the distribution of funding to each station." Volunteer fire departments must sign a Volunteer Station Program Funds Agreement, under which each department can receive up to \$40,000 per station per fiscal year.

“Program funds” are “the financial consideration provided by the County to the [volunteer fire department], including but not limited to Station Management fund and for participating [departments], Volunteer Staffing Enhancement funds.¹ Volunteer fire departments may use program funds for:

- Telephone and cellular service up to \$4,000 per fiscal year
- Internet and cable television up to \$5,000 per fiscal year
- Food and beverages up to \$8,000 per fiscal year
- An annual banquet or Maryland State Firemen’s Association Convention/Conference up to \$7,500 per fiscal year with the approval of the Fire Commission
- Additional property, liability, or fidelity insurance coverage up to \$15,000 per fiscal year
- Additional fuel for operational vehicles up to 200 gallons per month per fiscal year
- Minor apparatus, vehicle, or station maintenance up to \$10,000

One volunteer fire department only received \$2500 in program funds.

The State provides Senator William H. Amoss funds (“Amoss funds”) to increase financial support for fire, rescue, and ambulance companies by counties and promote the continued financial viability of volunteer fire, rescue, and ambulance companies given the greatly increased costs of equipment. See, Md. Code, Pub. Safety § 8-102 et seq. Under State law, the County receives at least 2% of the total state fund as appropriated in the State budget. The County must distribute the Amoss funds provided on the basis of need to volunteer fire, rescue, and ambulance companies. The County may not substitute Amoss funds for other funds to volunteer fire departments. However, Prince George’s County deposits the Amoss funds into its general fund. Volunteer fire departments in need of Amoss funds to pay for apparatus do not get the funds timely. Volunteer fire departments repeatedly suffer delinquent payments to lenders, and just this year, one volunteer fire department faced repossession because the County did not distribute the Amos funds in a timely manner.

¹ A new General Order 06-36, Volunteer Staffing Enhancement Program, became effective July 1, 2023, but it is unclear when it was revised after July 1, 2019.

In December 2023, the Fire Chief issued a new General Order 05-19, changing the long-time revenue sharing plan the volunteer fire departments agreed to and without regard to volunteer fire department authority under Md. Courts and Judicial Proceedings Code § 3-1101 et seq. The general order also restricts volunteer fire department use of the revenue, in that:

- All volunteer fire department purchases must comply with “existing policies and procedures and must be consistent with current operational policies, practices, and procedures:
- Facility-related disbursements over \$5,000 “must be consistent with the County’s Capital improvement Program and/or the County’s ability to maintain the facility in the future”
- The purposes for use are limited to:
 - Stand-by support
 - Office or technological costs associated with enhancing the delivery of emergency medical services
 - Physical or mental health support of emergency medical services providers
 - Paying debts for the purchase apparatus owed as of October 1, 2023 (*i.e., the cost of apparatus will now become a debt of the County tax payers*)
 - Maintenance and repair not supported the County
 - Purchasing approved personal protective equipment, tools, equipment, hoses, and appliances
 - Purchases of equipment and supplies related to scene rehabilitation
 - Purchase of or enhancements to safety equipment
 - Facility renovation, maintenance, repair, or improvement

General Order 05-19 requires volunteer fire departments to submit a spending plan for their ambulance billing revenue by November 1st of each year and must request disbursements of their ambulance billing revenue from the County. The County does not even provide accurate reports on each department's revenue.

The Fire Chief issued a new General Order 11-20 with volunteer training standards. Volunteer firefighters agree with enhancing training standards but disagree with implementing them in a general order. Additionally, the Fire Chief promised the County Council, in November 2023, to work with the volunteer fire departments on the implementation of training standards. The collaboration did not happen before the general order was issued.

Volunteer fire departments have suffered from oppressive and unfair discipline practices. Volunteer fire chiefs experience retaliation for speaking against the County Fire Chief or disobeying county policies. Volunteer firefighters are regularly barred from serving the community without due process. The County Fire Chief has the authority to decide how and when volunteers are disciplined, and volunteer firefighters have no appeal rights. One volunteer fire chief has been operationally removed from service for over three years for a Facebook post the County Fire Chief believes called her an offensive term even though the post did not refer to anyone in particular. Other fire fighters have been operationally removed because their names were mentioned in a criminal investigation even though they were cleared. A fire chief was operationally removed for assisting a local police department with training, and another for calling in a fire in another county without assuming command of the scene.

Recruiting for volunteer firefighters has been stifled and impeded by the County Fire/EMS Department. The County Fire Chief hired a volunteer recruiter in the Volunteer Services Office. However, the recruiter did not offer much assistance to volunteer fire departments. Fingerprinting and background checks of volunteer applicants takes three to six months, and physicals take even longer. By the time applicants are called to complete the volunteer process, many have been approved by and are serving in neighboring counties or have given up on becoming a volunteer firefighter.

Volunteer firefighters have served Prince George's County for over 120 years and want to continue serving their community. On one hand the County brags of having the largest combination fire department in the nation, and on the other, has established a climate where volunteer firefighters feel unwanted and unappreciated. Volunteers are being held to the standards of a collective bargaining agreement but not receiving union benefits.

Volunteer firefighters believe the actions at Beltsville Volunteer Fire Department are just another attempt to rid the County of volunteers who provide 50% of the workforce. Prince George's County residents might not know the difference between career and volunteer firefighters and emergency responders. However, we are watching our neighbors die because the County is pushing volunteers away and does not have enough career personnel to answer every call in accordance with national standards.

AUTHORIZED FOR RELEASE BY:

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