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Representatives and Senators

State Capital

Juneau AK 99801

Dear House Finance and Interior Delegation:

I'm writing in support of passing House Bill 55, the bill that provides a fix for the Tier IV retirement issues. I personally am a Battalion Chief vested in PERS Tier III and will enjoy the pension benefits guaranteed to me in that system, but I work with and supervise mostly Tier IV employees. The retirement system in place now is problematic for the following reasons:

1. Firefighting is a career characterized by high stress, sky-high physiological and psychological demands, increased cancer risk, and high probability of injury on the job. This includes both firefighting and rescue activities as well as the associated duties of EMS most Alaskan fire departments also provide.

Back injuries are very common in this line of work, and due to the nature of the environment in which we perform our work, this risk can only be reduced, not eliminated. For instance, carrying a patient up or down stairs on a backboard with the potential for mass shifting, slipping, or tripping is hazardous under any circumstances. Additional risk factors such as ongoing CPR, loose or weakened stairs, poor lighting, ice on the steps, or a particularly obese patient, and the potential and even likelihood for injury is unquestionable. Firefighting casualties and injuries make the newspaper headlines, but it's these routine medical calls that put wear and tear on our responders.

Specifically, the psychological impact of dealing with trauma, drama, fatalities, child abuse and injuries, domestic violence, and societies exiles, the homeless, alcoholic, and mentally ill adds up. We serve our patients in their home (or homeless) environments, skate across bloody puddles on the floor to check

for a pulse, and hold a grieving mother while she shrieks and sobs over the sudden death of her toddler.

Twenty years of that kind of service, that type of giving to strangers...is enough. The emotional toll it takes plays a role in the rates of responder suicides, which by far outnumber the line of duty nationwide deaths each and every year. We give and give and avoid showing weakness until there is nothing left to give and often, no-one left to care, as we put our service before our family in so many instances.

I divorced a fantastic man due to the demands of both of our careers and inability to balance work and family life. He's an Alaska State Trooper now and I work for the City of Fairbanks. We both gave in service to our community, leaving no energy available to maintain our marriage. Just this last week, I worked 120 hours (5 days) straight, the last 24 hours on forced overtime. Tell me...how does a lifestyle like that fit into maintaining a family? I saw how this career would affect family life and chose not to have children. We give up a lot of time and effort to enter this profession and make it a career. We deserve a guaranteed income afterwards. Tier IV does not provide a light at the end of the tunnel. It's a gamble about your own life expectancy at best.

2. Employee turnover rates have skyrocketed since Tier IV was established. The average fire department new hire at Fairbanks Fire Department is leaving **WITHIN TWO YEARS OF HIRE** for a better paying PERS job in Anchorage or, more often, employment in Washington or Oregon. This is alarming not only because we are unable to maintain staffing and are losing our institutional knowledge, but also because the rate only seems to be increasing as time goes on.

New fire department employees represent a serious investment and much of the time and money spent training them goes to waste in a system that doesn't focus on retention. Initial orientation and preparation for work as a line firefighter depends on already having extensive firefighter training and being certified as at least an EMT I.

We then put them through 8 weeks of training to prepare them for work in our system, causing staffing and overtime issues in the process of running that training. New uniforms and two sets of turnout gear at about \$4500/set only increase the investment. Only three or four people are actually retiring during an average year, yet we are running up to three classes of three to five recruits to maintain staffing as Tier IV employees leave for better opportunities.

These are only two of many reasons it's in the best interest of Alaska's residents to return to a defined benefit system. We need a competitive retirement system to attract and retain public servants and responders. The cost to continue dealing with employee resignation at the rate that we are is unsustainable. Alaska's residents deserve stable and competent responders who haven't worked beyond burnout.

Please pass HB 55 and forward it to the Senate so we can solve this statewide problem expediently!

If I can elucidate any of my statements or you have questions, please contact me via email at [joybcottle@gmail.com](mailto:joybcottle@gmail.com)

Thank you for your service to the state and community!

Respectfully,

Joy Beth Cottle