

2575 Allen Adale Road  
Fairbanks, AK 99709-2581

24 February 2021

The Honorable Representative Andy Josephson  
State Capitol Room 502  
Juneau, AK 99801

RE: Letter in support of House Bill 55, "An Act relating to participation of certain peace officers and firefighters in the defined benefit and defined contribution plans of the Public Employees' Retirement System of Alaska; relating to eligibility of peace officers and firefighters for medical, disability, and death benefits; relating to liability of the Public Employees' Retirement System of Alaska; and providing for an effective date."

Representative Josephson:

Thank you for sponsoring legislation to address the problem of Alaska's highly trained and experienced firefighters leaving Alaska for states with more attractive retirement plans. This legislation is needed to stem the out-migration of Alaska's firefighters. I am writing to you in support of this bill from my perspective as a fire chief that is highly involved in the fire service in Alaska and nationally.

I worked for about 26 years in the Anchorage Fire Department. For me and my contemporaries, getting hired at AFD was the ultimate achievement for an aspiring firefighter. Working in the largest fire department in the magnificent State of Alaska was the ultimate prize. In the latter part of my career at AFD, as a chief, I was astonished and alarmed to witness an increasing number of firefighters leaving the department for jobs Outside. These were firefighters - including long-time Alaskans - in whom we had invested over a year of intensive training and thousands of dollars in equipment. Based on statements they made, I attribute this to the implementation of the PERS Tier IV retirement plan. Once firefighters got off probation and started thinking about families and retirement, they began shopping around.

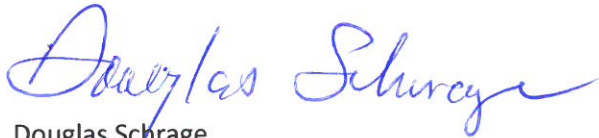
Through my involvement as an officer and President of the Alaska Fire Chiefs Association, I became aware that this phenomenon was occurring in fire departments throughout the state. The loss of experienced firefighters which departments had spent months recruiting and training is an even bigger burden to the smaller city and rural departments. For these, the loss of a single firefighter represents a significant financial and operational deficit, as they seek to recruit and retrain a replacement while maintaining adequate coverage to their communities.

Currently, I operate a workforce development program for firefighters with an emphasis on higher education. Our firefighter alumni populate most Alaska career fire departments. The 42 young men and women in my program are far more aware of financial planning and retirement concerns than I was at their age. It is troubling that the majority of them are testing and interviewing for jobs in other states.

The fire departments in other states know this. In my travels and conversations as a Director of the Western Fire Chiefs Association and as a Director for the International Association of Fire Chiefs, I have seen how departments throughout the West are increasingly offering lateral hiring - avoiding the expense of training firefighters that other departments have already trained. These departments are actively recruiting in Alaska because of PERS Tier IV.

At a time when local budgets are strained, this problem takes on added emphasis. I thank you for working to solve this problem for our communities.

V/r,



Douglas Schrage

Fire Chief, University of Alaska Fairbanks

(907) 317-7240