

Pension Advisory Working Group  
December 14, 2023  
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Good Afternoon,

Within the Rhode Island Fire Service lies a number of structural challenges that prohibit our agencies, municipal and State, from reaching their potential. In fact, today these obstacles are impacting our ability to achieve the minimum needed levels of service.

Fire Protection is provided within our 39 cities & towns by a variety of sources, municipal fire departments, fire districts, and private volunteer fire departments. Of those, about half have full-time employees who enjoy pension benefits. Contained in that half are 18 communities served by MERS and 6 that are served by private pension plans.

Historically, positions in municipal fire/ems departments are filled by young people, aspiring men and women who wanted to become part of the fire service. Positions at the State agencies, such as the state fire marshal's office, state fire training academy, and state run colleges, were normally staffed with retirees who held the knowledge and experience needed to perform those job functions. The state fire marshal's office in particular is facing difficulty in filling existing positions within their office taxing existing staff, causing a backlog of work in inspections and plan review. Eventually, this may result in a perceived negative impact on the ability of the office to service state licensed occupancies.

In 2023, fire/ ems departments throughout the state are facing challenges recruiting to fill voids within their ranks, thus causing an economic impact on cities and towns. First, the number of applicants seeking employment in municipal fire departments in Rhode Island has sharply declined since 2011. Larger departments that saw 500 or more applicants, every two years, when establishing a hiring list, now sees numbers that have dwindled to below 100. Similarly, departments who saw 100 applicants are struggling to achieve 10 to 15.

In order to meet minimum staffing needs, there is a great expenditure of overtime dollars. One way municipal administrators are finding qualified applicants is by utilizing a relatively unknown, on the east coast, concept called lateral transfer. This is where a working firefighter from another community is offered employment by waiving attendance at the fire academy. This works well for the receiving department but leaves the other departments short staffed.

When we ask why people are no longer applying for positions, the answer we typically receive is "I can do better in private sector" or I don't want to be away from my family on holidays and weekends. While the priorities of humans changes over the generations, for many those reasons often yielded to the lure of the guaranteed pension. Having financial wherewithal in the later years of life has always been a piece of the puzzle that attracted people.

Some of the impacts from the 2011 Pension changes have left the younger generation less inclined to accept the pension as a guarantee which offsets years of hard work and missed family opportunities. Indeed, there is no doubt that many of the changes have been felt statewide. However, in the fire service we are facing a number of consequences that could be corrected by a roadmap to benefit and encourage

new workers and to help retain experienced workers. It is our hope that restoration of some of the pension features will have a positive impact on this challenge we face.

One particular point I would like to raise today regards MERS exclusion policies. The impact of the prohibition on MERS retirees against work in another MERS administered agency or organization. 40 years ago, few firefighters sought higher education and the role of a firefighter was considered as a blue collar job. Since then, the number of firefighters achieving college degrees and advanced education has risen and it is now uncommon to find a new hire without some sort of post-secondary education. These people have invested in their careers, in the communities they serve and in bettering themselves. After acquiring this knowledge, after fulfilling their service to the community, what then to do with this industry specific knowledge and experience?

Many state agencies need personnel where that knowledge and experience are prized. Unfortunately, with so many municipal pensions changing from private municipal pension systems, to falling under the oversight and administration of the MERS pension system, these state agencies are now limited to a pool of candidates from just the 6 private pension communities.

Given the regulation against working for other MERS administered entities, this has effectively limited the applicant availability for positions at the State Fire Marshals, the Rhode Island Fire Academy, Rhode Island EMA and the Rhode Island E911 Center. There is a pool of well educated, relatively young workers who desire to fill these positions, and those agencies are losing out on acquiring workers who have experience and knowledge to perform those functions.

Our fire service leaders are leaving Rhode Island and seeking employment in others states such as Massachusetts and Connecticut where they can begin to collect their MERS pension.

In discussions with state officials, there is no financial impact to allowing retiring public safety employees to seek employment in another community or the state offices I spoke of earlier, the issue is the old adage of double dipping. In today's society, if we need skilled workers and we have them available as recent retirees then provisions should be made to facilitate the use of these seasoned and educated workers. As they are already trained, they are essentially "plug & play". The agencies will not be forced to bear the cost of training periods and the delay in putting bodies to work.

I ask this working group to strongly consider in your final recommendations, a repeal of the prohibition or limit to the MERS retiree in their ability to work another position in a MERS or state pension position.