

From **CONCEPT TO CONSENSUS:** *How FASNY Helped Shape New York's Nominal Compensation Legislation*

For years volunteer fire service leaders across New York have grappled with recruiting and retaining volunteers. While New York's volunteer fire departments continue to provide exceptional emergency response to communities across the state, demographic changes, competing demands on volunteers' time, and evolving training requirements have prompted policymakers and fire service leaders alike to explore new tools to strengthen volunteer recruitment and retention.



Photos by Sidewinder Photography



One proposal that has gained significant attention is the concept of “nominal compensation,” a practice that would allow volunteer firefighters to receive modest stipends for responding to calls or participating in standby activities while maintaining their volunteer status. While the concept has generated considerable interest, it also has raised important questions about equity, oversight, funding, and the potential unintended consequences for the volunteer fire service.

Throughout the legislative process, FASNY played a central role in ensuring those questions were answered before legislation moved forward.

Supporting the Goal, Improving the Policy

From the outset FASNY recognized nominal compensation could become an important tool in a broader recruitment and retention strategy. At the same time, the Association made clear any program must be carefully structured to preserve the integrity of New York’s volunteer fire service and protect departments operating in communities with limited financial

resources. FASNY’s position was straightforward: New York needs additional tools to attract and retain volunteer firefighters, but those tools must be implemented responsibly. The Association consistently emphasized volunteer departments continue to provide outstanding service across the state and rejected claims that the current volunteer system is failing. Instead FASNY advocated for a balanced approach that would strengthen recruitment while preserving the volunteer tradition that serves millions of New Yorkers.

Working closely with bill sponsors and respective Chairs of each house’s Local Government committees, Sen. Monica Martinez and Assemblymember Michaelle Solages, FASNY participated in extensive discussions regarding the framework of a potential nominal compensation program. Those conversations focused on ensuring accountability for taxpayer dollars, maintaining volunteer status protections, establishing clear program standards, and preventing wealthier communities from gaining an unfair advantage over departments in less affluent areas.



A Seat at the Table

As legislation evolved FASNY worked alongside lawmakers and our partners at the New York State Association of Fire Chiefs, the Association of Fire Districts of the State of New York and the New York State Association of Fire Coordinators to address practical concerns surrounding implementation. FASNY repeatedly stressed the importance of establishing meaningful oversight mechanisms and safeguards to ensure nominal compensation programs would operate transparently and responsibly.

Particular attention was devoted to the challenge of equity. Without safeguards communities with greater financial resources could potentially offer larger stipends than neighboring districts, creating recruitment disparities and placing additional strain on departments already facing financial challenges. FASNY urged lawmakers to recognize this concern and incorporate measures that would help ensure all departments had access to the program, regardless of local wealth. According to Association leaders, the final product reflects months of dialogue, revisions, and collaboration among legislators, fire service organizations, local governments and other stakeholders. “This is the culmination of a great deal of work by legislators who were willing to listen to different voices within the fire service and thoughtfully respond to those concerns,” FASNY First Vice President Donnie Farrell noted during the legislative process.



Key Improvements in the Final Legislation

The final bill incorporates many of the principles FASNY identified as essential to creating a workable program.

First, the legislation clearly establishes that participation in a pay-per-call or paid-on-call stipend program does not alter a firefighter's volunteer status. Volunteer firefighters remain volunteers for purposes of state law, labor law, civil service law, workers' compensation protections, and volunteer firefighter benefits.

Second, the legislation creates significant accountability requirements. Local governments authorizing nominal compensation programs must adopt rules and procedures governing administration of the program. Firefighters must remain active members in good standing, meet training requirements, satisfy attendance standards, and comply with physical examination requirements established by their departments.

Third, the bill incorporates robust financial oversight provisions. Departments receiving state

assistance must comply with reporting requirements, submit documentation to the Office of the State Comptroller, and remain subject to audit and review.

Perhaps most importantly, the legislation establishes a Volunteer Fire Service Nominal Compensation Assistance Fund, initially authorized at \$15 million. The fund is specifically designed to assist smaller departments and communities that may not otherwise have the financial resources to implement nominal compensation programs on their own. The assistance fund directly addresses one of FASNY's longstanding concerns: ensuring departments in disadvantaged communities are not left behind while wealthier jurisdictions gain a recruitment advantage. Under the legislation priority is given to eligible departments with lower revenues and greater demonstrated need.

Building a Stronger Recruitment Toolbox

FASNY has consistently maintained nominal compensation should not be viewed as a standalone solution. Instead it should be considered one component of a larger recruitment and retention strategy that includes property tax relief, service award programs, educational incentives, training support, and other volunteer-friendly policies. The Association continues to advocate for reforms that provide local governments with greater flexibility to support volunteer firefighters while preserving the

unique character of New York's volunteer fire service. The final nominal compensation legislation reflects that broader philosophy. Rather than replacing volunteerism, the bill provides communities with an additional tool that may help recruit new members, retain experienced firefighters, and strengthen emergency response capabilities statewide.

The Value of Collaboration

Legislation affecting New York's volunteer fire service is rarely simple. Questions involving labor law, municipal finance, tax policy, workers' compensation protections, volunteer firefighter benefits, and local government authority create a complex policy landscape. FASNY's involvement throughout this process demonstrates the importance of having knowledgeable fire service advocates engaged in legislative discussions from the beginning. By working constructively with sponsors, identifying potential challenges, and proposing practical solutions, the Association helped shape legislation that reflects the realities faced by volunteer firefighters and fire departments throughout New York.

As the bill potentially advances next session, FASNY remains committed to ensuring any new recruitment and retention tools strengthen the volunteer fire service while protecting the traditions, protections, and community-focused mission that have defined New York's volunteer firefighters for generations.