

SENATE BILL REPORT

SHB 2147

As Reported By Senate Committee On:
Government Operations & Elections, March 29, 2007

Title: An act relating to vocational rehabilitation services for volunteer firefighters and reserve officers.

Brief Description: Providing vocational rehabilitation services for volunteer firefighters and reserve officers.

Sponsors: House Committee on Appropriations (originally sponsored by Representatives Kristiansen, Ericks, Chandler, Blake, Curtis, Morrell, Roberts, Hurst, Pearson, McCune, Moeller, B. Sullivan, Simpson, Santos, Ormsby, Newhouse and Kelley).

Brief History: Passed House: 2/28/07, 97-0.

Committee Activity: Government Operations & Elections: 3/29/07 [DP].

SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS & ELECTIONS

Majority Report: Do pass.

Signed by Senators Fairley, Chair; Oemig, Vice Chair; Roach, Ranking Minority Member; Benton, Kline, Pridemore and Swecker.

Staff: Sharon Swanson (786-7447)

Background: The Volunteer Fire Fighters' and Reserve Officers' Relief and Pension System (VFFRORPS) provides death, disability, medical, and retirement benefits to volunteer fire fighters and reserve officers in cities, towns, and fire protection districts. The system is funded by member and employer contributions and a portion of the fire insurance premium tax.

The State Board for Volunteer Fire Fighters and Reserve Officers (Board) administers the VFFRORPS. The Board consists of three members of fire departments covered by the VFFRORPS, no two of whom may be from the same congressional district. The members are appointed by the Governor for overlapping six-year terms.

Employers are required to participate in the death, disability, and medical benefit plans offered by the VFFRORPS, but participation in the pension component is optional. About 18,000 members are covered by the death, disability, and medical benefits, and 12,000 members are covered by the pension benefits. Members that are disabled may be eligible for both temporary duty disability benefits, and after six months of disablement, ongoing disability allowances of up to \$2,994 per month. To be eligible for the disability benefits, a member

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must be disabled to the extent that he or she is unable to engage in any occupation, or has lost the use of limbs or eyesight. The Board may also provide lump-sum partial disability benefits in the same amounts as provided for through the workers compensation system.

The VFFRORPS does not provide benefits that pay for expenses associated with the vocational rehabilitation of injured members

Summary of Substitute Bill: When, in the sole discretion of the Board, vocational rehabilitation is likely to make a disabled member return to employment, benefits may be paid from the VFFRORPS fund. Up to \$4,000 may be paid for the costs of education and associated costs, including on-the-job training fees or tools necessary for self-employment or re-employment. The \$4,000 must be used within 52 weeks of the Board approval of vocational rehabilitation benefits, except for job placement expenses, which may be extended by the Board for up to an additional 52 weeks. The Board may engage with the Washington Employment Security Department to provide job placement under this section.

An additional \$5,000 may be authorized by the Board for physician-approved accommodations necessary for participation in a retraining plan, or for performing the essential functions of an occupation.

The vocational rehabilitation benefits are available to participants who either have claims pending on the effective date of the act, or whose injury occurred on or after January 1, 2006.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: No.

Effective Date: The bill contains an emergency clause and takes effect immediately.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: Most firefighters in this state are volunteers. Currently, there is no vocational rehabilitation for volunteer firefighters who are injured. This bill will help towards getting volunteers retrained and getting them back to their old job or getting them trained for a new job. There are examples of volunteers being hit by cars, falling through floors, one man had a refrigerator land on him from a floor above. These events can result in significant injuries requiring a person to find a new line of work. During the time a person struggles with a disability and learns a new trade they should receive financial assistance. The last thing a family needs to worry about is bankruptcy. This bill will help remove some of the financial burden a family faces when a loved one is injured.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Representative Moeller, prime sponsor; Ryan Spiller, Washington Fire Commissioners; Tamare Warnke, Washington State Fire Fighters Association; Kimberly Scarpete, citizen.