

SENATE BILL REPORT

SHB 1180

As Reported by Senate Committee On:
Ways & Means, April 8, 2013

Title: An act relating to death benefits for volunteer firefighters and reserve officers.

Brief Description: Addressing death benefits for volunteer firefighters and reserve officers.

Sponsors: House Committee on Appropriations (originally sponsored by Representatives Scott, Blake, Kristiansen and Santos).

Brief History: Passed House: 3/13/13, 97-0.

Committee Activity: Ways & Means: 3/27/13, 4/08/13 [DP].

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

Majority Report: Do pass.

Signed by Senators Hill, Chair; Baumgartner, Vice Chair; Honeyford, Capital Budget Chair; Hargrove, Ranking Member; Nelson, Assistant Ranking Member; Bailey, Becker, Braun, Conway, Dammeier, Fraser, Hasegawa, Hatfield, Keiser, Kohl-Welles, Murray, Padden, Parlette, Ranker, Rivers, Schoesler and Tom.

Staff: Pete Cutler (786-7474)

Background: The Volunteer Fire Fighters' and Reserve Officers' Relief and Pension System (VFFRORPS) provides death, disability, medical, and retirement benefits to volunteer firefighters, reserve officers, and emergency medical workers in cities, towns, and fire protection districts. VFFRORPS is funded by member and employer contributions and 40 percent of the revenue from the fire insurance premium tax.

Employers must participate in the death, disability, and medical benefit plans, collectively referred to as the relief benefits, offered by VFFRORPS, but participation in the pension component is optional and participants must enroll to be covered by the pension benefits. Around 13,000 members are covered by the death, disability, and medical benefits, and 10,600 members are covered by the pension benefits.

Relief benefits are available to members covered under the relief provisions of VFFRORPS who are injured in the performance of duty. Monthly and lump-sum line-of-duty death benefits are provided when VFFRORPS members die from injuries or sickness that are the

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result of the performance of duties. The lump-sum death benefit is currently \$152,000. The monthly death benefit paid to a surviving widow or widower is currently \$1,687 and is increased by \$146 per month, per dependent child of the member, up to a maximum of \$3,377 per month. The monthly surviving spouse and dependent child death benefits for VFFRORPS are indexed to the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers. In 2010, a \$214,000 lump sum duty-related death benefit, indexed to the CPI, was added to the Law Enforcement Officers and Firefighters Retirement System; with the CPI increases the payment is currently \$223,120.

If the widow or widower does not have legal custody of the deceased member's children, payments for the children are made to the person with legal custody of the children. If there is no widow or widower, then the monthly benefit that would be made to the widow or widower is made to the youngest child, along with \$146 for each additional child. If there is no widow, widower, or children, then the benefit may be paid to a dependent parent or parents. The widow or widower benefits cease upon remarriage. The monthly payment may be converted to a lump sum payment not to exceed \$12,000, at the discretion of the Board for Volunteer Firefighters and Reserve Officers.

Summary of Bill: The lump-sum death benefit paid to survivors of VFFRORPS members who die as a result of injuries or sickness that are the result of the performance of duties is increased from \$152,000 to \$214,000. The current additional \$146 monthly survivor payment for each dependent child is increased to \$500 per month, and is paid to the surviving parent or legal guardian of each child who was dependent upon the deceased member for support at the time of the member's death, and is either unemancipated or under 18 years of age. Monthly survivor benefits will no longer be affected by marriage. The limit for lump sum conversion of monthly survivor benefits is increased to \$25,000.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: Almost three-quarters of the firefighters in Washington are volunteers including most firefighters in towns and rural areas. Volunteer firefighting is a big commitment, and as families' lives get busier every year, it is a harder commitment to make. Fire districts are having more difficulty recruiting and retaining volunteers. If we need to start paying them the cost would be substantial.

When a firefighter is killed in the line of duty it is devastating to the family. The changes made by the bill are the least we can do for the families of those who made the ultimate sacrifice. The changes made by the bill will have no impact on state or local government budgets.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Representative Scott, prime sponsor; Ryan Spiller, WA Fire Commissioners Assn.