

**BILL TO ALLOW VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS TO PURCHASE HEALTH INSURANCE THROUGH LOCAL TOWN OR VILLAGE PLANS AWAITS GOVERNOR'S SIGNATURE**

With the number of volunteer firefighters in New York declining, state lawmakers approved legislation to make them eligible for low-cost municipal health insurance.

"It's a good recruitment and retention bill," said Assemblywoman RoAnn Destito, an Oneida County Democrat who sponsored the measure. It passed the Assembly 140-0 last month and the Senate by voice vote this week.

It was the top priority of volunteer firefighting and emergency services, Destito said. According to state and association data, their ranks statewide have thinned by about 20,000 since the mid-1980s to fewer than 100,000.

The bill allows volunteer fire and EMS workers to buy-in to current municipal plans, such as through their local town or village. The volunteer would have to pay for the insurance themselves, but by being able to buy in to the municipal plan the cost will be much less than what they would pay elsewhere.

The measure, under review by Gov. David Paterson, would take effect in 180 days.

Details will have to be worked out in regulations by the state Office of Fire Prevention and Control, said Destito, who chairs the Assembly Governmental Operations Committee.

Firefighters and fire companies are urged to contact Governor Paterson's office and ask him to sign this legislation.