

**Testimony Submitted by the
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**Before the
Committee on Education and Labor
Subcommittee on Health, Employment, Labor and Pensions**

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Chairman Andrews, Ranking Member Kline and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I'd like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here today to speak with you about the need for employment protection for volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel. My name is John Alchevsky and I am the Chief of Cassville Volunteer Fire Company #1 in Jackson Township, New Jersey, where I have served for almost 30 years.

In 2005, immediately following Hurricane Katrina, my Fire Company was contacted by FEMA and asked to contribute two teams of four to be deployed to Louisiana to perform community relations duties. I am employed as a Captain with the New Jersey Department of Corrections. When I approached my employer about potentially deploying, I was informed that I did not have enough personal leave time accrued to go.

My job has prevented me from responding to major emergencies within the state of New Jersey on a number of occasions. For instance, last summer my company was dispatched to Stafford

Township in Southern Ocean County, where a wildland fire was burning, for structure protection duty. While I was eventually able to deploy along with the rest of my company, having to go through the formal process of requesting and receiving time off from work delayed my response by 24 hours.

These are just two examples of instances in which my job has prevented me from responding to an emergency. Over the course of 30 years of volunteer service, I have personally experienced and witnessed situations in which volunteer firefighters have either been prevented from or delayed in responding to an emergency or had to leave the scene of an emergency prematurely for fear of disciplinary action by their employer.

In New Jersey, municipal employees that are members of a volunteer fire company or first aid squad are allowed time off with pay to respond to local emergencies. Additionally, civil servants employed by the state are authorized to respond to state- or federally-declared disasters to serve as certified Red Cross volunteers. This protection does not extend to volunteer firefighters, EMS or emergency management personnel. Unfortunately, there is no job protection of any kind for volunteers who are employed in the private sector.

From my perspective, the issue of job protection is a fundamental one for the long-term health of the volunteer fire service. Recruitment and retention of volunteer personnel is becoming increasingly difficult. Many people don't seem to have enough free time to volunteer anymore, particularly as training requirements increase. In the past, when people lived

and worked in the same town, volunteering was easier and employers were also community members. In many parts of New Jersey, people are moving from Philadelphia and New York into formerly rural areas and commuting back into the city for work. As the distance between home and employment grows, people are finding it more difficult to balance their responsibilities as employees and volunteer emergency responders. Passage of legislation protecting the employment status of volunteer emergency responders would help to counteract this trend.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify here today. I look forward to answering any questions that you might have.