

U.S. Sens. Baldwin, Capito, Tester, Cramer: Introduce bill to increase affordable housing for volunteer firefighters and first responders

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, U.S. Senators Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV), Jon Tester (D-MT), and Kevin Cramer (R-ND) introduced the *Volunteer First Responder Housing Act*, bipartisan legislation to provide affordable housing opportunities for volunteer firefighters and first responders to help recruit and retain more volunteers, especially in rural and under-served communities.

“Fire departments in Wisconsin and throughout the nation rely heavily on volunteer firefighters and EMS first responders. In order to recruit and retain the volunteers needed to keep our communities safe, we need to make sure that those who volunteer their time to serve have access to affordable housing,” **said Senator Baldwin**. “Our bipartisan legislation will boost recruitment efforts, support emergency responders who want to live in the neighborhoods they serve, and help keep our communities safe.”

According to the National Fire Protection Association’s 2020 U.S. Fire Department Profile, 65 percent of firefighters nationwide are volunteers, and fire departments and local governments across the country rely on these volunteers to respond to a wide array of emergencies. Recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters is critical for thousands of communities, yet local volunteer fire departments, especially those serving small and rural communities, find it difficult to meet staffing needs and attract younger volunteers. Since 2019, there has been a 4 percent overall decrease in volunteer firefighters across the nation – the lowest total reported since 1991.

The *Volunteer First Responder Housing Act* would expand eligibility for qualified volunteer first responders to participate in certain federal housing assistance programs and provide a greater incentive for more volunteers to stay and continue to serve their communities.

“Hundreds of rural communities across West Virginia rely on volunteer firefighters and EMS professionals,” **Senator Capito said**. “This bill works to address the staffing and retention issues many stations face—some which were a result of the recent pandemic—by providing housing incentives. The goal is to encourage these local heroes to continue their brave work in their communities, and this bill gives them access to opportunities enjoyed by other public servants to help accomplish that.”

“Montana’s volunteer first responders put themselves in harm’s way to keep our communities safe, and we owe it to them to make sure they’ve got what they need to keep up their life-saving work,” **said Senator Tester**. “That includes helping them get a roof over their heads wherever they are serving, so that they have a safe, affordable, and convenient place to call home. I’m proud to be working with my colleagues to expand housing access for these brave men and women, and I’ll keep working until we get this bill passed into law.”

“Volunteer first responders are critical for responding to emergencies in rural states like North Dakota,” **said Senator Cramer**. “As a result of acting in a volunteer capacity, they are often excluded from benefits enjoyed by their professional counterparts. This bill recognizes their contributions to our communities and allows eligible volunteer first responders to participate in the Single-Family Housing Guaranteed Loan Program and Good Neighbor Next Door Sales Program.”

This legislation makes it possible for more volunteer emergency responders to participate in the Single-Family Housing Guaranteed Loan program through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development. This existing program assists approved lenders in providing loans to low-and moderate-income households to build, rehabilitate or improve a home in eligible rural areas. The bill will allow volunteers to participate in the loan program even if their income exceeds the maximum allowable income level by up to \$18,000.

This bill also makes volunteer emergency responders eligible to participate in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Good Neighbor Next Door Sales Program. This existing program gives law enforcement, teachers, career

firefighters and emergency medical technicians a 50 percent discount from the list price of a home located in a revitalization area.

The *Volunteer First Responder Housing Act* is supported by the National Volunteer Fire Council, International Association of Fire Chiefs, Housing Assistance Council, National Rural Housing Coalition, National Association of Towns and Townships, National Association of Counties, Wisconsin State Firefighters Association, Wisconsin State Fire Chiefs Association, Wisconsin Counties Association, Wisconsin Towns Association, and Wisconsin EMS Association.

“The Wisconsin State Firefighters Association supports the Volunteer First responder Housing Act and thanks Senator Baldwin for her introduction of the bill,” **said Todd Blaser, President of the Wisconsin State Firefighters Association.** “This Bill provides an opportunity to show appreciation to our volunteer service first responders, recognizing the sacrifices, time and talents they provide in keeping their community safety and protection of their well-being.”

“On behalf of the Wisconsin Towns Association and the National Association of Towns and Townships, I applaud and admire Senator Baldwin’s continued effort to support incentives for volunteer fire and EMS personnel,” **said Mike Koles, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Towns Association.** “Our communities rely on these essential public safety servants and need additional resources to recruit and retain them. Allowing volunteer first responders to be eligible recipients of existing housing programs is a tremendous positive strategy that moves us in the right direction and shows appreciation for their commitment to keeping communities safe. Thank you again to Senator Baldwin for her leadership on this important effort.”

“I thank Senator Baldwin for introducing the Volunteer First Responder Housing Act. This legislation recognizes the important service that volunteer firefighters provide to their communities. Today, fire departments are facing recruitment and retention challenges. This bill provides an especially important incentive for interested volunteers at a time when mortgage rates are historically high. We ask the U.S. Senate to pass this legislation soon so that we may assist those individuals in our communities who are protecting our infrastructure and citizens.,” **said Chief Donna Black, CFO, EFO, the president and board chair of the International Association of Fire Chiefs.**

“I thank Senators Baldwin, Capito, Tester and Cramer for their leadership on this

important bill,” **said National Volunteer Fire Council Chair Steve Hirsch.** “Many fire, EMS, and rescue departments are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain volunteer personnel. Helping volunteer emergency responders buy or renovate homes is a fantastic retention incentive that makes it easier for volunteers to continue living in the communities they serve.”

More information on the *Volunteer First Responder Housing Act* is available [here](#).

An online version of this release is available [here](#).