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Op-Ed: The Heroes Next Door

What words come to mind when you think about firefighters and paramedics? Strength, courage, and dedication of course – but there is another word that should be close behind – neighbor. Volunteer firefighters and emergency medical personnel are the heroes next door; they are the first line of defense for rural communities and small towns.

According to recent statistics from the U.S. Fire Administration, 92.5% of Wisconsin's fire departments are either entirely volunteer or mostly volunteer. A significant amount of emergency medical personnel are volunteer as well, but unfortunately – and dangerously, volunteerism is on the decline.

There are several reasons for this – more stringent training requirements, declining rural populations, and more hours spent working full-time jobs. Something has to be done to incentivize more people to volunteer, and to keep people volunteering long term. That's why I've worked with Rep. Treig Pronschinske (Mondovi), Rep. Jeff Mursau (Crivitz), and Sen. Steve Nass (Whitewater) to craft the B.R.A.V.E. Act – which stands for **B**eginning **R**etention and **A**ttraction for **V**olunteer **E**mergency personnel.

As introduced, the bill creates three refundable tax credits for volunteer firefighters and emergency medical personnel who meet basic participation criteria. The first is a \$300 credit that kicks in after one year, then escalates to \$600 per year after five years of service. The second is a credit of up to \$500 to defray the cost of training, and the third is a credit of up to \$400 for covering equipment costs and transportation costs associated with attending training.

These incentives help make volunteering more affordable and accessible for the people who want to do it, and will help Wisconsin maintain the timely and efficient response to emergencies that we've all come to expect and on which we've come to rely. With this legislation we hope to repay – in a small way – those who protect us and continue to be our heroes next door.