

SENATE BILL 691

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By: **Senator Augustine**

Introduced and read first time: January 29, 2024

Assigned to: Education, Energy, and the Environment

A BILL ENTITLED

1 AN ACT concerning

2 **Higher Education – Firefighters and EMS Recruitment and Retention –**
3 **Scholarship and Loan Repayment Assistance**

4 FOR the purpose of altering the Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue
5 Squad Member Scholarship to make the scholarship applicable to all courses at
6 institutions of higher education in the State; altering the maximum award amount
7 available, when a scholarship should be credited, and to whom initial awards should
8 be provided under the scholarship; establishing the Maryland Loan Repayment
9 Assistance Program for Firefighters and Emergency Medical Services Providers;
10 providing for the administration of the loan repayment program; requiring the
11 Department of Budget and Management to evaluate the feasibility of providing
12 firefighters with certain health care and child care benefits; and generally relating
13 to the recruitment and retention of firefighters and emergency medical services
14 providers.

15 BY repealing and reenacting, with amendments,
16 Article – Education
17 Section 18–603.1
18 Annotated Code of Maryland
19 (2022 Replacement Volume and 2023 Supplement)

20 BY adding to
21 Article – Education
22 Section 18–4001 through 18–4004 to be under the new subtitle “Subtitle 40.
23 Maryland Loan Repayment Assistance Program for Firefighters and
24 Emergency Medical Services Providers”
25 Annotated Code of Maryland
26 (2022 Replacement Volume and 2023 Supplement)

27 Preamble

EXPLANATION: CAPITALS INDICATE MATTER ADDED TO EXISTING LAW.

[Brackets] indicate matter deleted from existing law.



1 WHEREAS, The lives and property of Maryland residents and businesses are all
2 protected by and benefit greatly from strong and efficient fire, rescue, and emergency
3 medical services response systems, coordinated at the county and community level across
4 Maryland; and

5 WHEREAS, The social and demographic makeup of communities has largely shifted,
6 presenting both career and volunteer fire companies and emergency medical services great
7 difficulty in recruiting and retaining individuals for service; and

8 WHEREAS, Appropriate educational attainment in the fire and emergency medical
9 service in either a career or volunteer capacity is important but also creates a meaningful
10 barrier to new entrants into any fire fighting or emergency medical service capacity; and

11 WHEREAS, A stark shortage of available recruits and on-duty firefighters and
12 emergency medical services personnel has caused fire companies to call on volunteers who
13 are well into their 60s and 70s for primary response to fire and emergency medical calls;
14 and

15 WHEREAS, Volunteer fire companies remain deeply embedded in many
16 communities, serving as the primary fire fighting and emergency medical response across
17 large parts of the State; and

18 WHEREAS, Relatively metropolitan parts of the State rely on coordinated services
19 from both career and volunteer firefighters and emergency medical services personnel to
20 provide needed service coverage, but face strains in finding adequate participation at both
21 levels; and

22 WHEREAS, Maryland and its local governments currently offer a variety of support
23 incentives, staff benefits, and other compensation targeted to career and volunteer fire
24 company members and those working in emergency medical services; and

25 WHEREAS, The recruitment and retention of both career and volunteer firefighters
26 and emergency medical services personnel pose an urgent and high priority concern for
27 Marylanders' safety and security in the short term and long term; and

28 WHEREAS, the Maryland General Assembly, through Chapter 655 of the Acts of the
29 General Assembly of 2023, created the Commission to Advance and Strengthen Fire
30 Fighting and Emergency Medical Services Within Maryland to develop a set of
31 recommendations to strengthen the State's fire fighting and emergency medical services;
32 now, therefore,

33 SECTION 1. BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF MARYLAND,
34 That the Laws of Maryland read as follows:

35 **Article – Education**

36 18-603.1.

1 (a) (1) In this section the following words have the meanings indicated.

2 (2) “Eligible institution” means a public or private nonprofit institution of
3 higher education in the State that possesses a certificate of approval from the Commission.

4 (3) “Fund” means the Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and
5 Rescue Squad Member Scholarship Fund.

6 (4) “Scholarship” means the Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance
7 and Rescue Squad Member Scholarship.

8 (b) There is a Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue Squad
9 Member Scholarship.

10 (c) An individual may apply to the Office for the scholarship if the individual:

11 (1) Is a resident of Maryland;

12 (2) [(i)] Is accepted for admission or enrolled in [the regular
13 undergraduate program] **A COURSE OFFERED** at an eligible institution[]; or

14 (ii) Is accepted for admission or enrolled in a 2-year terminal
15 certificate program in which the course work is acceptable for transfer credit for an
16 accredited baccalaureate program in an eligible institution[]; and

17 (3) Is actively engaged as a career or volunteer firefighter or ambulance or
18 rescue squad member in an organized fire department or ambulance or rescue squad in the
19 State.

20 (d) (1) A scholarship awarded under this section:

21 [(1)] (I) May be used for the tuition and mandatory fees at any eligible
22 institution; and

23 [(2)] (II) May be up to:

24 1. 100% of the equivalent annual tuition and mandatory fees
25 of a resident **STUDENT AT A 2-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION**
26 **ESTABLISHED UNDER TITLE 16 OF THIS ARTICLE WITH THE HIGHEST ANNUAL**
27 **EXPENSES FOR A FULL-TIME RESIDENT STUDENT; OR**

28 2. **50% OF THE EQUIVALENT ANNUAL TUITION AND**
29 **MANDATORY FEES OF A RESIDENT** undergraduate student at the 4-year public
30 institution of higher education within the University System of Maryland, other than the
31 University of Maryland Global Campus and University of Maryland, Baltimore Campus,

1 with the highest annual expenses for a full-time resident undergraduate [for courses
2 credited toward a degree in fire service technology, emergency medical technology, fire
3 service management, or public safety administration with a minor or concentration in fire
4 service technology or fire service management].

5 **(2) ANY STUDENT FINANCIAL AID, OTHER THAN A STUDENT LOAN,**
6 **AWARDED TO A SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT SHALL BE CREDITED TO THE RECIPIENT'S**
7 **TUITION BEFORE THE CALCULATION OF ANY AWARD AMOUNT PROVIDED THROUGH**
8 **THE SCHOLARSHIP.**

9 **(3) INITIAL AWARDS SHALL BE PROVIDED TO SCHOLARSHIP**
10 **RECIPIENTS ON A FIRST-COME, FIRST-SERVED BASIS.**

11 (e) A scholarship recipient shall maintain a grade point average of at least 2.5 on
12 a 4.0 scale.

13 (f) Each recipient of a scholarship under this section may hold the award for 5
14 years of full-time study or 8 years of part-time study.

15 (g) A Senator or Delegate may authorize the Office to award all or a portion of the
16 funds authorized under Subtitles 4 and 5 of this title to eligible recipients of scholarships
17 awarded under this section.

18 (h) (1) Funds for the Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue
19 Squad Member Scholarship shall be as provided in the annual budget of the Commission
20 by the Governor.

21 (2) There is a Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue
22 Squad Member Scholarship Fund in the Commission.

23 (3) The Commission shall administer the Fund.

24 (4) The Fund is a special, nonlapsing fund that is not subject to § 7-302 of
25 the State Finance and Procurement Article.

26 (5) The State Treasurer shall hold the Fund separately and the
27 Comptroller shall account for the Fund.

28 (6) The Commission:

29 (i) May accept any gift or grant from any person or corporation for
30 the Fund;

31 (ii) Shall use any gift or grant that it receives for a scholarship from
32 the Fund; and

1 (iii) Shall deposit any gift or grant that it receives for the Fund with
2 the State Treasurer.

3 (7) (i) At the end of the fiscal year, the Commission shall prepare an
4 annual report on the Fund that includes an accounting of all financial receipts and
5 expenditures to and from the Fund.

6 (ii) The Commission shall submit a copy of the report to the General
7 Assembly in accordance with § 2-1257 of the State Government Article.

8 (i) A recipient of a scholarship shall work for at least 1 year as a volunteer or
9 career firefighter or ambulance or rescue squad member in an organized fire department
10 or ambulance or rescue squad in the State after completion of [an eligible program in]
11 **STUDY AT** an eligible institution.

12 (j) A scholarship recipient shall repay the Commission the funds received under
13 this section if the recipient does not perform the service obligation required under
14 subsection (i) of this section.

15 **SUBTITLE 40. MARYLAND LOAN REPAYMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR**
16 **FIREFIGHTERS AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES PROVIDERS.**

17 **18-4001.**

18 (A) **IN THIS SUBTITLE THE FOLLOWING WORDS HAVE THE MEANINGS**
19 **INDICATED.**

20 (B) **“FIRE, RESCUE, OR EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES ENTITY” HAS THE**
21 **MEANING STATED IN § 7-101 OF THE PUBLIC SAFETY ARTICLE.**

22 (C) **“HIGHER EDUCATION LOAN” MEANS A LOAN THAT IS OBTAINED FOR**
23 **TUITION FOR UNDERGRADUATE OR GRADUATE STUDY.**

24 (D) **“PROGRAM” MEANS THE MARYLAND LOAN REPAYMENT ASSISTANCE**
25 **PROGRAM FOR FIREFIGHTERS AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES PROVIDERS.**

26 (E) **“PUBLIC RESCUE PERSONNEL MEMBER” MEANS AN INDIVIDUAL WHO IS**
27 **EMPLOYED BY OR A VOLUNTARY MEMBER OF A FIRE, RESCUE, OR EMERGENCY**
28 **MEDICAL SERVICES ENTITY.**

29 **18-4002.**

30 (A) **THERE IS A MARYLAND LOAN REPAYMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR**
31 **FIREFIGHTERS AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES PROVIDERS.**

1 **(B) THE OFFICE SHALL DISTRIBUTE FUNDS FROM THE PROGRAM TO ASSIST**
2 **IN THE REPAYMENT OF A HIGHER EDUCATION LOAN OWED BY A PUBLIC RESCUE**
3 **PERSONNEL MEMBER WHO:**

4 **(1) RECEIVES A GRADUATE, PROFESSIONAL, OR UNDERGRADUATE**
5 **DEGREE FROM A PUBLIC COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY IN THE STATE;**

6 **(2) WORKS FOR AT LEAST 1 YEAR AS A VOLUNTEER OR CAREER**
7 **FIREFIGHTER OR AMBULANCE OR RESCUE SQUAD MEMBER FOR A FIRE, RESCUE, OR**
8 **EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES ENTITY IN THE STATE; AND**

9 **(3) SATISFIES ANY OTHER CRITERIA ESTABLISHED BY THE OFFICE.**

10 **18-4003.**

11 **(A) THE OFFICE SHALL ADOPT REGULATIONS TO CARRY OUT THIS**
12 **SUBTITLE.**

13 **(B) THE REGULATIONS SHALL INCLUDE:**

14 **(1) A LIMIT ON THE TOTAL AMOUNT OF ASSISTANCE PROVIDED BY**
15 **THE OFFICE IN REPAYING THE LOAN OF AN ELIGIBLE INDIVIDUAL, BASED ON THE**
16 **INDIVIDUAL'S TOTAL INCOME AND OUTSTANDING HIGHER EDUCATION LOAN**
17 **BALANCE; AND**

18 **(2) THE PROVISION OF ASSISTANCE ON A FIRST-COME,**
19 **FIRST-SERVED BASIS FOR ALL ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS.**

20 **18-4004.**

21 **SUBJECT TO § 2-1257 OF THE STATE GOVERNMENT ARTICLE, THE OFFICE**
22 **SHALL REPORT TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON OR BEFORE JANUARY 1 EACH YEAR**
23 **ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAM.**

24 **SECTION 2. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That:**

25 **(a) (1) In this section the following words have the meanings indicated.**

26 **(2) "Fire or rescue entity" means:**

27 **(i) a governmental subdivision, by its appropriate designated**
28 **authority;**

1 (ii) a board or fire commission of a fire department or governmental
2 subdivision;

3 (iii) a fire department;

4 (iv) a fire company; or

5 (v) a rescue squad.

6 (3) "Program" means the State Employee and Retiree Health and Welfare
7 Benefits Program established under Title 2, Subtitle 5 of the State Personnel and Pensions
8 Article.

9 (b) The Department of Budget and Management shall evaluate the feasibility of
10 including firefighters in the Program who:

11 (1) are employed by or are voluntary members of a fire or rescue entity;
12 and

13 (2) do not receive comparable health care benefits to those offered by the
14 Program from their relationship to a fire or rescue entity.

15 (c) The Department's evaluation shall consider:

16 (1) the possibility of allowing firefighters to fully pay for coverage through
17 the Program;

18 (2) any increased costs associated with effectively and efficiently
19 incorporating firefighters into the Program, including any costs related to additional
20 management, administration, oversight, and information-sharing burdens on the
21 Program; and

22 (3) the effect incorporating firefighters into the Program would have in
23 attracting individuals to become firefighters working or volunteering for a fire or rescue
24 entity.

25 (d) On or before December 31, 2024, the Department shall report the results of its
26 evaluation to the Governor and, in accordance with § 2-1257 of the State Government
27 Article, the General Assembly.

28 SECTION 3. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That:

29 (a) In this section, "fire or rescue entity" means:

30 (1) a governmental subdivision, by its appropriate designated authority;

1 (2) a board or fire commission of a fire department or governmental
2 subdivision;

3 (3) a fire department;

4 (4) a fire company; or

5 (5) a rescue squad.

6 (b) (1) The Department of Budget and Management shall evaluate the
7 feasibility of a program designed to efficiently and effectively provide child care for
8 firefighters who are employed by or are voluntary members of a fire or rescue entity.

9 (2) The Department's evaluation shall include possible mechanisms to
10 fund the program through funding provided by both the State and the county in which the
11 fire or rescue entity is located.

12 (c) The Department's evaluation shall include considerations of:

13 (1) the cost of providing child care through the program, including
14 administrative and other indirect costs; and

15 (2) the effect incorporating firefighters into the program would have in
16 attracting individuals to become firefighters working or volunteering for a fire or rescue
17 entity.

18 (d) On or before December 31, 2024, the Department shall report the results of its
19 evaluation to the Governor and, in accordance with § 2-1257 of the State Government
20 Article, the General Assembly.

21 SECTION 4. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That this Act shall take effect July
22 1, 2024. Sections 2 and 3 of this Act shall remain effective for a period of 1 year and, at the
23 end of June 30, 2025, Sections 2 and 3 of this Act, with no further action required by the
24 General Assembly, shall be abrogated and of no further force and effect.