

Testimony on House Bill 2372
Before the House Committee on Federal and State Affairs
Mark Engholm, State Fire Marshal
February 17, 2025

Chairman, Vice Chair, Ranking Member and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide neutral testimony on Kansas House Bill 2372, which would designate the existing firefighters memorial adjacent to the Kansas Firefighters Museum in Wichita as the Kansas Fallen Firefighters Memorial.

During the 2001 legislative session, a bill was passed authorizing the construction of a fallen firefighters memorial on the statehouse grounds. Modeled after the law enforcement memorial, this monument was intended to provide a place where names of fallen firefighters could be added annually. An advisory committee, appointed by the Governor, was established to oversee the project, and a dedicated fund was created in the state treasury for its design, construction, and maintenance.

Upon my appointment to the State Fire Marshal's Office last year, I discovered that the advisory board for the statehouse firefighter memorial had ceased meeting and had been inactive for several years. Former committee members cited leadership retirements and the impact of COVID-19 as reasons for its dissolution. Efforts to reconstitute the committee were met with little to no interest. My understanding is that the project had only progressed to the initial design phase over more than 20 years since it was initiated.

Meanwhile, in June 2002, a firefighters memorial was dedicated next to the Kansas Firefighters Museum in Wichita. Located in Lincoln Park, a municipal space featuring a playground, gazebo, and splash pad, the memorial includes a life-sized bronze statue of a firefighter, engraved bricks, a memorial wall, and a meditation area. I had the honor of speaking at this memorial's annual service last fall, where the names of Kansas firefighters who had fallen in the line of duty were added. Wichita has also developed plans to enhance Lincoln Park into a firefighter-themed area, further elevating the memorial's significance.

While I understand and support the intent of HB 2372, I would like to bring certain concerns to the committee's attention. As written, the bill amends statutes designed for a memorial located on the statehouse grounds, thereby involving agencies such as the Director of the Division of Facilities Management, the State Historical Society, and the Secretary of Administration—none of which would have a relevant role in overseeing a memorial on municipal property. Additionally, the bill maintains a

level of state oversight, including a Governor-appointed committee, yet does not include representation from the City of Wichita or the Kansas Firefighters Museum, which are responsible for the memorial's daily upkeep. I am unaware of any other municipal memorial that operates under this level of state oversight, and I believe it would create unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles.

Instead, I propose a streamlined approach: recognize the Kansas Fallen Firefighters Memorial in Wichita as the official state memorial, transfer the funds collected in the state firefighters memorial fund to the City of Wichita for maintenance and enhancements, and repeal KSA 75-36,102 and 75-36,103. This would empower Wichita, the Kansas Firefighters Museum, and statewide fire service organizations to manage the memorial without excessive state involvement. Established fire service organizations—including the Kansas State Firefighters Association, Kansas State Association of Fire Chiefs, Fire Marshal's Association of Kansas, Kansas Chapter of the International Association of Arson Investigators, and the International Association of Firefighters—are fully capable of carrying out this duty independently.

I appreciate the committee's consideration of this important matter in a busy legislative session. Kansans deserve a place to honor fallen firefighters and their families. I stand ready to answer any questions and can be reached following the hearing.

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