

Testimony
House Committee on Taxation
Jason Hartman
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Chairman Smith and Members of the House Committee on Taxation:

Good Afternoon. My name is Jason Hartman. I serve as the State Forester for the Kansas Forest Service. I am pleased to testify before you today on HB 2066 - Property Tax Exemption for Fire and EMS.

Kansas Forest Service has been assisting Kansas fire departments, both volunteer and career, for over 60 years. We have been able to witness the organization of fire districts and the ebb and flow of the number of volunteers. Nationally, per the National Fire Protection Association, there are 1.04 million firefighters, with 66% being volunteers. In Kansas of the 16,000 firefighters, 13,000 are volunteers, which is 81% of the firefighters. Volunteers are the backbone of emergency response, including wildfires that cover most communities and land in Kansas.

A NFPA report shows a 4% decrease in total number of firefighters since 2019 and volunteer numbers are at the lowest number since 1991. Small communities are hit the hardest, with shrinking and aging population, which is reflected in the volunteer service. We have been told repeatedly, the average age of a volunteer is over 50, possibly over 60 years old. Additionally, the labor shortage provides hardship on both volunteer and career firefighters.

As the volunteer numbers continue to decrease, the demands on the firefighters have increased. In the past, many wildfires would last 2-4 hours, allowing a volunteer to leave work and still return to shift the same day. Now, Kansas is experiencing multi-day fires with many volunteers working non-stop for more than 16 hours per day. This creates hardship on the firefighter, their family, their employer, and the communities they serve.

Kansas Forest Service supports any effort, such as House Bill 2066, that looks at providing some additional incentives to recruit and retain firefighters and support these men and women who serve their communities.

Chairman Smith, thank you again to you and the members of the House Committee on Taxation for the opportunity to testify today . I am happy to stand for questions.