

BILL ANALYSIS

Senate Research Center

S.B. 567
By: Springer
Education
4/4/2023
As Filed

AUTHOR'S / SPONSOR'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

Volunteer firefighters serve their communities in ways obvious, like fighting fires, and in ways overlooked, like improving communities' home insurance rates through ISO ratings. Volunteer departments participate in almost every disaster—not just fires. Reasons for calling volunteer firefighters can vary from medical calls to accidents to water rescues or helping local governments in high wind situations during tornados or hurricanes.

There are 23,957 volunteer firefighters in Texas, which is fewer than the state's 31,866 paid firefighters, who are located mainly in larger cities. Yet volunteer departments cover approximately 76 percent of Texas and are often the only service in many parts of the state. Unfortunately, the ratio of volunteer firefighters per 1,000 residents dropped from eight in the late 1980s to less than six today.

To boost recruitment, some parties have suggested updating the current statute that allows volunteer firefighters to enroll free of charge in any higher education courses offered as part of a fire science curriculum. The legislation clarifies a volunteer firefighter's qualifications to participate in the free tuition for fire sciences to make the program more accessible to volunteer firefighters and make the program more of a recruitment tool in the future.

As proposed, S.B. 567 amends current law relating to Firefighters Enrolled in Fire Science Courses.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

This bill does not expressly grant any additional rulemaking authority to a state officer, institution, or agency.

SECTION BY SECTION ANALYSIS

SECTION 1. Amends Section 54.353, Education Code, as follows:

(a) Requires the governing board of an institution of higher education to exempt from the payment of tuition and laboratory fees any student enrolled in one or more courses offered as part of a fire science curriculum who:

(1) makes no changes to this subdivision; or

(2) is a member in good standing in a volunteer firefighter department, registered with Texas Forest Service and providing 911 service to a designated area and who:

(i) attends at least 20 hours of annual training;

(ii) attends or provides support services for at least 25 percent of the department's emergencies in a calendar year; and

(iii) and who holds certain certifications.

Deletes existing text requiring the governing board of an institution of higher education to exempt from the payment of tuition and laboratory fees any student enrolled in one or more courses offered as part of a fire science curriculum who is currently, and has been for at least one year, an active member of an organized volunteer fire department participating in the Texas Emergency Services Retirement System or a retirement system established under the Texas Local Fire Fighters Retirement Act (Article 6243e, Vernon's Texas Civil Statutes) and who holds certain certifications. Makes nonsubstantive changes.

(b)-(f) Makes no changes to these subsections.

SECTION 2. Effective date: September 1, 2023.