



Montana Career Fire Chiefs Association

PRESIDENT'S UPDATE

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The Montana Career Fire Chiefs Association exists to shape the future of Montana's professional fire service organizations, enhance the professional development of its members, and improve the quality of life for the communities it serves.

For the first time participating in Montana's bi-annual legislative process, the Montana Career Fire Chiefs Association made progress in our Mission to serve communities and members. We learned a lot about what we can do better in the future, just like everybody does when beginning something new.

What follows is an update on *some* of the legislative bills we were watching during the four-month session and, later, I also share personal insights about the process:

HB 231 - DID NOT PASS

Would have repealed the requirements for municipalities to hire career paid firefighters in Class I and II cities.

Passed by the Montana House of Representatives, HB 231 never made it out of a Senate committee. MCFCA took a neutral stand, but this bill was not favored by the majority of the membership.

HB 307 - DID NOT PASS / VETO BY Governor
Would have prohibited state building codes from requiring fire sprinkler systems in one-and-two family residential family dwellings.

This one was a tough one. They tried to NOT allow residential sprinklers as a fire-protection OPTION. It was actually anti-sprinkler legislation and we thank the Governor for vetoing it, after trying to add amendments, which they rejected twice, but in the end didn't have votes to override a Veto.

HB 354 - DID NOT PASS

Would have repealed the requirement for approved carbon monoxide detectors in each dwelling under a landlord's control.

Position Paper Issued: MCFCA opposed on the grounds that "it would put tenants at risk and compromise community safety."

HB 400 - DID NOT PASS

Would have prohibited fees for motor-vehicle accidents.

Members generally feel that Fire Service Agencies need to be able to recoup costs associated with these types of calls.

HB 508 - APPROVED / Governor Signed
Brings equity to firefighter worker's compensation to allow disability time to figure into salary/retirement benefits.

This bill was the right thing to do. If a firefighter injures his/her leg on the job and is forced to retire because of the injury, that disability time wouldn't figure into retirement pay. Without this legislation, firefighters are left in poverty for an on-the-job injury. HB 508's passage brings fire districts into the same coverage with municipal fire agencies.

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Medical Marijuana (HB 68 and Others) -
DID NOT PASS / Not signed by Governor = Law
July 1. Repeals the Initiative-passed Medical
Marijuana law; replaced with new regulations.

LC 1844.1 - DID NOT PASS

Would have limited EMS providers to 12 hours
in one consecutive 24-hour period with at least
a 10-hour rest period

*MCFCA was not in the fight to allow or not allow
medical marijuana. Our concern is safety: How to keep
safe the people working and using these businesses as
well as our responding firefighters. Concerns include
grow operations with overloaded circuitry and unknown
stored chemicals. If occurring in residences, we don't
have the benefits of fire code inspections.*

*Position Paper Issued: MCFCA's concern was the
scheduling problems for many departments in the way
they protect communities.*

PERSONAL INSIGHTS:

Working with the legislature and our individual legislators for the first time as an organized association was a challenge for us. However, we did what we could to keep ourselves "in the loop" and to get out our messages to respective legislators. We wanted them to know that there is a Career Fire Chiefs Association.

So we went to Helena and handed out our Intro and Contact information. We were able to do a Meet-and-Greet with the legislators, state and career fire chiefs, and the career firefighters on two separate occasions. We met with a lot of legislators, which was important, because one of our big challenges was keeping up with all the legislation being introduced -- pro or con.

It's a challenge for fire chiefs to get away from their duties at a moment's notice. Some hearing dates gave us eight hours notice. We know it's better to testify about a bill rather than submit a written document, but sometimes all we could do was call the legislative folks and let them know our views on votes. It's just hard on us to drop what we're doing. A fire chief's calendar is full. There is not enough time to essentially leave yourself open for three months during a legislative session. We are currently exploring the idea of having a Legislative Liaison for the next session.

So one of the topics we need to discuss as a membership is how to handle the learning experience. It was a challenge and *will be a* challenge for us: How do we stay in contact with our legislators? We do the best we can by email/written correspondence and we travel to Helena when we can--a number of us did that. We work closely with our firefighters to make it all work.

Being a new organization, we also have communication issues. We have monthly conference calls, but it was busy. We were deeply involved and deeply concerned about some of the legislation. It took a lot of effort to stay on top of a rapidly changing process, when your particular issues are hard. So, another challenge is to continue communication amongst ourselves. It's important to stay involved as an association.

In future, we will tweak more so we can do better than we did. In future, we will continue to evaluate fire service issues so we can continue to better our communities. We appreciate the participation and the legislators who listened to our views. Ultimately, it's about the safety of the citizens in the communities that we cover. Our Association covers the majority of the state's population. We represent nearly 500,000 Montanans. Our members work in communities with the highest emergency-call-volume. We believe strongly in our service to our communities and we will continue to do the best we can for them with the resources that we have.

- Brent L. Christopherson - President, MCFCA