

SUBJECT: Exempting certain volunteer firefighters from tuition and lab fees

COMMITTEE: Higher Education — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 7 ayes — Branch, Castro, Berman, Cohen, D. Howard, Patrick, Rose
0 nays
2 absent — Alonzo, McCall

WITNESSES: For — Steve Perdue, State Fireman’s and Fire Marshals’ Association;
(*Registered, but did not testify:* Julianne Acevedo, Texas Fire Chiefs Association)

Against — None

On — (*Registered, but did not testify:* Jane Caldwell, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board)

BACKGROUND: Education Code, sec. 54.208 exempts firefighters employed by a political subdivision from paying tuition and laboratory fees for fire science courses at public junior colleges and four-year colleges and universities. Government Code, sec. 419.071 regulates the voluntary certification program for volunteer firefighters and fire departments.

DIGEST: CSHB 2013 would extend to volunteer firefighters with an accredited advanced level of certification or an equivalent under the State Fireman’s and Fire Marshals’ Association of Texas volunteer certification program the tuition and lab fee exemption currently in place for firefighters enrolled in fire science courses. The exemption also would apply to those who hold a Phase V certification or equivalent successor certification under the Texas Commission on Fire Protection’s voluntary certification program.

The exemption would not apply to security deposits that may be required for property loans to a student.

The exemption would begin with the fall 2009 semester.

The bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2009.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

HB 2013 would correct an inequity by authorizing for volunteer firefighters a higher education benefit that paid firefighters currently enjoy. The bill would assist in volunteer retention and serve as an incentive for volunteer firefighters to achieve advanced certification.

The bill would only expand the tuition and lab fee exemption to volunteer firefighters who are active members of an organized volunteer fire department and hold a certain high level of certification. There are about 1,200 volunteer firefighters who have received this advanced certification, and about half of them have gone on to paid positions. It is a difficult program that mirrors the training and certification required for paid firefighters. The total number of volunteer firefighters expected to utilize the exemption likely would be around 5-to-10 percent of that number, or 30 to 60 a year.

Offering higher education benefits to these volunteer public servants would provide a good incentive to keep them in their local communities and encourage their higher education. The communities in which they serve would greatly benefit from this.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

While no one disputes the worthiness of this bill's intentions and beneficiaries, adding new exemptions could create a financial strain, especially for community colleges. Although CSHB 2013 would have no fiscal impact on the state, it would continue a trend that is eroding the base of the state's higher education funding. At some point, policy makers should consider creating uniformity for exemptions and establish benchmarks and standards for recipients receiving aid.

According to the Texas Higher Educating Coordinating Board, in fiscal 2008, Texas public universities and community colleges reported a total of about \$365 million in various tuition and fee exemptions and waivers.

NOTES:

According to the LBB, there would be no significant fiscal impact to the state. However, according to the THECB, it is estimated that the decreased tuition and fee revenue for higher education institutions would total about \$620,869 in fiscal 2010. This amount would increase as more volunteer firefighters used the exemption.

The committee substitute specifies that the status of an active member of an organized volunteer fire department is defined by the fire fighter's pension commissioner.

A related bill, HB 2347 by Thibaut, which would grant a tuition and fee exemption for peace officers taking criminal justice or law enforcement-management courses, passed the House by 98-43 on April 29 and has been referred to the Senate Higher Education Committee.