

Guest Viewpoint: Firefighters face risks and deserve their pensions

When the bell sounds at fire houses in our communities, irrespective of the nature of the call or the hour, New York's full-time firefighters respond without hesitation. And they do so repeatedly.

Here are a few interesting facts that put it into context:

» In small communities such as Saratoga Springs, the 53-member department responded 3,402 times last year — nearly 10 times per day.

» In three of upstate's bigger cities — Binghamton, Albany and Syracuse — there were 53,000 calls. That's 145 calls per day combined, or more than two in each city every hour.

» In New York City, which has the largest fire department in the country with 10,500 uniformed personnel serving 8 million people, there were 500,000 calls — or 1,369 per day, roughly one every minute, every day.

The men and women serving in the fire service are doing extraordinary work, and while ordinary New Yorkers, they possess and demonstrate an outstanding commitment. Each year, members of the fire services are tragically lost in the line of duty.

At this time, Gov. Andrew Cuomo and many local officials are seeking a new set of standards for its pension system, and while the state workforce tops 250,000 and includes valued civil servants who provide important public services, the civilian ranks do not face the physical challenges and potential risks of first responders.

In fact, it has been documented that firefighters have higher incidences of heart disease and high blood pressure; are susceptible to aggressive cancers; and, as a group, experience a life expectancy approximately

10 years less than the general population. According to publicly available data, the New York State Police and Fire Retirement System currently pays benefits to 29,325 recipients, with an annual average benefit of \$42,107. Sixty percent of the benefits paid are below \$41,067.

In 2010, a year during which the state encouraged a significant number of early retirements, 946 members of the state's police and fire services began claiming retirement benefits. During that time, there was a modest number of new hires of local firefighters, a few stemming from the desire of localities to maintain emergency service levels and critical response times, while simultaneously reducing overtime costs. However, there has been a net loss of first responder forces and as such a corresponding increase in risk to those who remain.

As president of the New York State Professional Fire Fighters Association, I represent 18,000 outstanding New Yorkers. Each is prepared to answer the call of service.

Proponents of Cuomo's plan argue that introducing a new retirement tier only affects those who have yet to be hired, but they fail to consider that those who will respond to the fires, accidents and attacks of the future are responsible for protecting your family and mine. They will continue to pay a tremendous price and incur daily risk. It's what sets them apart.

And, at the end of a career spanning 20 years or more, they have earned the gratitude, respect and appreciation of their neighbors, and an appropriate pension benefit, too.

McManus is the president of the New York State Professional Fire Fighters Association. He served for 29 years on active duty with the City of Binghamton Fire Department.