

Firefighters deserve gratitude - and more

To the Editor:

When the bell sounds at fire houses in our communities, irrespective of the nature of the call or the hour, New York state's full-time firefighters respond without hesitation. And they do so repeatedly. A few facts put this 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, 145 calls per day combined, or more than two in each city every hour.

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

It is clear that the men and women serving in the fire service are doing extraordinary work, and while they are ordinary New Yorkers, they possess and demonstrate an outstanding commitment to their communities.

Each day, it is the accepted and assumed role of the women and men of the fire service to protect their community. They believe their unwavering support of each other ensures they will all return home safely to their families at the end of their shifts.

However, it is a sad truth that each year, members of the fire services are tragically lost in the line of duty.

Firefighters usually join the service in their 20s, and serve for approximately 25 years. At this time, Gov. Andrew Cuomo and many local officials are seeking to bring a new set of standards to the state pension system, and while the state work force tops 250,000 and includes valued civil servants who provide important public services, the civilian ranks simply do not face the physical challenges and potential risks of first responders.

In fact, it has been documented that firefighters have higher than average 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; 60 percent of the benefits paid are below \$41,067.

In 2010, when the state encouraged a significant number of early retirements, 946 members of the state's police and fire services began claiming retirement benefits. 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 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 one 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 an important point: Those who do the job today, and 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. 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.

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