

Response to Questions on the FY 2017 Budget

Request By: Supervisor Gross

Question: Please provide additional detail about the LOSAP program for volunteer firefighters. What are some options to funding a more robust program, especially as grant funds may disappear?

Response: Length of Service Awards Programs (LOSAPs) are pension-like programs increasingly used across the United States to assist communities in recruiting, retaining and rewarding volunteer firefighters and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) personnel.

The amount of the LOSAP benefit is directly related to the number of years of service credit earned by the volunteer. To earn a year of credit, a volunteer must perform 240 hours of operational service, accomplish a minimum amount of training, and be certified to some advanced level ranging from ambulance driver to certified chief officer. A member becomes vested in the program after earning five years of credit, and can earn a maximum of 30 years of credit. Once vested, a member receives a monthly benefit of \$10 for every year of credit earned when they turn 65 up to a maximum of \$300 per month (for 30 years of service). The benefit is paid until death; however, once payments begin, it is guaranteed for a minimum of 10 years. It should be noted that this program does include a benefit provision if an individual is disabled on the job or if death occurs prior to age 65.

LOSAP is a proven retention tool, which several surrounding jurisdictions utilize to retain their volunteers. The following are examples of local jurisdictions that utilize a LOSAP program: Montgomery County, Loudoun County, Prince William County, and Hanover County.

The value to the County to support LOSAP is twofold – increased return on investment and increased capacity.

The average length of volunteer service in the fire department is approximately three years. The majority of the costs to the County are incurred in the first six months of hiring, equipping and training new volunteers, and can range from \$3,000 for a new volunteer firefighter to \$21,000 for a new Emergency Medical Technician (EMT). The LOSAP program provides an incentive to volunteers to increase their years of service to five or more thus providing the County a much greater return on the initial investment.

Secondly, the longer a volunteer is in the system, the more capacity there is to serve the residents and visitors of Fairfax County. Keeping members longer, along with proper recruiting, will lead to more volunteers in the system to provide emergency response services. In addition, keeping members longer ensures more highly trained senior volunteers will be able to supplement the career staff in serving the residents of the County. These senior volunteers will also be able to use their experience to mentor and train new volunteers resulting in a safer, more robust system.

In 2014 initial seed money, in the amount of \$260,000, was funded for two years through the Fairfax County Volunteer Fire and Rescue Association (FCVFRA) and the United States Department of Homeland Security's Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program. It should be noted that the County had no role in the application process for these funds. Due to cost efficiencies, the LOSAP Board was able to stretch this initial period to four years. Now that this funding is nearly exhausted, the program is in danger of collapsing without a continuing long term funding source. Currently, there are no other grant options available to assist with this program.

Although volunteer membership fluctuates, it is anticipated the number of eligible members will stabilize at around the 200 range. The actuary that is responsible for managing the program has indicated that annual funding of \$95,000 will be required to cover 200 credits per year.