SENATE BILL 691

F2, E4 4lr2031
CF HB 899

By: **Senator Augustine**
Introduced and read first time: January 29, 2024
Assigned to: Education, Energy, and the Environment

Committee Report: Favorable with amendments
Senate action: Adopted
Read second time: March 2, 2024

CHAPTER _____

AN ACT concerning

Higher Education – ~~Firefighters and EMS Recruitment and Retention – Scholarship and Loan Repayment Assistance~~ Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue Squad Member Scholarship – Alterations

FOR the purpose of altering the Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue Squad Member Scholarship to make the scholarship applicable to all courses at institutions of higher education in the State; altering the maximum award amount available, when a scholarship should be credited, and to whom initial awards should be provided under the scholarship; ~~establishing the Maryland Loan Repayment Assistance Program for Firefighters and Emergency Medical Services Providers; providing for the administration of the loan repayment program; requiring the Department of Budget and Management to evaluate the feasibility of providing firefighters with certain health care and child care benefits;~~ and generally relating to the ~~recruitment and retention of firefighters and emergency medical services providers~~ Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue Squad Member Scholarship.

BY repealing and reenacting, with amendments,
Article – Education
Section 18–603.1
Annotated Code of Maryland
(2022 Replacement Volume and 2023 Supplement)

~~BY adding to~~
~~Article – Education~~

EXPLANATION: **CAPITALS INDICATE MATTER ADDED TO EXISTING LAW.**
[Brackets**]** indicate matter deleted from existing law.
Underlining indicates amendments to bill.
~~Strike out~~ indicates matter stricken from the bill by amendment or deleted from the law by amendment.

~~Section 18–4001 through 18–4004 to be under the new subtitle "Subtitle 40. Maryland Loan Repayment Assistance Program for Firefighters and Emergency Medical Services Providers"~~
~~Annotated Code of Maryland~~
~~(2022 Replacement Volume and 2023 Supplement)~~

Preamble

WHEREAS, The lives and property of Maryland residents and businesses are all protected by and benefit greatly from strong and efficient fire, rescue, and emergency medical services response systems, coordinated at the county and community level across Maryland; and

WHEREAS, The social and demographic makeup of communities has largely shifted, presenting both career and volunteer fire companies and emergency medical services great difficulty in recruiting and retaining individuals for service; and

WHEREAS, Appropriate educational attainment in the fire and emergency medical service in either a career or volunteer capacity is important but also creates a meaningful barrier to new entrants into any fire fighting or emergency medical service capacity; and

WHEREAS, A stark shortage of available recruits and on–duty firefighters and emergency medical services personnel has caused fire companies to call on volunteers who are well into their 60s and 70s for primary response to fire and emergency medical calls; and

WHEREAS, Volunteer fire companies remain deeply embedded in many communities, serving as the primary fire fighting and emergency medical response across large parts of the State; and

WHEREAS, Relatively metropolitan parts of the State rely on coordinated services from both career and volunteer firefighters and emergency medical services personnel to provide needed service coverage, but face strains in finding adequate participation at both levels; and

WHEREAS, Maryland and its local governments currently offer a variety of support incentives, staff benefits, and other compensation targeted to career and volunteer fire company members and those working in emergency medical services; and

WHEREAS, The recruitment and retention of both career and volunteer firefighters and emergency medical services personnel pose an urgent and high priority concern for Marylanders' safety and security in the short term and long term; and

WHEREAS, the Maryland General Assembly, through Chapter 655 of the Acts of the General Assembly of 2023, created the Commission to Advance and Strengthen Fire Fighting and Emergency Medical Services Within Maryland to develop a set of

recommendations to strengthen the State's fire fighting and emergency medical services; now, therefore,

SECTION 1. BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF MARYLAND, That the Laws of Maryland read as follows:

Article – Education

18–603.1.

(a) (1) In this section the following words have the meanings indicated.

(2) "Eligible institution" means a public or private nonprofit institution of higher education in the State that possesses a certificate of approval from the Commission.

(3) "Fund" means the Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue Squad Member Scholarship Fund.

(4) "Scholarship" means the Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue Squad Member Scholarship.

(b) There is a Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue Squad Member Scholarship.

(c) An individual may apply to the Office for the scholarship if the individual:

(1) Is a resident of Maryland;

(2) **[**(i)**]** Is accepted for admission or enrolled in **[**the regular undergraduate program**]** **A COURSE OFFERED** at an eligible institution**[**; or

(ii) Is accepted for admission or enrolled in a 2–year terminal certificate program in which the course work is acceptable for transfer credit for an accredited baccalaureate program in an eligible institution**]**; and

(3) Is actively engaged as a career or volunteer firefighter or ambulance or rescue squad member in an organized fire department or ambulance or rescue squad in the State.

(d) **(1)** A scholarship awarded under this section:

[(1)**]** **(I)** May be used for the tuition and mandatory fees at any eligible institution; and

[(2)**]** **(II)** May be up to**:**

1. 100% of the equivalent annual tuition and mandatory fees of a resident **STUDENT AT A 2–YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION ESTABLISHED UNDER TITLE 16 OF THIS ARTICLE WITH THE HIGHEST ANNUAL EXPENSES FOR A FULL–TIME RESIDENT STUDENT; OR**

2. 50% OF THE EQUIVALENT ANNUAL TUITION AND MANDATORY FEES OF A RESIDENT undergraduate student at the 4–year public institution of higher education within the University System of Maryland, other than the University of Maryland Global Campus and University of Maryland, Baltimore Campus, with the highest annual expenses for a full–time resident undergraduate **[**for courses credited toward a degree in fire service technology, emergency medical technology, fire service management, or public safety administration with a minor or concentration in fire service technology or fire service management**]**.

(2) ANY STUDENT FINANCIAL AID, OTHER THAN A STUDENT LOAN, AWARDED TO A SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT SHALL BE CREDITED TO THE RECIPIENT'S TUITION BEFORE THE CALCULATION OF ANY AWARD AMOUNT PROVIDED THROUGH THE SCHOLARSHIP.

(3) INITIAL AWARDS SHALL BE PROVIDED TO SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS ON A FIRST–COME, FIRST–SERVED BASIS.

(e) A scholarship recipient shall maintain a grade point average of at least 2.5 on a 4.0 scale.

(f) Each recipient of a scholarship under this section may hold the award for 5 years of full–time study or 8 years of part–time study.

(g) A Senator or Delegate may authorize the Office to award all or a portion of the funds authorized under Subtitles 4 and 5 of this title to eligible recipients of scholarships awarded under this section.

(h) (1) Funds for the Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue Squad Member Scholarship shall be as provided in the annual budget of the Commission by the Governor.

(2) There is a Charles W. Riley Firefighter and Ambulance and Rescue Squad Member Scholarship Fund in the Commission.

(3) The Commission shall administer the Fund.

(4) The Fund is a special, nonlapsing fund that is not subject to § 7–302 of the State Finance and Procurement Article.

(5) The State Treasurer shall hold the Fund separately and the Comptroller shall account for the Fund.

(6) The Commission:

(i) May accept any gift or grant from any person or corporation for the Fund;

(ii) Shall use any gift or grant that it receives for a scholarship from the Fund; and

(iii) Shall deposit any gift or grant that it receives for the Fund with the State Treasurer.

(7) (i) At the end of the fiscal year, the Commission shall prepare an annual report on the Fund that includes an accounting of all financial receipts and expenditures to and from the Fund.

(ii) The Commission shall submit a copy of the report to the General Assembly in accordance with § 2–1257 of the State Government Article.

(i) A recipient of a scholarship shall work for at least 1 year as a volunteer or career firefighter or ambulance or rescue squad member in an organized fire department or ambulance or rescue squad in the State after completion of **[**an eligible program in**]** **STUDY AT** an eligible institution.

(j) A scholarship recipient shall repay the Commission the funds received under this section if the recipient does not perform the service obligation required under subsection (i) of this section.

~~**SUBTITLE 40. MARYLAND LOAN REPAYMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR FIREFIGHTERS AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES PROVIDERS.**~~

~~**18–4001.**~~

~~**(A) IN THIS SUBTITLE THE FOLLOWING WORDS HAVE THE MEANINGS INDICATED.**~~

~~**(B) "FIRE, RESCUE, OR EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES ENTITY" HAS THE MEANING STATED IN § 7–101 OF THE PUBLIC SAFETY ARTICLE.**~~

~~**(C) "HIGHER EDUCATION LOAN" MEANS A LOAN THAT IS OBTAINED FOR TUITION FOR UNDERGRADUATE OR GRADUATE STUDY.**~~

~~**(D) "PROGRAM" MEANS THE MARYLAND LOAN REPAYMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR FIREFIGHTERS AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES PROVIDERS.**~~

~~(E) "PUBLIC RESCUE PERSONNEL MEMBER" MEANS AN INDIVIDUAL WHO IS EMPLOYED BY OR A VOLUNTARY MEMBER OF A FIRE, RESCUE, OR EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES ENTITY.~~

~~18–4002.~~

~~(A) THERE IS A MARYLAND LOAN REPAYMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR FIREFIGHTERS AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES PROVIDERS.~~

~~(B) THE OFFICE SHALL DISTRIBUTE FUNDS FROM THE PROGRAM TO ASSIST IN THE REPAYMENT OF A HIGHER EDUCATION LOAN OWED BY A PUBLIC RESCUE PERSONNEL MEMBER WHO:~~

~~(1) RECEIVES A GRADUATE, PROFESSIONAL, OR UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE FROM A PUBLIC COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY IN THE STATE;~~

~~(2) WORKS FOR AT LEAST 1 YEAR AS A VOLUNTEER OR CAREER FIREFIGHTER OR AMBULANCE OR RESCUE SQUAD MEMBER FOR A FIRE, RESCUE, OR EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES ENTITY IN THE STATE; AND~~

~~(3) SATISFIES ANY OTHER CRITERIA ESTABLISHED BY THE OFFICE.~~

~~18–4003.~~

~~(A) THE OFFICE SHALL ADOPT REGULATIONS TO CARRY OUT THIS SUBTITLE.~~

~~(B) THE REGULATIONS SHALL INCLUDE:~~

~~(1) A LIMIT ON THE TOTAL AMOUNT OF ASSISTANCE PROVIDED BY THE OFFICE IN REPAYING THE LOAN OF AN ELIGIBLE INDIVIDUAL, BASED ON THE INDIVIDUAL'S TOTAL INCOME AND OUTSTANDING HIGHER EDUCATION LOAN BALANCE; AND~~

~~(2) THE PROVISION OF ASSISTANCE ON A FIRST–COME, FIRST–SERVED BASIS FOR ALL ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS.~~

~~18–4004.~~

~~SUBJECT TO § 2–1257 OF THE STATE GOVERNMENT ARTICLE, THE OFFICE SHALL REPORT TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON OR BEFORE JANUARY 1 EACH YEAR ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAM.~~

~~SECTION 2. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That:~~

~~(a) (1) In this section the following words have the meanings indicated.~~

~~(2) "Fire or rescue entity" means:~~

~~(i) a governmental subdivision, by its appropriate designated authority;~~

~~(ii) a board or fire commission of a fire department or governmental subdivision;~~

~~(iii) a fire department;~~

~~(iv) a fire company; or~~

~~(v) a rescue squad.~~

~~(3) "Program" means the State Employee and Retiree Health and Welfare Benefits Program established under Title 2, Subtitle 5 of the State Personnel and Pensions Article.~~

~~(b) The Department of Budget and Management shall evaluate the feasibility of including firefighters in the Program who:~~

~~(1) are employed by or are voluntary members of a fire or rescue entity; and~~

~~(2) do not receive comparable health care benefits to those offered by the Program from their relationship to a fire or rescue entity.~~

~~(c) The Department's evaluation shall consider:~~

~~(1) the possibility of allowing firefighters to fully pay for coverage through the Program;~~

~~(2) any increased costs associated with effectively and efficiently incorporating firefighters into the Program, including any costs related to additional management, administration, oversight, and information–sharing burdens on the Program; and~~

~~(3) the effect incorporating firefighters into the Program would have in attracting individuals to become firefighters working or volunteering for a fire or rescue entity.~~

~~(d) On or before December 31, 2024, the Department shall report the results of its evaluation to the Governor and, in accordance with § 2–1257 of the State Government Article, the General Assembly.~~

~~SECTION 3. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That:~~

~~(a) In this section, "fire or rescue entity" means:~~

~~(1) a governmental subdivision, by its appropriate designated authority;~~

~~(2) a board or fire commission of a fire department or governmental subdivision;~~

~~(3) a fire department;~~

~~(4) a fire company; or~~

~~(5) a rescue squad.~~

~~(b) (1) The Department of Budget and Management shall evaluate the feasibility of a program designed to efficiently and effectively provide child care for firefighters who are employed by or are voluntary members of a fire or rescue entity.~~

~~(2) The Department's evaluation shall include possible mechanisms to fund the program through funding provided by both the State and the county in which the fire or rescue entity is located.~~

~~(c) The Department's evaluation shall include considerations of:~~

~~(1) the cost of providing child care through the program, including administrative and other indirect costs; and~~

~~(2) the effect incorporating firefighters into the program would have in attracting individuals to become firefighters working or volunteering for a fire or rescue entity.~~

~~(d) On or before December 31, 2024, the Department shall report the results of its evaluation to the Governor and, in accordance with § 2–1257 of the State Government Article, the General Assembly.~~

SECTION ~~4.~~ 2. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That this Act shall take effect July 1, 2024. ~~Sections 2 and 3 of this Act shall remain effective for a period of 1 year and, at the end of June 30, 2025, Sections 2 and 3 of this Act, with no further action required by the General Assembly, shall be abrogated and of no further force and effect.~~