



CITY OF HOUSTON

Fire Department

Promoting Excellence as the World's Largest Accredited Municipal Fire Agency

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Senate Committee on Local Government
Texas Senate
P.O. Box 12068 – Capitol Station
Austin, Texas 78711

RE: Houston Fire Department Support for SB 897

Dear Members of the Senate Committee on Local Government

The Houston Fire Department fully supports the Texas Commission on Fire Protection's (TCFP) mission "to aid in the protection of lives and property of Texas citizens through the development and enforcement of recognized professional standards for individuals and the fire service", especially how it impacts firefighter health and safety. Joined in our support of SB 897 are fire chiefs from a majority of the 25 largest municipal fire departments in the state, as well as several volunteer departments and prevention-only agencies.

Our advocacy and call to restructure TCFP's governing board is grounded in the belief that representation from individuals that have a cross-sectional view of a fire department's operation would enhance the TCFP's "ethics, accountability, efficiency, transparency and integrity" in the development and enforcement of its standards. Responsibilities of a fire department vary significantly based upon a community's risk. The corresponding training, equipment, and facility needs in a rural fire department operating with unreliable water supply are different than a metropolitan fire department without zoning. Dedicating a position for a fire chief or assistant chief of a department serving a population of 100,000 or more to TCFP's governing board helps achieve the necessary diversity of perspectives without sacrificing any interest currently represented.

Based on the proposed population bracket called for in SB 897, personnel from over 40 municipal fire departments may be eligible for this position. The Houston Fire Department supports SB 897 with full awareness that this position has a strong probability of not having any affiliation with our department. Including the management perspective of larger municipal departments during the decision-making process, and beyond public comments, is the overarching goal and reason for our support of this bill. Larger jurisdictions face a different set of implementation challenges than those where the director of a department can visit each station to distribute equipment directly on a weekly basis. Municipal fire departments – and consequently, local taxpayers – carry an undue burden in funding the Texas fire service regulations. As an example, in July 2019 the governing board voted 10-1 not to lower recertification fees arguing that the financial burden is on local governments not on individual firefighters, despite that fact, that local governments are the largest fee contributor due to scale. Without appropriate local government representation on governing boards, fees targeted to local governments are unfair to taxpayers and forces local governments to divert resources away from training, equipment, and facilities. The proposed restructure of TCFP would provide a stronger voice in discussing the

Council Members: Amy Peck Tarsha Jackson Abbie Kamin Carolyn Evans-Shabazz Dave Martin Tiffany Thomas Greg Travis Karla Cisneros
Robert Gallegos Edward Pollard Martha Castex-Tatum Mike Knox David Robinson Michael Kubosh Leticia Plummer Sallie Alcorn
Controller: Chris Brown

fiscal impact on local governments while ensuring decisions still require the support of commissioners representing different groups of stakeholders.

The Houston Fire Department is in good standing with the TCFP. Violations cited in its inspection in February 2020 were classified as “minor.” Policies, guidelines, training, and equipment have been issued to ensure continued compliance, especially in health and safety. The Houston Fire Department’s standard operating guidelines have detailed individual firefighter responsibilities in maintaining personal protective equipment, rapid intervention team, incident management, training and other department operations. Unlike other regulated professions, TCFP only holds the department responsible for violations made by individuals even in the presence of strong institutional controls. For example, a previous TCFP inspection conducted in June 2018 confirmed that the Houston Fire Department had policies for all but two criteria’s, investigated by TCFP. Other violations noted were related to “practice,” which is more of a function of individual firefighter actions, but the department was the one subject to scrutiny and faced potential penalties. The report’s conclusion directed the Houston Fire Department to ensure that “end-users” and “all HFD fire protection personnel” are engaged in the “routine cleaning of firefighting protective clothing elements.” In addition, that report entrusts the Houston Fire Department to ensure improved compliance from its “non-participation list” of individuals that have not provided the appropriate level of care and maintenance to individually issued equipment. The TCFP inspection process has helped the Houston Fire Department emphasize to its membership the importance of these issues, and these issues have since been resolved.

Striving for improved health and safety of its firefighters remains a priority for the Houston Fire Department as shown by currently meeting and exceeding expectations defined by TCFP. As an example, TCFP per National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards requires only one advanced inspection per year, the Houston Fire Department provides each firefighter six scheduled advanced cleaning and inspection opportunities per year through an independent service provider (ISP). In addition to scheduled cleanings, firefighters can elect to an additional advanced inspection and cleaning at any time by our ISP at no cost. In addition, the Houston Fire Department maintains sufficient personal protective equipment reserves for individual firefighters to use if their personally issued equipment is not in workable condition. Significant investments have been made since 2017 to improve health and safety, including the installation of 61 extractors – with an additional 32 already purchased – and the acquisition of 45 vehicle exhaust removal systems and a strategic plan for remaining fire stations. The Houston Fire Department recognizes additional improvements should be made, but state-imposed regulations need advocacy from municipalities of all profiles.

The Houston Fire Department supports SB 897 as a means to improve the Texas fire service including enhancing the health and safety of firefighters across Texas. The proposed restructuring of TCFP provides fair representation across different stakeholders including, volunteer and career departments and helps protect municipalities from arbitrary unfunded mandates.

Respectfully,



Samuel Peña
Houston Fire Chief