

# Legislation offers job protection for volunteers

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A poorly timed fire nearly cost Ryan Peterson his day job as an apprentice plumber.

“I got called to a fire at about 5 a.m. up near Arlington,” said Peterson, a volunteer firefighter. “Usually I’m getting up and ready for work at about 5:30, but this was a little earlier. I had to run out and didn’t grab my cell phone.”

Peterson has worked as an apprentice in the Madison area for four years and as a volunteer for the Dane Fire Department for three years. The Arlington fire, which forced Peterson to show up for work a couple of hours late, was only the second of two emergencies that conflicted with his plumbing career, he said.

“My supervisor basically said I had to choose whether I want to be a construction worker or firefighter,” said Peterson, who would not say what company he works for. “If there was something set in place where you could prove you were missing work for a good reason, that’d be a big help.”

Peterson might get that help from a bill that would give volunteer firefighters, emergency medical technicians, ambulance drivers and first responders the right to unpaid leaves of absence from their jobs. State Sen. Kathleen Vinehout, D-Alma, and state Rep. Scott Gunderson, R-Waterford, are lead sponsors of identical bills in the Senate (Senate Bill 308) and Assembly (Assembly Bill 464).

State law lets employers give unpaid leaves of absence to employees for such reasons as voting, jury duty, donating bone marrow or organs, and attending National Guard or military reserve training.

Larry Plummer, president of the Wisconsin Firefighters Association and a supporter of the bill, said volunteers need the same protection. There are 700 volunteer fire departments in the state. “There are cases of employers laying some bad disciplines on guys just for being a little late,” he said. “I know there are some people abusing the system, but I’ve said to my guys, ‘If you abuse this, you can kiss the bill goodbye.’”

The bill would require volunteers make every effort to notify an employer of an absence or tardiness and that they get a letter from the fire chief or person in charge if the employer requests it.

Still, not everyone supports the bill. State Sen. Randy Hopper, R-Fond du Lac, voted against it Wednesday in committee, citing a lack of evidence the problem merits legislative action. Ryan Murray, Hopper’s chief of staff, said the state averages two formal employment complaints per year based on absence because of a volunteer emergency. “It just seems like the problem is not widespread,” Murray said, “and it’s best for employers and employees to work that out.”

Many construction companies already do. Ron Schwenn, a laborer for Madison-based J.H. Findorff and Son, has been a volunteer firefighter for 18 years and said fires rarely get in the way of his construction duties. “There have been cases where I’ve called ahead if I’m out at a fire or driving to work and see something,” he said. “It’s never been an issue. I don’t think I’ve missed a day’s work because of it.”

But Plummer said the lack of formal complaints justifies the bill, and Peterson’s reluctance to share his employer’s name illustrates the problem. “My members come to me with stories about three guys being five minutes late to work because of a fire and then having to go three days without pay,” Plummer said. “The problem is those guys never produce an affidavit or say who the employer is because they fear retaliation and losing their job.”