Written testimony on S.156 by Bradley Reed, President, Professional Fire Fighters of Vermont

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My name is Bradley Reed, I am the president of the Professional Fire Fighters of Vermont. We represent paid professional union firefighters, emergency medical technicians, and paramedics who work in cities and towns where they have a collective bargaining agreement, and are governed by the Vermont Municipal Labor Relations Act (MLRA).

The first time I testified on this bill I did my best to explain how the contract negotiating process works for us under the current law, how it would would work if S.156 was signed into law, and why this bill is important to our members. If there are any additional questions related to my previous testimony, I would be happy to answer them today, and I did want to highlight a couple of additional points I think are noteworthy.

At the top of the list is a subject that is important to everyone, and that is the cost. Whenever there is a proposed change to the MLRA, we need to consider the financial impact to all parties.I would like to point out that the MLRA already allows for fact finding which is essentially non binding arbitration. Fact finding is a process by which a neutral arbitrator examines the remaining issues of an impasse, and submits a non binding report, and the cost for this fact finding arbitrator is already shared between the parties. It is important to note that the proposed new language in S.156 has a provision that allows the parties to bypass fact finding and go straight to binding interest arbitration, or the parties may elect to accept the fact finders report. So this cost is already built into the system, therefore there should be no reason for added expense.

The next point I would like to make addresses the perception that the deck is somehow stacked in favor of unions, and arbitrators sympathize with unions. I

would like to re-state that arbitrators are professional neutral parties who are chosen by both sides, and frankly are sometimes not even from Vermont. So there should be no concern that they will weigh their decisions in favor of one side or the other. It would seem to me, that if a neutral arbitrator determined that the employee's position is more reasonable than the employers position, then they will side with the employee's, and the same would go for the employers if the arbitrator found that their position was more reasonable.

The final point I wanted to raise specifically as it relates to the MLRA, is that this language only applies to public safety workers. The language proposed would not cover any other municipal workers who are not prohibited to strike under 21 VSA § 1730 (3) if it will endanger the health, safety, and welfare of the public. So the segment of population within the municipal system would be rather small, yet these are the only employees who are currently governed by the MLRA who do not have a mechanism to resolve a continued impasse.

As we stated before, we feel that this legislation would level the playing field for public safety employees, and we urge you to support S. 156.