



Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance

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NEWS

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\$525 Million Buys Fire Protection Services for Wisconsin Fire Spending Up 20.2% Since 2001, Fire-Related Revenues Up 57.5%

MADISON—Wisconsin municipalities spent \$525.0 million on fire protection services in 2006, a 20.2% increase from 2001 (\$436.8 million). However, fire protection spending as a percentage of all municipal expenditures has remained the same, 16% in 2001 and 2006, according to a new report from the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance (WISTAX), a nonprofit, nonpartisan public-policy research organization dedicated to citizen education.

According to WISTAX, per capita expenditures on fire protection increased from \$80.88 in 2001 to \$93.45 in 2006, a 15.5% rise. Other fire-related spending also increased. Debt service payments on fire-related items grew 36.5% between 2001 and 2006. Capital fire-related expenditures for building construction and equipment purchases increased at a relatively modest 7.9% over the period studied.

To pay for growing fire protection costs, municipalities used funds primarily from municipal property taxes and state shared revenues. In 2006, an estimated 90.5% of fire expenditures were funded through these two sources. Combined, property taxes and shared revenues grew 14.9% from 2001 to 2006, a slower rate than fire-specific revenues.

The three primary fire-specific revenues grew 57.4% between 2001 and 2006. Intergovernmental fee revenue, paid to municipalities that provide fire protection to other areas, rose 19.4%. State distributions from a tax on fire insurance premiums increased 61.2%. The most rapid growth was found in public charges, increasing 171.5%. Some areas may prefer to increase revenue from public charges for items such as fire calls and inspections, rather than increase property taxes or pull funds from other municipal services.

Revenues from all sources were used to fund Wisconsin's 16,081 full- and part-time firefighters. Wisconsin had 2.89 firefighters per 1,000 residents in 2006, fourth highest in the nation. The U.S. average was 1.42 per 1,000. Neighbors Illinois (2.21), Minnesota (1.93), Michigan (1.77), and Iowa (1.57) were also above average, though lower than Wisconsin.

Wisconsin's high ranking was due to its number of part-time firefighters. Here, there were over three part-time firefighters for every full-time one. The U.S. average was 0.5 to one. Nearby Minnesota (5 to 1 ratio), Michigan (2 to 1), and Iowa (nearly 2 to 1) also relied heavily on part-time firefighters. Small municipalities with limited budgets in Wisconsin and nearby states rely more on part-time and volunteer firefighters than other states do.

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All Wisconsin municipalities provided fire protection services in 2006, either through their own departments or through contracts with other departments. Volunteer fire departments, with no full- or part-time staff, were most common, making up 82.6% of the 835 municipal departments. Volunteers were paid based on fire calls, training, or other activities. For many small municipalities, volunteers represent the most economical way to deliver fire protection.

In addition to volunteer departments, 35 career departments employed only full- and part-time firefighters and no volunteers. These departments, usually found in larger municipalities, provide 24-hour coverage. The cost of providing 24-hour service increased fire expenditures to an average of \$151.98 per capita. Spending among all Wisconsin municipalities was substantially lower, with over 60% of communities spending less than \$50.00 per person.

The 35 career departments served 55 communities. When the populations of all municipalities served were taken into account, career departments averaged 1.3 firefighters per 1,000 residents covered in 2006. Among these departments, coverage ranged from 0.8 firefighters per 1,000 people in Milwaukee to 2.3 per 1,000 in Wauwatosa.

Firefighter numbers and per capita expenditures for career fire departments can be found at www.wistax.org in the "Facts and Figures" section. A free copy of *The Wisconsin Taxpayer* report "Learning About Local Fire Protection" is available by contacting WISTAX at 401 North Lawn Ave., Madison, WI 53704-5033; e-mailing wistax@wistax.org; visiting www.wistax.org; or phoning 608.241.9789. □

(Editor's Note: An electronic version of this release is available at www.wistax.org.)