

2014 Local 3666 Candidate Questionnaire
County Council, District 4
Jessica Fitzwater

1. The career firefighters are considered uniformed essential employees of Frederick County Government yet are historically treated the same as nonessential employees with regards to wages and benefits. Current legislation limits collective bargaining to wages and benefits, which is not clearly defined.

a. How do you define uniformed essential employee?

I agree with the county's definition of a uniformed essential employee. This is someone who is in an active duty position that requires certification by the MD Fire and Rescue Institute, MD Police Training Commission, or MD Correctional Training Commission and whose daily duties could result in the loss of life. County citizens rely on the 24/7 service of these individuals to ensure their public safety and the quality of life in our communities.

It is my understanding that there has been a history of treating fire and rescue employees differently from other employee groups in terms of shift scheduling, extended work hours, holidays, and other benefits. I think the county should recognize the different circumstances and requirements for these uniformed essential positions and consider issues of wages, benefits, and working conditions through this lens.

b. Would you vote for expanding existing legislation to include working conditions in the collective bargaining agreement?

I will support legislation that expands collective bargaining and would work with the rest of the council and the County Executive in this effort. This expansion may be something that we would have to work on in collaboration with our state delegation. I believe that working conditions are just as important to the performance and success of an employee as salary and benefits and should be part of the collective bargaining process. Public safety employees work entirely different schedules than other county employees and have unique requirements and duties.

As a member of a teachers union, I benefit from collective bargaining that includes language on workload and working conditions along with salary and benefits and I fully understand how that positively impacts my career as a teacher and my ability to do my job well. I would also be very supportive of legislation that provides equal collective bargaining rights for all county employees.

2. Frederick County currently utilizes a combination of career firefighters and volunteers to provide fire, rescue, and emergency medical services. What is your view of the role of the career staff of the County fire services as it fits into this system?

Career staff ensure that there is always a response 24/7 in times when not enough volunteers are available. They respond to many of the urban area calls and support our volunteer companies in more rural parts of the county to ensure that all citizens receive a high level of service. This role is incredibly important to ensure that all stations are operating safely and efficiently at all times. The career firefighters' effective fire and rescue service works in conjunction with the trained volunteers and the stations and equipment owned by the volunteer organizations.

I believe that a combination of career firefighters and volunteers is a positive system for Frederick County. This arrangement allows for excellent coverage, fast response times, and shared knowledge and experience. I believe that all the men and women who serve us in this capacity are professionals dedicated to the safety and well-being of our citizens. When a fire truck or EMS truck arrives on the scene, it shouldn't matter if the truck says "volunteer" or not. All of you in this field are there because you have a calling: to care for others, improve our community, and ensure the safety of all citizens. I think that as long as we are all working together in service, then this hybrid system will continue to work well for Frederick County.

3. In 2013 Frederick County Government passed legislation to establish the position of Fire Chief with the authority to oversee all of the fire service, career and volunteer. Do you support this position?

I do support the position of a county Fire Chief/Director of Fire and EMS Services. It is beneficial to have a clear chain of command and one individual who is responsible for providing leadership, vision, and operational management to the fire and rescue service. It makes sense to streamline efforts and communication. It is our fiscal responsibility to ensure that tax dollars are being spent wisely and all stations, employees, and volunteers are being held accountable.

As we continue the transition to this new structure, I think we must respect the Frederick County Volunteer Fire and Rescue Association and the historical knowledge and experience they bring to the table. A positive relationship between the county Fire Chief/Director of Fire and EMS Services and our volunteer leadership must be built and preserved. The 2013 ordinance also created a Fire Advisory Board which I too support. This is a good way for both career and volunteer firefighters to have a voice in decision-making and to further build relationships.

Embedded in the responsibilities of the Fire Chief/Director of Fire and EMS Services should be the development of a long-term strategic plan to effectively meet the department's mission to "protect life, property, and the environment and ensure the safety, health, and welfare of the citizens of Frederick County by providing professional, efficient, quality service." This process must be inclusive and include the Fire Advisory Board, union representatives, county elected officials, and citizen and business stakeholders.

4. You have been provided with a copy of the National Fallen Firefighter's Association 16 Life Safety Initiatives. The union fully supports these goals.

a. If brought to the council for a vote, would you provide the resources necessary to implement these initiatives?

The safety of our fire and rescue employees is incredibly important. These 16 Life Safety Initiatives provide a framework for approaching issues of health and safety and implementing best practices both operationally and in the field. I fully support these initiatives and feel that many of them do not require extra funding, but focus more on a cultural change within the fire service and more education about unsafe practices and risk management. Those that may require funding, such as the staff needed to provide counseling and psychological support as well as the investigation of fatalities, injuries, and near misses, would have my support.

In addition, many of these initiatives call for national standards that would not be under the purview of the County Council, however I would support efforts by our Fire Chief/Director of Fire and EMS

Services and the Fire Advisory Board to collaborate with state and federal partners in developing and piloting some of these protocols.

b. If you would not provide full funding for each of these goals, which do you feel does not necessitate funding?

To achieve many of the goals outlined in the 16 Life Safety Initiatives, we would need to design a timeline for implementation with checkpoints along the way to evaluate our progress. This would be part of the Fire Chief/Director of Fire and EMS's long-range planning and would help prioritize funding needs over the course of several budget cycles. I think that all of the initiatives should be supported in a way that is sustainable both financially and operationally.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to these questions. I look forward to discussing these issues with you in the future. Please do not hesitate to contact me at any time at 301-639-7714 or via email at jefitz1@gmail.com.

Sincerely,
Jessica Fitzwater