

“STRIVE”

State Tuition Reimbursement as Incentive for Volunteer Emergency Responders

Administrative Guide



Nebraska State Volunteer Firefighters Association

2017 SAFER Grant for College Tuition Reimbursement

April 9, 2019

“STRIVE”

Introduction

Nebraska State Volunteer Firefighters Association's (NSVFA) STRIVE program was developed as a way to recruit and retain volunteers in response to a critical need identified by our association's volunteer fire departments and emergency medical services providers. The NSVFA STRIVE program is funded by a Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant through the Department of Homeland Security.

All funds earmarked for STRIVE shall be maintained to ensure available funding for STRIVE participants through this conclusion in the program.

The student/volunteer must agree to apply for all other available sources of free financial aid in accordance with the standard Free Application for Federal Student Aid Form (FAFSA) if attending a state college or university, and to use STRIVE funds only to supplement any tuition not covered by other sources of free financial aid.

Program Description

The goal of the program is to retain current emergency responders and attract new volunteers to the fire service. STRIVE will offer tuition reimbursement for up to 75 current and new volunteer emergency responders each year throughout the 4 year grant period.

Program Reimbursement Options:

Each eligible volunteer emergency responder may receive reimbursement for tuition for up to \$4,400 per academic year. For every year that a volunteer receives tuition reimbursement, he or she must commit to membership at a volunteer fire department for 2 years.

1. Tuition Reimbursement: Volunteers utilizing STRIVE may study any subject area they choose and may attend either full-time or part-time. Volunteers can pursue their education while serving as an active volunteer. STRIVE encourages residents to remain in their community for their higher education needs.

A volunteer may elect to serve in their department for the 2-year commitment and transfer the use of the funds to an immediate family member.

1. Immediate family member: anyone who still lives in the volunteer's household or who is a dependent on the volunteer's tax returns.

Within the first 12 months of appointment to the department, newly recruited volunteers must meet the minimum fire and EMS training requirements, of that department, and within 24 months complete Introduction to Firefighting at the Nebraska State Fire School or Firefighter I.

Additionally, the department at which the volunteer commits their time must participate in the Volunteer Emergency Responders Act (LB886; Nebraska Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106). If the department is unable to participate in LB886 (NE Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106) they must provide equivalent documentation showing that the member met the standards of the Statutes.

If you are an established volunteer emergency responder at your department (“established” is defined as being a member for 12 months or longer) you must provide documentation showing that you meet LB886 (NE Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106) requirements on a semi-annual basis. Documentation will also need to accompany your Application showing that you met the most recent LB886 (NE Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106) deadline.

If you are a new volunteer emergency responder at your department (“new” is defined as being a member for less than 12 months), you are applying for STRIVE knowing that you’ll need to meet LB886 (NE Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106) requirements at the completion of your first full calendar year at your sponsoring agency. After your first year has passed, we will request documentation that shows you have qualified for LB886 (NE Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106).

Every Sponsoring Department/Agency will establish standards for entry level medical screening. Whenever possible, departments will cover these training expenses or facilitate training in-house. There is potential for a volunteer to incur out of pocket expenses towards these professional certifications. Consult your fire Chief for details.

**Receipt of grant monies in either capacity may have tax consequences. Please consult your tax advisor PRIOR to participation in this program.*

STRIVE Application Process

Following are the steps intended to process a student candidate through the STRIVE program:

Step 1: Candidate completes membership process with volunteer department (if applicable) and STRIVE Application Form.

Step 2: The student completes all financial aid forms (i.e. FAFSA) for consideration of eligibility; send a print out of your FAFSA Student Aid Report (SAR) with your application. FAFSA application NOT required if completing professional certifications that are independent from a college or university or completing a master’s degree.

Step 3: Established firefighter obtains a letter from their Chief stating that they have qualified for LB 886 (NE Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106); for the Spring Application deadline this will state they have met the requirement for the February tax deadline and for the Fall Application deadline this will state they have met the requirement for their semi-annual reporting deadline.

Step 4: Upon obtaining the signature of the Sponsoring Department/Agency’s Chief/Commissioner/Director (if you are the residing Chief of your department you must have a superior figure such as an elected official of Rural Board President sign your application), the candidate forwards the completed STRIVE Application Form to NSVFA’s STRIVE Committee.

Step 5: The Student completes admissions process (including placement test) and is accepted for enrollment.

Step 6: After each semiannual deadline the NSVFA STRIVE Committee (whose Members are subject to all appropriate disclosure rules and forms) reviews the STRIVE Application Form, verifies costs, verifies financial aid forms, verifies LB886 (NE Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106) status and decides who will receive the award. All applicants will be sent a letter of determination approximately 4-6 weeks after the deadline.

Step 7: The student/volunteer granted the award obtains STRIVE confirmation from the STRIVE Committee and begins a program of study on a part-time or full-time basis.

Step 8: NSVFA and the department fire chiefs for participating students act as the clearinghouse to monitor the student's educational and volunteer service progress throughout the entire program.

Step 9: Volunteers & their Chiefs/superiors will work together to provide proof of meeting LB886 (NE Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106) requirements during the two state deadlines each year of their volunteer commitment (i.e. in a 2-year commitment, LB886 (NE Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106) proof must be provided a total of 4 times for established firefighters; this number will vary for new firefighters).

Program Eligibility

The following is a list of program guidelines set forth in the SAFER grant narrative and must be adhered to by NSVFA and all participants:

1. Provide proof of membership, or intention of membership, to a volunteer or combination fire department or emergency services agency.
2. For each year of tuition, applicant must commit to 2 years of membership to a volunteer fire department.
3. Volunteer firefighters who work part time for the department and are paid an average of less than 20 hours per week are eligible.
4. Career firefighters who volunteer with a volunteer or combination fire department are eligible; in the case a volunteer gets a career job during time of commitment they must still fulfill their volunteer amount of 2 years.
5. Commit to remain an active volunteer in good standing with the Sponsoring Department/Agency.
6. Meet requirements for LB886 (NE Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106) on a semi-annual basis. Provide proof of meeting requirements with Application and during additional reporting periods.
7. Commit to completing Introduction to Firefighting or Firefighter I within 24 months of becoming a volunteer. Nebraska's Firefighter I Certification program may be administered through the Sponsoring Department/Agency. In cases where the Sponsoring Department/Agency does not provide this training, an applicant can enroll directly through the state.
8. Students may elect to complete volunteer portion of criteria after completion of education requirements- however these applications will be given low priority and only be awarded if there are not enough applicants otherwise. These Applicants will be qualified as "new" members in reference to LB 886 (NE Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106) requirements.

9. Submit a STRIVE Application Form. Upon approval by the Chief/Commissioner/Director, the application is then sent to the STRIVE committee to be reviewed. Chief's signature is required.
10. The college or university should be in the same vicinity as the department in which the individual is volunteering when possible. Online courses are acceptable.
11. Degree programs must be from a government accredited state funded higher education institution, a private university, a vocational technical school, or a certified instructor that can provide a professional certification. (Note: Coursework or certifications in this category should be above and beyond what the department typically funds for required minimum-staffing firefighter certification. Books and lab fees are eligible, but computers are not.)
12. Maintain a grade point average of at least 2.5 and have an official transcript sent directly to STRIVE from educational institution showing this requirement is met.
13. Applicant's Chief/Commissioner/Director must sign the Reimbursement Form after each semester to collect reimbursement for tuition expenses.
14. Volunteer may elect to transfer tuition reimbursement to an immediate family member, provided the volunteer agrees to the volunteer service minimum requirements, and the student benefitting from the reimbursement meets all minimum requirements for the education minimums. Failure to comply with these minimum standards by either the volunteer OR the student will forfeit the eligibility for reimbursement through this program.
15. A Department/Agency may elect to pay education expenses for a student up front, then be provided with a reimbursement once the student has successfully completed the education and volunteer requirements for the STRIVE program.
16. Applications must meet criteria guidelines to be considered for award.
17. Submit proper documentation that your sponsoring agency and you have met LB886 (NE Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106) requirements as specified for a new and an established firefighter at the time of Application as well as on a semi-annual basis.

Award Selection Criteria

General Eligibility:

The NSVFA STRIVE Committee will review all applications and other forms to approve or decline award eligibility.

Being accepted into the membership of the sponsoring department and/or being accepted for enrollment at an institution does not guarantee the student will be awarded a reimbursement under the STRIVE program; satisfying these two criteria simply make them eligible for an award.

The NSVFA STRIVE Committee has developed the following criteria for final award selection:

1. Individual department/agency: (i.e. Applications are reviewed to ensure that at least one volunteer application from each department represented in the application pool will be considered for an award).
2. Intra-department/agency: (i.e. if, based upon the application pool, funding limits require applicants from the same department to compete with one another, the student/volunteer with the greatest need based upon the FAFSA Student Aid Report Estimated Family Contribution (SAR EFC)) will receive priority).
3. Preference will be given to candidates who are already successful in the program when it comes time for renewal of the award, especially if they show forward movement in their training, including FF1, FF2, or Emergency Medical Responder/EMT.
4. Preference will be given to candidates who are members of the NSFVA.
5. Preference may be given to candidates who are studying fire science, medical, paramedic or emergency courses.
6. Preference may be given to candidates who enroll in approved courses that are in the same vicinity as the Sponsoring Department/Agency where they volunteer.
7. Candidates who are attending an institution within the state of Nebraska will receive priority. Second consideration will be given to candidates attending an institution in a state bordering Nebraska. Those who are attending schooling outside of these two parameters will be considered last.
8. Candidates will not be discriminated against based on race or gender. In order to help the volunteer firefighter population better reflect the gender and racial diversity of the state population as a whole, at least 30% of these awards will go to women and minorities first to fulfill the SAFER grant requirements.

Award Renewal Criteria

Participants already enrolled in the STRIVE program with a proven track record of success will be eligible for renewal of STRIVE award for up to one additional year with a 2-year commitment to volunteer service with their department. (Total of 2 years of STRIVE award and 4-year volunteer commitment, maximum.) The participant must turn in an application for their 2nd year of eligibility for record keeping purposes.

Service and Education Commitment

The NSVFA tuition reimbursement program is a federally funded (FEMA) grant. This fact means that the accepted applicant and NSVFA MUST follow and adhere to requirements set forth in the grant award package. The grant was written to recruit and retain volunteer fire fighters in Nebraska.

For an accepted applicant to receive any reimbursement two major requirements must be met.

IMPORTANT: This is a reimbursement program. **Both** major requirements must be met before reimbursement can be made. The grant performance period that ends 11/29/2022. We must disburse all reimbursement funds by this date.

1. Volunteer Commitment

The student/volunteer must either be an active member or become an active member in a volunteer or combination Fire Department. The student/volunteer must commit to the department for no less than two (2) complete years from the date they are awarded acceptance into the grant.

The student/volunteer must complete Introduction to Firefighting or Firefighter I within 24 months of beginning their volunteer commitment.

Student/volunteer must qualify for LB886 (NE Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106) each year of their 2- or 4-year commitment and submit documentation that proves eligibility.

STRIVE recruits may terminate their membership with the Sponsoring Department/Agency and make membership application to another eligible volunteer department for the purpose of satisfying their volunteer service obligation. If volunteer moves to a different state, they must complete their volunteer commitment in that state.

Required documents and reporting:

The training records may be needed to document service requirements. The Sponsoring Department/Agency should keep all training records for active members. A copy of Introduction to Firefighting or Firefighter I documentation may be required as proof of completion.

Volunteer/students who are already certified Firefighter I or who already past Introduction to Firefighting and who have been a member of a VFD must commit to 2 years of volunteer service from the time of application for the STRIVE program.

The Chief/Commissioner/Director of the Sponsoring Department/Agency will be required to complete their designated portion of the STRIVE Application Form verifying department membership OR intent for department membership. We reserve the right to contact the Sponsoring Department/Agency's Chief/Commissioner/Director for additional information and/or we may require additional written updates from the Chief/Commissioner/Director.

2. Education Requirements

Tuition reimbursement means that a student/volunteer can be reimbursed for expenses for tuition and books related to higher education upon completion of the requirements (up to \$4,400.00 per year).

All degree types are eligible for reimbursement. Maximum reimbursement still applies per academic year. All courses must appear on an official transcript or documented as an official professional

certification. Online courses through approved institutions are acceptable. Courses must appear on the official transcript.

Required documents and reporting:

Following each academic term, the student/volunteer must submit a Reimbursement Form including a report of the grades achieved in that reimbursement period (non-cumulative GPA). An official institution transcript must be mailed or emailed directly to the STRIVE Committee from the educational institution to verify that the STRIVE student/volunteer has maintained acceptable academic standards during the preceding academic term. The Reimbursement Form MUST be signed by the Chief.

The student/volunteer must provide the STRIVE Committee with their original bill's and receipts (photocopies are not accepted). Original bills are necessary for effectively documenting reimbursements of federal grant monies. All reimbursement requirements must be completed within 6 months of finishing the awarded semester.

Documentation showing qualified participation in LB886 (NE Revised Statutes 77-3101 to 77-3106) will be required at the time of Application and semi-annually for established emergency responders. New emergency responders must provide documentation at the end of their first full calendar year at their sponsoring department and all semi-annual deadline proceeding that.

**All applicable local, state or federal laws and regulations shall supersede the procedures and conditions outlined in this administrative guide. STRIVE student/volunteers may be subject to discontinued enrollment at any time due to any and all limitations of funding. These guidelines are subject to change without notice.*

Program Contacts**NSVFA SAFER Project Coordinator:**

Kate Mewes, Grant Manager

kate@volunteerfirefighter.org

1-855-VOL-FIRE

Retention & Recruitment Committee**Members:**

Brad Anderson, Committee Chairperson

firemanbsa@hotmail.com

Mark Meints

meints2@windstream.net

Cleon Schwede

cjschwede@yahoo.com

Joel Cerny

Cerny_j@hotmail.com

Patrick Miller

Pmiller001@neb.rr.com

John Bomar

jbomar@telebeep.com

Troy Shoemaker

tshoemaker@cityofalliance.net