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Poughkeepsie Journal

FRIDAY, MARCH 6, 2026 | POUGHKEEPSIEJOURNAL.COM

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U.N. GROUP DECRIES STRIKES ON IRAN



A damaged building is seen March 5 after an Israeli strike in Choueifat, Lebanon, amid renewed hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel. AHMAD AL KERDI/REUTERS

Calls war a violation of its territorial integrity

Michael Loria, Bart Jansen and Jeanine Santucci
USA TODAY

The United Nations' Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, a group that investigates human rights abuses in the country, issued a statement that "strongly condemns" the U.S. and Israeli strikes that launched the war with Iran on Feb. 28.

"These attacks, which were followed by Iran's retaliatory strikes across the region, run counter to the U.N. Charter, which prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State," the group said in a statement. "The rules of international law must apply to all and consistently — they cannot be varied according to the State taking action."

According to the U.N. group, "the Iranian population is now caught between a large-scale military campaign that may go on for weeks or months, and a government

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Smoke rises March 5 after an explosion in Tehran, Iran. The Trump administration launched the war Feb. 28 with ally Israel, striking the Iranian capital with a bombardment that killed the country's supreme leader and dozens of top Iranian officials. VIA REUTERS

NY debate to weaken '19 climate law

Study warns of big spikes in household utility bills

Chris McKenna
New York State Team | USA TODAY NETWORK

A battle is brewing between Gov. Kathy Hochul and fellow Democrats in Albany over potential moves to weaken a 2019 climate protection law due to concerns over its impact on utility costs.

The latest sign of a looming standoff came in a Feb. 26 state memo estimating big hikes in household bills from the law's push to slash planet-warming gases.

That analysis by the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority warned that natural gas and home-heating oil costs could leap by as much as \$4,200 a year for homes outside of New York City by 2031.

The findings — which are disputed by environmental groups — came with no specific proposals to avert the predicted cost hikes. And Hochul, who has spoken previously about slowing implementation of the climate law, hasn't suggested any changes yet for legislators to take up in their current session, set to run through June 4.

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NY turns to paid volunteer firefighters to ease ongoing shortages

Emily Barnes
New York State Team | USA TODAY NETWORK

Nearly half a dozen volunteer-based firehouses across New York closed their doors last year due to a lack of staffing, as the ranks of volunteer firefighters fell to the lowest level in 40 years, fire officials say.

That's why members of leading firefighter groups gathered inside the state Capitol on March 4, to push for compensation for mandatory, on-duty fire personnel staffing firehouses to help both the firefighters and the communities they serve. They warned, in part, that current volunteer shortages increased the risk of delays in emergency response times.

"The system, as it exists right now for both career and volunteer fire service, is struggling in not all, but in many, of our locations across the state," says David Denniston, who is the first vice president of the Association of Fire Districts and past chief of the Cortlandville Fire Department.

Here's why firefighters are pushing to pay volunteer members.

How many volunteer firefighters are there in New York?

The Association of Fire Districts of the State of New York, the New York State Association of Fire Chiefs and the County Fire Coordinators' Association of the State of New York — the three organizations pushing for pay for volunteers — are responsible for almost 80,000 volunteer firefighters statewide, a number that has decreased by a third since the early 2000s.

Over 90% of fire stations in New York rely on volunteer firefighters, Denniston said, and because of a lowering member count, response times are increasing across the state and several volunteer stations have no choice but to shut down.

North Massapequa Fire Department Commissioner Ralph Raymond says his department had 125 members around six years ago. That number is now down to 85.

"What does that mean? That means those 85 guys, we're stressing them to the limit," said Raymond, who is also the Association of Fire Districts' second vice president.

And Bruce Heber, Berkshire Fire District commissioner and retired chief of the City of Johnstown Fire Department, says the issue is "probably more evident upstate than it is downstate." His volunteer department has downsized from 50 people to 30 people in the last 20 years, which currently includes only 10 firefighters.

How would paying volunteer firefighters help New York communities?

Current state laws keep fire districts from incentivizing or reimbursing volunteer firefighters, Denniston said, and while legislation hasn't been filed to allow for this specific compensation, a spokesperson for the Association of Fire Districts said Assemblymember Michael Solages, D-Long Island, is interested in introducing a bill.

"By incentivizing our volunteers with some form of nominal compensation, the (departments) can improve response times by having in-house crews available to respond quickly to fires and emergencies," Denniston added.

It would also help improve firefighter safety, according to Deer Park Volunteer Fire Department member Thomas Richardson, a former New York City Fire Department chief of department.

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