



COUNCIL

RE*CONNECTION

**Retirees Edition*

SEPTEMBER, 2025

WSCFF Retirees Association Newsletter

Serving Active Retirees of the Washington State Council of Fire Fighters

Protecting What We Built

As the holidays get closer, I hope you're finding time to relax and catch up with family and friends. I also want to give you a quick update on what's happening with our LEOFF 1 Pension System and what your WSCFF RA Board is doing to protect it.

The LEOFF 1 fund currently has a \$3 billion surplus, and there's a lot of talk in Olympia about what to do with it. The Select Committee on Pension Policy (SCPP) has been asked to review two major proposals and report back in January 2026.

I attended the October 21 SCPP meeting, where two key bills were discussed. The first, SSB 5085, proposes merging LEOFF 1 with TRS 1 and PERS 1 into a new "Legacy Pension" system. If this happens, the new plan would have nearly 72,000 members. LEOFF 1 has roughly 5,950 members. The merger is designed to strengthen the overall funding and provide a permanent cost-of-living adjustment for TRS 1 and PERS 1 members. Importantly, this proposal does not require any reversion of LEOFF 1 funds (LEOFF 1 money going to the State), which may make it easier to receive IRS approval.

The second bill, SHB 2034, would terminate and restate the LEOFF 1 system, allowing the State to take a large portion of the surplus. The idea behind this is to help balance the State budget. Although current and future pension benefits would remain the same, many of us have serious concerns about what this could mean for the long-term protection of the LEOFF 1 fund.

The State has hired Ice Miller, a top pension law firm, to sort out the legal and IRS angles of these proposals. The IRS will ultimately decide whether any plan to use or restructure these funds passes muster.

Some of the people involved are arguing that 77% of LEOFF 1 funds came from State appropriations, a number that raises eyebrows, and likely includes investment returns from the State Investment Board, generated by both LEOFF 1 member and employer contributions, not simply State money. Our WSCFF Legislative team is watching these claims closely and continues to stand up for the integrity of the LEOFF 1 system.

Our strength comes from standing together, just as we always have. I will be attending the next SCPP meeting on November 18 and will keep you updated as these discussions continue. In the meantime, spread the word and invite other retirees to join the WSCFF Retirees Association. The more of us involved, the louder our voice.

As a reminder, even as I wrote this article, I got a call from someone with a caller ID that matched my credit union's name and number, but it was a scam. These scams are becoming more sophisticated and frequent, so stay alert. If something feels off, hang up and contact the company directly. Better safe than sorry.

Thank you for everything you've done to serve our communities. Wishing you and your families a safe and happy Thanksgiving. Stay proud of what we built and let's keep protecting it.

In solidarity and friendship,
Roy Orlando
WSCFF Retirees Association Vice-Chair

Still Standing Together

**THE JOB STAYS WITH YOU. THE PEOPLE STAY WITH YOU.
THE RESPONSIBILITY DOESN'T END WHEN THE GEAR COMES OFF.**

We all have stories from the job. Not just the big calls or union wins, but the moments when you stepped up, stood your ground, or made a difference for someone who needed you. Those moments shape who we are and do not disappear when we retire.

Like many, I followed a family legacy into the fire service. My dad was a firefighter and my first fire chief. I joined a cadet program in high school, became a volunteer at 18, and never looked back.

It has been almost 20 years since I hung up my gear, but the lessons I learned from the fire service and the union stay with me. Brotherhood. Advocacy. Showing up. These were not just slogans on the union hall walls. They were lived values. And they still matter.

Even in retirement, our responsibility to each other and the next generation continues. I spent 26 years with Shoreline Fire Department and 20 representing Local 1760, including 15 as president. I also carried those union values into public service at the State Legislature, County Council, and as mayor of Edmonds.

During part of my time in political office, I was still union president. Someone from the union was in my office almost daily, checking in and staying connected. That is what union leadership looks like. Sharing our stories is one way we carry that forward.

MY JOB AS AN OLD FIREFIGHTER IS TO HELP YOUNG FIREFIGHTERS BECOME OLD FIREFIGHTERS.

That meant pushing for safer gear, better training, and healthier practices. Too many were lost to job-related illnesses. I wanted us to do better.



Mike Cooper on the job circa 1985

Two calls stand out. One was in 1982, when we launched a holiday program to help families in need. The other was a house fire where we rescued a trapped child by cutting through a wall. It was a team effort and a reminder of why we do this work.

When cancer and COVID came into my life, the fire service community showed up for me. That care does not stop at retirement. It is who we are.

I have seen the fire service evolve. When I started in 1980, SCBAs were rarely used and stations had no exhaust systems. That changed, along with the culture around safety, gear, and training. I also remember the resistance when women first joined the ranks. One of the first was assigned to my shift. She recently retired as a deputy chief. I could not be more proud.



Mike Cooper middle school wrestling, down but never out even on crutches.

I also coached youth wrestling, supported school programs, and served as a Scout leader. Sharing experience and setting an example have always been important. It is not just about the fire service. It is about service to others.

I joined the WSCFF Retirees Association because I still have work to do. After years in leadership, I saw how quickly knowledge can fade if not passed on. Some members did not even know what benefits they had. I spent my career fighting for those things. It made sense to keep showing up.

That is why the Retirees Association matters. It keeps us connected, informed, and active in protecting what we worked so hard to build. From sharing benefit information to offering support during tough times, the RA keeps the fire service family strong, even in retirement.

I have spoken at local meetings and shared my story about cancer. It is not easy to talk about, but people need to hear it. I did not keep up with my annual physicals. That was a mistake. Now I encourage others to get checked. Staying on top of your health is part of taking care of the life you worked hard to earn.

If you are reading this, your story matters. Whether it was a fire, a union fight, or a moment you were there for someone, it matters. That is how we pass the torch. That is how we stay connected. That is how we keep standing together.

We stood together then. Let us keep standing together now.

Mike Cooper
WSCFF Retirees Association Board Member

Remembering Our Fallen

Pat and Barb Hepler



Since the mid-90s, we've lost members of our locals to duty-related illnesses. Our local—now part of L1828 after merging with L1984, L1996, and L1997 through the RFA—has made sure those members are remembered. Their names have been added to the IAFF Fallen Fire Fighter Memorial in Colorado Springs and the Washington State memorial. I've had the honor of attending those ceremonies over the years, and they're always incredibly moving.

This September, I was invited by our local to attend the ceremony again, this time to honor Dean Warren, one of our own. Of course, I said yes. I went with my wife and more than 20 others from our local, including family members of those being honored. It was a real privilege.



This year, 311 IAFF members were honored and added to the granite wall. People came from all over the U.S. and Canada. Washington State had a strong showing. Some locals were there honoring their own; others just came to support. L27, Seattle, didn't have anyone added to the Wall this year, but they still showed up with a big group. L31, Tacoma, honored two members. Both had a strong presence in the honor guard and pipes and drums.

Even though those locals aren't currently part of the WSCFF, many of their retired members are in the WSCFF Retirees Association. Their support was huge, not just for their own, but for all of us. They brought hospitality, encouragement, and that union spirit. And they weren't the only ones. There were nearly 100 locals there with tents, welcoming members and families from everywhere.

AT THE END OF THE DAY, WE WERE ALL THERE FOR ONE REASON: TO HONOR OUR FALLEN. POLITICS DIDN'T MATTER. NONE OF THE OTHER NOISE MATTERED. WE CAME TOGETHER AS ONE TO SHOW SUPPORT AND REMEMBER.

Some people might think retirees don't really have a place at something like this. But I'd say it's just the opposite. If you worked with someone, knew them, or just want to pay your respects, you belong there. It's a powerful way to show what kind of union we are.

If you ever get the chance, visit the IAFF Memorial in Colorado Springs. And if you can, attend the ceremony. It's unforgettable. This year, over 10,000 people were there. Union members in dress blacks, families and friends, honor guards, and pipes and drums groups — more than 1,000 in the honor guard and bands alone.



It was a true honor to be a part of it.

Pat Hepler
WSCFF Retiree Association Board Member
Retired Local 1828 Member

Fire Service Memorial License Plate

The WSCFF has officially launched the campaign to bring a Fire Service Memorial Special License Plate to Washington, and we need your help to make it happen.

We're collecting 3,500 signatures from Washington residents to show public support. Signing doesn't commit you to buy a plate, but the signatures are required to move the process forward.

Proceeds from future plate sales will help maintain the Washington State Fallen Firefighter Memorial and support the Washington State Fallen Firefighters Memorial Foundation. Please visit wscff.org to add your name today.

Every signature helps honor our fallen heroes on Washington's roads.

Contentment After the Fire

By George Orr, WSCFF Retirees Association Board Member

We may be retired, but the job never really leaves us. The memories stay. The bond remains. And the things we saw and felt build a perspective few others have.

I read something recently from financial writer Morgan Housel. He asked what truly makes people happy? It is not money. It isn't luxury. It is something simpler, being content with what you already have, seeing the value in what is still before you.

This hits home for those of us who spent our lives in the fire service. Even in retirement, I've seen many firefighters carry something that most people spend a lifetime chasing. We've seen what matters and what doesn't. We know how fast life can change. We've learned to appreciate the little things.

There is beauty in the ordinary. A quiet shift. A laugh in the kitchen. The stillness after a call. The happiest people I have known in this job were not the wealthiest. They were the ones who managed to be content.

Life is about building memories. The job, the people, the challenges are all part of that. Sometimes, the memory is better than the moment itself. Even the hard times become part of the story. You carry it all with you, and it shapes who you are.

We didn't chase happiness. We earned it. Through long nights, hard calls, and standing shoulder to shoulder with people you could trust.

I remember a fire where one of my brothers and I felt useless, like nothing we did was making a difference. Later, the person we helped told him, "You were a tower of strength for me." Ever since then, whenever we see each other, he'll say, "Tower of strength, Georgie." It's our way of saying, *I saw what you did. I still see it*

When I was still on the job, I thought a lot about responsibility. Not just to the work, but to the people around me. To live up to being the firefighter your kid or your mom believes you are. That responsibility doesn't go away.

I started out as the hose man by the mess hall. No Kelly Days back then. Senior guys picked vacations first. Over time, we won better conditions. If you took on more responsibility, like pump operator, you got paid for it. We weren't just building something for us, it was for the next generation too.

When I was union president, there was a battalion chief who wasn't well liked. Years later, I ran into his son. All he remembered was that his dad and I were both firefighters. Titles fade. What remains is the uniform. The bond.

Retirement doesn't end that connection. The purpose is still there. The pride is still there. We may not ride the rigs anymore, but we're still here for each other.

MY MOM USED TO JOKE I WAS VACCINATED WITH A PHONOGRAPH NEEDLE BECAUSE I NEVER STOPPED TALKING. MAYBE SHE WAS RIGHT. BUT THESE DAYS, I'VE LEARNED THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS LISTENING. TO EACH OTHER. TO LIFE. TO WHAT'S STILL GOOD AND STILL HERE.

Maybe that's what real contentment looks like. And after all we've seen and done, I'd say we've earned it.



We're working on an updated edition of *Fully Involved: The History of the WSCFF*, and we need your help to tell our story.

If you have any old photos, from your time with us, please share them. Your memories help keep our history alive.

We are looking for photographs of fire stations, EMS vehicles, badges and buttons, turnout gear, helmets, and SCBAs over the years. Let's preserve and celebrate the legacy of the WSCFF for generations to come.

Please email Caitlin@wscff.org with your pictures.

Overnight Brisket on a Traeger

Retiree Edition

When he's not leading the WSCFF, Dennis Lawson is firing up something else. Here's his simple, firefighter-friendly version of his overnight brisket, inspired by the famous "Meat Church" style. Set it up before bed and wake up to tender, juicy perfection. It's worth every minute.

Ingredients:

- 1 whole brisket (10–15 lbs)
- Yellow mustard or beef tallow (as a binder)
- Meat Church Holy Cow and Holy Gospel rubs (or see homemade versions below)
- Butcher paper or heavy-duty foil
- Optional: apple cider vinegar or beef broth for spritzing
- Smoker-safe thermometer

Method:

Trim any thick or hard fat from the brisket, leaving about a ¼-inch fat cap.

Rub the entire brisket with yellow mustard or beef tallow. Season generously with Holy Cow rub, then add a lighter layer of Holy Gospel rub (or homemade versions).

→ Dennis tip: A lot of pepper helps create a good bark, which seals in the juices.

Set your Traeger to 180–225°F and place the brisket fat side up.

Smoke overnight until the internal temperature reaches 165–170°F by morning.

→ Tip: Dennis puts it on at 11 PM and checks the Traeger with an app during the day.

Wrap the brisket tightly in butcher paper. Add apple cider vinegar, beef broth, or a spoon of beef tallow if desired.

Increase smoker temperature to 250–275°F and continue cooking until the brisket reaches 203–205°F and feels soft when probed.

Remove and rest for 1–4 hours in a cooler. Slice against the grain and serve.

No Traeger? No Problem

You can still make this brisket using a smoker, charcoal grill, or even your oven:

Smoker: Follow the same temps (180–225°F overnight, 250–275°F to finish). Oak or hickory wood chunks work great.

Charcoal Grill: Set up for indirect heat (coals on one side, meat on the other). Use wood chunks or chips for smoke and adjust vents to hold temperature.

Oven: Follow the same temperature steps. You won't get smoke flavor, but a little liquid smoke or smoked salt in your rub gives a nice touch.

Wrap and rest it the same way. You'll still get tender, flavorful brisket.

Homemade Rub:

If you don't have Meat Church rubs, try this simple blend.

→ Tip: Extra pepper provides a good bark and helps seal in everything.

Holy Cow-Style Rub (Beefy and Bold)

2 Tbsp coarse black pepper

1 Tbsp kosher salt

1 Tbsp paprika

1 Tbsp garlic powder

1 Tbsp onion powder

1 tsp cayenne pepper (optional)



Low and slow always wins.

Resting the brisket lets the juices settle for a tender, flavorful result that's perfect for sharing.

Dennis Lawson

WSCFF President and Retiree Association Member

Recipe inspired by Meat Church BBQ techniques and flavors.

In Memoriam

Honoring Our Active Retirees

Gary Brown, Local 29 Spokane

Gary Brown, a well-respected and key labor advocate of Local 29, passed away on October 23, 2025. He loved his union deeply and played a central role in the local, serving on its first contract negotiation committee and helping to lay the foundation for labor representation in the department.

If you knew Gary, you knew he loved baseball, and he and his wife were known for dancing the nights away and enjoying many camping adventures with fellow Local 29 friends.

A celebration of his life and memory will be held on November 22, 2025, at 1:00 p.m. at the Spokane Eagles Lodge.

Jerry Cooper, Local 2819 Kitsap

Jerry Cooper dedicated 42 years to the fire service, serving the Poulsbo Fire Department with distinction from 1985 until his retirement in 2009 as Fire Marshal. A proud union member, he was deeply committed to supporting his fellow firefighters and remained a steady presence in the fire service community long after retirement.

Above all, Jerry was a devoted family man. His quiet strength, dry humor, and deep sense of loyalty touched everyone who knew him. He will be remembered not only for his decades of service, but for the integrity and care he brought to every part of his life.

Dale Patterson, Local 29 Spokane

Dale Patterson served the Spokane Fire Department for 20 years, retiring in 1990. He passed away in September 2025.

Before joining the department, he served six years in the U.S. Coast Guard. A lifelong athlete, he played multiple sports in school, was on the Coast Guard basketball team, briefly played semi-pro football, and even tried bull riding at rodeos. Dale had a wonderful singing voice, was a great dancer, loved country western music, made friends easily, and had a larger-than-life personality.

A celebration of life was held on November 8, 2025 at the Spokane Eagles Lodge.

Keith Wright, Local 726 Central Pierce

Keith Wright served 32 years with distinction, joining in 1989 and leading as Fire Chief from 2013 to 2015. He played a key role in passing GEMT legislation, securing nearly a billion dollars in funding for Washington fire departments. Keith passed away on October 13, 2025.

His leadership was marked by courage and commitment. He was a responder for the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 with the Urban Search and Rescue Team, earning multiple awards, and mentoring future firefighters as a respected instructor. Keith faced early-onset frontotemporal dementia and ALS with strength and grace.

In his memory, please consider donating to the [Leukemia & Lymphoma Society](#), a cause he championed.

**Their leadership, kindness, and dedication to the fire service
and their unions will always be remembered.**



Thank you for reading!

Our active retirees keep the spirit of the fire service alive.

Stay safe, take care of one another,
and feel free to reach out with any updates or stories to share.

– The WSCFF Retirees Association Advisory Board

Roy Orlando, Co-Chair, served 39 years with Local 31 Tacoma and actively monitors pension legislation and union benefits to support retirees.

Mike Cooper served as a Shoreline Fire Department Lieutenant and a state legislator, continuing his commitment to the community in retirement.

Pat Hepler retired as a Battalion Chief after many years with Snohomish County Fire District #1 and has been a longtime advocate for firefighters and their families.

Steve Hostetter retired as a Battalion Chief from Central Kitsap Fire and Rescue and enjoys sharing his knowledge on retirement planning.

George Orr has over 50 years with Local 876, including leadership roles and time as a state representative focused on firefighter issues.

Curtis Vandver retired as Deputy Chief from the Puyallup Fire Department after 34 years of service and has been a 55-year member of Local 726, remaining active on LEOFF and fire pension boards. He also serves as West Vice President of the LEOFF Association and continues to advocate on pension and firefighter issues.



**RETIREES
ASSOCIATION**