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Lawmakers to Introduce Job Protection Bill for Volunteer Firefighters Responding to Disasters By Eileen Sullivan, CQ Staff

Lawmakers plan to introduce a bill Thursday that would protect volunteer firefighters from losing their jobs when responding to national disasters.

Democratic Reps. Robert E. Andrews and Bill Pascrell Jr., both from New Jersey and Reps. Michael N. Castle, R-Del., and John R. "Randy" Kuhl Jr., R-N.Y., are expected to introduce the Volunteer Firefighter and EMS Personnel Job Protection Act. The bill would provide job security similar to what National Guard members receive when called up to service.

Currently volunteer firefighters and emergency medical personnel risk losing their jobs or being demoted when they miss work because they're responding to a national emergency. Volunteer firefighters comprise about 75 percent of the country's fire service, according to the National Volunteer Fire Council. The fact that they can be fired if they miss work has served as a disincentive for volunteer firefighters to lend their time during national disasters, officials said.

The bill would protect jobs for up to 14 days a year, but employers would not be obligated to pay the firefighters' salaries while they're away. An employee who has been fired or discriminated against would have the right to file a civil suit in district court and seek reinstatement and back pay.

Eight states currently have laws that protect volunteer firefighters' jobs: Pennsylvania, Illinois, New Jersey, Massachusetts, West Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky and Washington.

"Over the past few years we have seen small and large national disasters throughout the United States - from the flooding in New Orleans to the forest fires in the west. Time and time again, our volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel rose to the occasion and proved to be crucial in the rescue operations," Castle said in a prepared statement Wednesday. "Unfortunately, under current law, volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel are not protected from termination or demotion by their employer when they respond to national disasters."