

## Recommendation for First Responder Recruitment & Retention Act

### **Background:**

LB 447 which included the Law Enforcement Act was introduced and passed to be enacted during the 2016/2017 academic year. This act required public institutions within Nebraska to waive 100% of the tuition charges for law enforcement officers who were seeking a degree that led to a career in law enforcement. From 2016 to the 2022/2023 academic year CCC had 5 students participate with a combined total of \$2,956.60 of tuition waived.

LB 447 was amended to LB 727 which adjusted the name to the First Responder Recruitment & Retention Act and extended the scope of eligible students. LB 727 was passed in June 2023 with an enactment date of September 2, 2023 becoming Nebraska statute 85-2601 thru 85-2606.

The extension of LB 727 was for professional firefighters and their legal dependents as well as the legal dependents of law enforcement officers for up to five consecutive years of college tuition waivers.

There has been much discussion and request for clarification on this act as there are several parts that were not clearly defined. Based upon information received from several parties and the act itself the below recommendation is being brought forth as we wait for further clarification on the act which will hopefully occur during the next legislative session.

### **Definitions:**

*Law Enforcement Officer:* Law enforcement officer means any person who is responsible for the prevention or detection of crime or the enforcement of the penal, traffic, or highway laws of the State of Nebraska or any political subdivision of the state for more than one hundred hours per year and who is authorized by law to make arrests. This definition was taken directly from the act.

*Professional Firefighter:* Professional firefighter means a firefighter or firefighter-paramedic who is a member of a paid fire department of a municipality or a rural or suburban fire protection district in the state of Nebraska, including a municipality having a home rule charter or a municipal authority created pursuant to a home rule charter that has its own paid fire department, and for whom firefighting is a full-time career. This definition was taken directly from the act.

*Legal Dependent:* A dependent, for the purposes of this program, is defined as a biological child, stepchild, foster child, sibling, stepsibling, or descendant who can legally be claimed as a dependent by a law enforcement officer (as defined above) or professional firefighter (as defined above). Being a dependent student means you meet the definition of a "[dependent student](#)" under the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and that at least one parent or legal guardian qualifies as a law enforcement officer or professional firefighter residing in the State of Nebraska. This definition was agreed upon by the other community colleges, states colleges and university system.

### **Degree Eligibility Recommendation:**

*Law Enforcement Officer:* Pursues studies leading to an associate degree that relates to a career in law enforcement. CCC programs will include:

- Associate of Arts Transfer Degree
- AAS Accounting
- AAS Business Administration
- AAS Criminal Justice
- AAS Human Services
- AAS Information Technology and Systems
- AAS Paramedicine

*Professional Firefighter:* Pursues studies leading to an associate degree in science or medicine that relates to a career in professional firefighting. CCC programs will include:

- Associate of Science Transfer Degree
- Associate Degree of Nursing
- AAS Paramedicine

The law allows for an appeal process if denied due to program choice for student to justify how program relates to law enforcement or professional firefighting careers.

*Legal Dependent:* Pursues studies leading to an associate degree. All CCC associate degree programs will be included for legal dependents.

#### **Recommendation of Funding:**

85-2603 and 85-2603.01 does indicate that this waiver is to be applied only after all federal & state grants have been applied. CCC would follow this and create a hierarchy of funding. The hierarchy of funding would be:

- Federal Pell Grant
- Federal Supplemental Opportunity Grant
- Nebraska Opportunity Grant
- Central Community College Funded Scholarships
- First Responder Recruitment & Retention Tuition Waiver

The First Responder Recruitment & Retention Tuition Waiver would be paid through one college wide general ledger account.

#### **Application for Funding Process and Student Eligibility Recommendations:**

85-2605 does have some stipulations for what information should be provided to the school, but in order to follow the above proposed hierarchy of funding the completion of the FAFSA should be also required.

*Law Enforcement Officer or Professional Firefighter:*

1. Be fully admitted into CCC
2. Complete Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
3. Submit verification of residency received from the Department of Revenue
4. Submit verification of satisfactory performance signed by fire chief or superior officer, which also serves as the application for funds.

*Legal Dependent:*

1. Be fully admitted into CCC
2. Complete Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
3. Submit application for First Responder Recruitment & Retention Tuition Waiver application
4. Submit verification of residency received from the Department of Revenue
5. Submit verification of satisfactory performance signed by fire chief or superior officer

**Tuition Wavier Recommendation After Graduation:**

Within 85-2606 there is guidance that if a legal dependent does not maintain Nebraska residency for five (5) years following graduation, the institution is able to seek out reimbursement of the tuition waiver. There has been discussion with this language of whether this is intended as a tuition waiver or a forgivable loan. Due to the nature of the program and the cost both in time and personnel, it is our recommendation that CCC treats this as a tuition waiver and forgoes the ability to seek repayment.

It is recommended that the Board authorize the College President to adopt or modify the recommendation presented above as Central Community College's implementation of Nebraska Statute 85-2601 regarding the First Responder Recruitment and Retention Act.