



Jefferson County Professional Firefighters – Local 5351

International Association of Firefighters
419 16th Avenue, Ranson WV, 25438

Response from Jefferson County Professional Firefighters, IAFF Local 5351

Regarding the Special Meeting with the Jefferson County Commission September 23, 2025

The Jefferson County Professional Firefighters, IAFF Local 5351, would first like to thank the Jefferson County Commission for granting a special meeting on September 22, 2025. We view this meeting as an important step forward and hope it marks the beginning of long-term, open communication between the Commission and our Local.

We consider yesterday's meeting a win for both Local 5351 and the Jefferson County Emergency Services Agency (JCESA). We were given the opportunity to make our presentation, followed by a time of open dialogue with the Commission. During this exchange, much information was shared, and several of our questions were answered. We will continue corresponding with the Commission to address the questions that remain.

At the time of our initial public statements and correspondence with the Commission, we were acting on information provided. Nonetheless, we appreciate the Commission addressing these issues directly and publicly.

During the meeting, the Commission assured us that they would have to vote on any budget cuts, closures of units, or reductions to JCESA services—and they went on record stating they have no plans to entertain such measures. This public commitment provides stability for our workforce and reassurance for the residents and visitors of Jefferson County who depend on our services.

Budget, Staffing, and Contingency Funds

While hiring freezes were denied, Commissioner Mood emphasized that county departments must operate within budget, reminding us that it is not an “open checkbook.”

Commissioner Mike Mood stated:

“I want to be absolutely clear: the Commission would authorize as many positions as possible, but going over budget isn't an option. It's not a hiring freeze, but it's also not a blank check.”

The County Administrator and Chief Financial Officer further noted that under West Virginia law, county departments must remain within budget. **What we believe refers to West Virginia Code (§7-1-3).**

We were told that the county holds a 10% contingency fund to assist departments with overages during the fiscal year. However, those funds must be replenished annually back to the 10% earmark.



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Additionally, we were advised that the county has added 30% to our salary line item. This was not new funding provided or found; rather, it was a reallocation of funds from the closure of the part-time program. Those dollars were shifted to our full-time salary line to support the hiring of additional field staff, as well as a logistics officer and two safety officers—positions not yet formally presented to the Commission for approval.

In practice, JCESA has worked to operate as efficiently as possible. We have been using **flexible staff to cover open positions at straight pay before resorting to overtime**, ensuring that shifts are filled responsibly and costs are managed. These flexible staff are new to the agency, brought in as part of an effort to control the budget and reduce overtime costs. However, because our department must 100% backfill open positions, overtime is ultimately inevitable.

A statement was made in public forum at our meeting Monday by the **County Administrator** that more junior staff could be used over senior staff to fill schedule openings. We believe such a directive only decreases morale among our workforce and increases the risk that experienced personnel will seek employment elsewhere—leaving us with an even larger staffing deficit than the one we already face.

We were also advised that our burn rate is too high for this point in the budget cycle and that we are projected to be over budget. We hope that by continuing to use creative staffing models that do not require us to consider what a person makes when filling open positions, we can help stabilize the budget while maintaining morale within our department.

Response to Commissioner Stolipher's Statement

Commissioner Steve Stolipher stated:

“The Commission has approved every staffing change brought forward by ESA leadership. That has resulted in nearly \$900,000 more budgeted for full-time salaries compared to last year. With a 30% increase in the full-time salaries line item over this time last year, I’m concerned as to why a local group would spread fear about cuts or freezes.”

We want to make it **absolutely clear** that Local 5351 was not spreading fear about cuts or freezes. Our responsibility as a Union is to represent and protect our members by bringing forward information that directly affects their employment and the community they serve.

What we shared publicly came from a credible and factual source, and it was explained to us that those verbal directives came down from the County Administrator.

At no time did we claim that the Jefferson County Commission had already voted on cuts, freezes, or closures. Rather, we raised concerns based on information provided to us in order to ensure transparency, accountability, and to prevent such measures from being implemented without public awareness.



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Our intent was never to mislead the community, but to provide them with the information we had at the time, and to demand clarity from county leadership. We are pleased that the Commission has since gone on record stating that no cuts, freezes, or closures are planned — and we welcome that reassurance both for our members and for the residents of Jefferson County.

Insurance, Benefits, and COLA

We also had clarification that our death benefit was reduced from \$100,000 to \$50,000 to match the standard for all county employees. We were informed that another department brought the discrepancy to light, leading to the adjustment.

Meanwhile, employee contributions for health insurance have risen sharply. Beginning October 1, 2025, the employee-only plan will increase by 159%, and this increase will apply only to members of JCESA, not to other county employees. While the plan itself has not changed, the County Administration increased contribution rates to equalize costs across departments.

While employees are now able to purchase additional life insurance for the first time, the combination of rising insurance contributions, the cut to short-term disability, and the halving of the death benefit has effectively erased the 3% COLA increase. For many employees, this results in a net zero—or even negative—raise.

It should also be noted that while all county employees received a 3% COLA, JCESA's budget was further adjusted when the closure of the part-time program led to a 30% increase in our salary line item. This increase did not reflect an across-the-board pay raise, but rather a reallocation of funds into the full-time staffing budget.

Apparatus Replacement and Fire Marshal Compliance

We also received answers regarding apparatus replacement. Commissioner Mood admitted in public session that he personally blocked the last two engine purchase proposals. While Commission President Majdi stated there have been no rejections, Commissioner Mood later explained his view that any engine must have at least 10 years of service life remaining and carry a minimum of 750 gallons of water.

The Union responded by reminding the Commission that the West Virginia Fire Marshal's office has the authority to issue a 180-day directive requiring compliance. Should we fail to comply, there is a risk of losing our FDID number. This number made us only the second certified county fire department in West Virginia, and the first combination fire and EMS department in the state. Losing it would jeopardize our ability to remain certified, apply for grants, and secure state and federal funding.



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Commissioner Mood stated that he wanted it to follow the county standard. That standard is listed above. This is from **JC OG:018**, which states that all Engines must comply with **NFPA 1901 (2024 edition)**. That standard defines a **Pumper Fire Apparatus (Engine)** as a fire apparatus with a permanently mounted fire pump, water tank, and hose body whose primary purpose is to combat structural and associated fires. NFPA 1901 requires:

- A fire pump with a rated capacity of at least **750 gpm**,
- A water tank of at least **300 gallons**,
- A hose body with the specified minimum hose load (attack and supply line), and
- Required equipment including ladders, SCBAs, forcible entry tools, and other NFPA-listed equipment.

Department Identity and Services

Although we still operate under the name Jefferson County Emergency Services Agency (JCESA), that name is no longer fully representative of the services we provide. We are not solely an EMS agency or staffing pool; our personnel routinely staff volunteer fire department apparatus with officers, drivers, and firefighters.

Maintaining our fire department certification is critical to accessing additional resources and accurately representing the all-hazards response role our members play in protecting the residents and visitors of Jefferson County.

Financial Accountability and Fees for Service

We did not receive answers regarding old ESA banking accounts, but we will continue working closely to locate information on those funds.

We also intend to diligently pursue accountability for fee-for-service and ambulance fee revenues. The core problem with the EMS fee is that it is simply not high enough to sustain the services our county requires.

The Commission must address this issue in December during the EMS fee meetings. We will call upon the community to attend and voice their concerns about the future of fire and EMS coverage. While we do not advocate for unnecessary taxes, we recognize that in order to improve services, adjustments may become necessary.

Clarification on IT Funding

We were also assured that \$60,000 was not taken from our budget to fund a Deputy Director of IT. Instead, we were told the funding came from closing a position elsewhere in the county and reallocating the employee to assume new duties.



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Commission Communications and Misinformation

The central point of contention during the meeting was that we went public with our concerns prior to meeting with the Commission. This was, however, the first time in our Local's history that we were granted a one-on-one public forum to raise such concerns.

We want to be clear: at no point in our original posting did we state that the Jefferson County Commission had voted on these issues, nor did we imply that they had already taken formal action.

To prevent future misunderstandings, we believe that any directives or suggestions from the County Administrator to county department directors should be put in writing. This will ensure accuracy, prevent miscommunication, and hold all parties accountable.

We also note that while the Commission criticized the Union for misinformation, they were forced to remove the photos of the letter they issued to the public on **Tuesday** and then edit their original text posting to social media multiple times. We feel this was due to the County Commission attempting to set the narrative about Monday's meeting too quickly, before fully reviewing and proofing their own comments to the public. By contrast, our press release has taken several days to produce, as we wanted to provide the highest quality statement, we could with the information provided to us from this meeting.

“In fact, full-time salaries are budgeted at a **30% increase over this time last year — outpacing every other department in the County**. Like every department, however, ESA must operate within its approved budget, and there has been no reduction in funding.” When in fact this was funding that was reallocated from our part-time line item to our full-time line item. While they boast about increasing funding to our agency, the reality is that our overall budget was actually cut from **FY 2024–2025: \$6,478,593 to FY 2025–2026: \$6,473,233 — a decrease of \$5,360 (0.08%)**. No new money has been allocated to JCESA, just redistribution of funds from one line to the other. **This information in came directly from the Commission's original statement letter to the public.**

We also want to make it absolutely clear that JCESA employees did not receive a **30% pay raise**. Employees only received a **3% COLA**, which has effectively been eliminated by insurance increases, benefit reductions, and other cuts.

While the Commission has since amended its statement, we feel they should have ensured accurate and proofed information before presenting it publicly — particularly after criticizing our Union for raising concerns based on information, we understood to be credible.

We expect the Commission to lead by example, and accurate public communication is part of that leadership responsibility.



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Union Compliance

Finally, during the meeting, it was suggested that our Local may not be properly filing reports. We want to correct this clearly: IAFF Locals are not required to file with the U.S. Department of Labor.

Local 5351 has filed every year with the West Virginia Secretary of State, as required. We maintain an active business license with the state and are fully compliant with all state and IAFF National filing requirements. Any implication otherwise was a mischaracterization and, in our view, an attempt to deflect pressure from the County Administration.

Support for Leadership and Union Role

Local 5351 stands firmly in support of Chief Sine's leadership of our department. We strongly stand committed to bringing forward anything we find to be unfair or detrimental to our agency, and to addressing those issues through the Union. Our goal is not to create conflict, but to ensure accountability, fairness, and the continued success of Jefferson County's fire and EMS services.

Conclusion

IAFF Local 5351 remains committed to building a transparent, respectful, and productive relationship with the Jefferson County Commission. Our members are dedicated to protecting the lives and property of the residents and visitors of Jefferson County. We will continue to advocate for the resources, staffing, and policies necessary to ensure the highest quality fire and EMS services.