Gov. David A. Paterson has signed a new law that takes effect immediately to increase access to health care for volunteer fire and ambulance workers in New York.

Paterson signed S.5111/A.8251 into law, clarifying the state’s general municipal law and civil service law to permit, but not require, municipal corporations to offer health insurance coverage to volunteer fire and ambulance workers. The new law also allows these volunteers to buy into the New York State Health Insurance Program (NYSHIP).

Established in 1957 for state employees, NYSHIP has evolved to include local governments, school districts and other groups into its membership. Now the largest public employer health insurance program in the nation – outside of the federal government – NYSHIP covers more than 1.1 million state and local employees, retirees and their families.

"It is an honor to sign this bill into law," Paterson said in a statement. "Our brave volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers give of themselves to protect their neighbors, and deserve not only our respect and admiration, but also our assistance in guaranteeing them affordable health insurance coverage."