RE: Legislative Activities  
DATE: February 5, 2011  
FROM: Chris Bitner, Legislative & Regulatory Affairs Committee

NYSVARA has set its Legislative Day for Monday May 2, 2011. Please mark your calendars and plan to join us in Albany as we educate our legislative representatives about the issues and needs of New York’s community ambulance corps.

Legislative Member Initiatives, more commonly referred to as “Member Items”, are an important source of funding to our member agencies. Please take a moment and read the attached article which describes them and the role they play in supporting non-profit organizations. This could prove to be a useful tool in your discussions with your representatives in government.
Sometimes, pork spending is kosher

Wholesale elimination of member items from state budget hurts worthy efforts

By Gayle Riehs

Today's release of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's $137 billion budget proposal for 2012-13 brings budget season — and all its wheeling and dealing — to New York. When the public thinks that lawmakers have trade deals for favorites hometown projects, they become frustrated. Who can blame them? When state governments like New York's are facing such dire fiscal issues, it seems only fair to allow "pork barrel" spending to continue.

Such "member items" were inserted in the state's 2011-12 budget, and there's little doubt such public appeals for them this year, either. But traditionally, member items have totaled around $1 billion a year. That's a lot of pork — but is any of it ever kosher?

The answer is simply yes and no. Member item money is designed to go to nonprofit groups or local governments in a legislator's home community for worthwhile projects that provide needed services. It's true that they're not just about the pork. And when this happens, they fulfill important funding needs in a given community.

The problem comes when lawmakers use the power of the purse to carry favors to their districts by providing big checks to small community groups, to fund pet projects that may or may not meet a community need or as a means for pork-barreling on various issues.

But if the spigot is totally turned off, what will happen to those nonprofits that have genuinely served people in need across Nassau and Suffolk counties?

The Jewish Community Center of the Great North Shore has been receiving $100,000 for the past five years for its Camp Friendship, a camp for children with special needs. The past year the Jewish Federation of New York has been having difficulty funding it. As a result, Camp Friendship has had to reduce staff hours and provide less food, meaning the community has less access to nutritional assistance.

The School-Based Family Service League, headquartered in Huntington, received member item funding for many of its programs, including those that support low-income children at risk of getting into behavioral or academic trouble. Recent cuts mean that one-third to one-half fewer kids now receive the services they need.

The League's Fast program — Families and Schools Together — shows at-risk kids and their parents how to work together in the evenings to teach them skills to create stronger families. A cut in funding resulted in 30 fewer families receiving this crucial support.

There are just a few of the Long Island nonprofits that will suffer setbacks as a result of the loss of member item. But they make clear the point that not all pork-barrel spending is bad. And in difficult economic times, when support from individual donors wanes, these small grants are all the more important.

Gayle Riehs is chair of the board of the Jewish Federation of New York's Long Island Government Relations Committee.
Fallen Firefighter Memorial Recognition Bill – To amend VFBL law to provide that in the case of a line of duty death where a benefit is paid to a covered volunteer, that the name of that volunteer firefighter shall be inscribed upon the NYS Fallen Firefighters Memorial at the Capitol Mall in Albany.

Blue Light on Ambulance and EMS Vehicles - Amend the Vehicle and Traffic law to allow ambulance and EMS vehicles to use the blue light for rear projection only, and to include ambulance and EMS vehicles in the definition of a highway emergency incident safety zone.

Bail Out Rope Repeal – To support legislation that clarifies the requirements of existing law and regulation regarding above ground evacuation equipment and procedures.

Consolidation Amendments – To seek amendments to recently enacted legislation creating new consolidation procedures applicable to local governments specifically requiring a second vote after the municipalities which are to be dissolved or consolidated have developed the plan for consolidation or dissolution.

Elimination of Exemption from Seat Belt Law – To seek legislation to require operators and passengers of certain authorized fire and EMS emergency vehicles to be restrained by safety belts by eliminating the existing exemption for such vehicles.

Felony Offenders – Amend applicable statutes to allow for a criminal background check on applicants or members of a volunteer fire department or EMS unit, and to provide for refusal of membership or expulsion of persons convicted of certain felony offenses.

Health Insurance for Volunteers – To enact legislation that requires health insurers to cover volunteers when the municipality allows the volunteer to participate, at the volunteers own expense, in that municipality’s own health plan and to provide for access for Volunteers to the Healthy New York program.