

**COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
BEFORE THE JOINT LABOR MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE**

In the Matter of Interest Arbitration Between:	)	
	)	
	)	
Bridgewater Firefighters, IAFF Local 2611	)	Decision and Award
	)	
and	)	JLM-24-10842
	)	
Town of Bridgewater	)	
	)	

Committee Members: Sheila Mayberry, Neutral Chair
David Gagne, Management Committee Member
Robert Green, Labor Committee Member

Appearances: For the Employer: John J. Clifford, Esq.
For the Union: Hailey Ferguson, Esq.

Date of Hearing: March 20, 2026

Location: Bridgewater, Massachusetts

I. INTRODUCTION

On March 20, 2026, the Joint Labor Management Committee's appointed Panel held an interest arbitration hearing between the Town of Bridgewater, Massachusetts, and the Bridgewater Firefighters Union, IFFA Local 2611. The Panel admitted documentary evidence and witness testimony. Each party filed a post-hearing brief on May 15, 2026.

The issues certified for arbitration are as follows:

Union Issues

1. Wages
2. EMS Stipend

3. Active Shooter / Hostile Event Response (ASHER) Incentive Pay: Amend Article 17, add new Section 6
4. Educational Incentive Pay: Amend Article 13, Section 2
5. Holiday: Amend Article 5, Section 2

Town Issues

1. Wages
2. Health Insurance: Amend Article 10
3. Vacation Language: Amend Article 7, add new Section 9
4. Vacation Language: Amend Article 7, add new Section 10

Pursuant to JLMC Statute (Chapter 589 of the Acts of 1987), an arbitration panel must consider the following factors in determining any awards:

1. Massachusetts General Law (MGL) Chapter 59, Section 21C.
2. The financial ability of the municipality to meet costs, to include such factors as
 - (i) its state reimbursements and assessments;
 - (ii) its long and short term bonded indebtedness;
 - (iii) its estimated share in the metropolitan district commission's deficit;
 - (iv) its estimated share in the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's deficit; and
 - (v) consideration of average per capita property tax burden, average annual income of community members, the effect any accord might have on the respective property tax rates on the city or town.
3. The interests and welfare of the public.
4. The hazards of employment, physical, educational and mental qualifications, job training and skills involved.
5. A comparison of wages, hours and conditions of employment of the employees with those of other employees performing similar services, and with other employees generally in public and private employment in comparable communities.
6. The decisions and recommendations of the fact-finder, if any.
7. The average consumer prices for goods and services, e.g., the cost of living.

8. The overall compensation presently received by the employees, including direct wages and fringe benefits.
10. Such other factors that are considered in collective bargaining, mediation, fact-finding, arbitration or otherwise between parties, in the public services or in private employment.
11. The Parties' stipulations.

II. FINDINGS AND AWARDS

1. Wages

Union's Proposal

- a. Effective 7/1/24: 5%
- b. Effective 7/1/25: 5%
- c. Effective 7/1/26: 5%

Town's Proposal

- a. Effective 7/1/24: No Change in Compensation
- b. Effective 7/1/25: 0.75%
- c. Effective 7/1/26: 0.75%

Findings

The Panel has reviewed the record evidence and arguments of the Parties and deliberated over the impact of the Town's financial condition and its ability to pay increases in wages and benefits.

The Town of Bridgewater is experiencing very challenging financial circumstances. It is eliminating jobs and reducing hours of many employees. In 2025, the Town's voters rejected, 55% to 44%, a Proposition 2 1/2 override vote to stave off reductions in the Town's budget. The Panel finds that the decision in 2026 not to seek an override after the decisive rejection in 2025 was reasonable. The FY26 budget was balanced with \$450,000 from one-time revenue sources, thereby adding to the structural deficit for FY27. For FY27, only \$540,000 in new revenue was available to fund increases in the Town's operational budget, necessitating reductions in hours

and services, as well as layoffs. The Town's priority was to fully fund public safety, while making reductions in other categories, as follows:

Category	2027 Net Reduction
General Government	-\$229,648 (-5.24%)
Public Safety	-\$24,536 (-0.17%)
Department of Public Works	-\$131,796 (-7.21%)
Health & Human Services	-\$49,600 (-8.74%)
Culture / Recreation	-\$116,411 (-11.28%)
Total Reductions	-\$551,991

The available revenue from the Ambulance funds will be used to balance the Town's budget and a certain percentage of it will be used to partially pay for the Fire Department's budget. New revenue will also be used to shore up other departments' budgets and to pay for increases in the Fire Department. This Panel finds, therefore, that while there is insufficient revenue to pay for the Union's proposed wage increase, there are funds to pay for a wage increase that will not be regressive and also reflect the reality of the Town's current financial circumstances.

With respect to the income levels of members of the Town's police and firefighter bargaining units, the Panel finds that the Town has attempted to maintain pattern bargaining for wage increases between the bargaining units over time. The Panel also finds that bargaining unit members' wages and benefits are comparable to similar communities in the region.

Award

Based upon the evidence of the Town's ability to pay and arguments presented by the Parties, the Panel awards wage increases as follows:

Effective 7/1/2024: 2%

Effective 7/1/2025: 1%

Effective 7/1/2026: 1%

Effective 1/1/2027: 1%

2. EMS Stipend

Union's Proposal

Effective 7/1/24: 18.5% increase

Effective 7/1/25: 19.5% increase

Effective 7/1/26: 20.5% increase

Town's Response

No Change

Findings

The Panel finds that the EMT stipend must include an increased financial recognition of the skills required by certified EMTs and all the services they provide.

Award

The EMT Stipend increase shall be as follows:

Effective 7/1/2024: 0.5%

Effective 7/1/2025: 0.5%

Effective 7/1/2026: 0.5%

3. Active Shooter / Hostile Event Response (“ASHER”) Incentive Pay (Article 17)

Union's Proposal

The Union proposes to add a new Section 6 to Article 17 to memorialize a stipend, whereby members receive a base wage increase of 1% for completing required ASHER training.

Town's Response

No Change

Findings

The Panel does not find that a stipend for completing ASHER training is warranted at this time.

Award

None

4. Educational Incentive Pay (Article 13)

Union's Proposal

The Union proposes to replace the existing flat stipends in Section 2 of Article 13 with percentage-based incentives, based upon the employee's wages, assigned to each educational degree, as follows:

Effective 7/1/2024

- a. Associate's degree: 6%
- b. Bachelor's degree: 7.5%
- c. Master's degree: 9%

Effective 7/1/2025

- a. Associate's degree: 10%
- b. Bachelor's degree: 15%
- c. Master's degree: 20%

Effective 7/1/2026

- a. Associate's degree: 15%
- b. Bachelor's degree: 20%
- c. Master's degree: 25%

Town's Response

No Change

Findings

The existing flat stipends are \$3500 for an Associate's degree, \$4500 for a Bachelor's degree, and \$5500 for a Master's degree. Based on the evidence and arguments presented, the Panel agrees that the educational stipend should instead be calculated as a percentage of the employee's wages, with the provision that no calculated stipend should be lower than the existing flat stipend; therefore, the existing flat stipends now constitute the *minimum* amount. Since this item has been treated as separate and distinct from the wages, it should also be treated as such

during the term of this Agreement. The Panel finds that this change should be implemented in the third year of the contract's term.

Award

Effective July 1, 2026, the educational stipends shall be:

- a. Associate's degree: 5% of wages (\$3500 minimum)
- b. Bachelor's degree: 6.5% of wages (\$4500 minimum)
- c. Master's degree: 7.5% of wages (\$5500 minimum)

5. Health Insurance (Article 10)

Town's Proposal

Effective 7/1/25, all new bargaining unit members shall contribute 25% towards the cost of the Town's contributory group insurance plan, consisting of Mayflower Health Group's BCBS Network Blue Benchmark Plan and HPHC Benchmark Plan.

Union's Response

No Change

Findings

Based upon the argument and the evidence provided by the Parties, the Panel finds that, while increasing the contributory percentage is not unreasonable, it is impractical to implement any change at this point in the negotiations. Therefore, the Panel determines that no change in this rate shall be implemented during the term of this Agreement. However, the Panel recommends that the Town's proposal be discussed during the next round of negotiations.

Award

None

6. Vacation Language (Article 7)

Town's Proposals

1. Add a new Section 9 – Vacation Buyback, as follows:

A member may annually trade in up to eight (8) vacation days per year for compensation but must notify the Town in writing by November 1st of their intent to do so. Once submitted, this request is irrevocable, and the accrual time will be deducted from the member's available vacation balance. The payment will be made at the member's current rate of pay and will appear in the first payroll in December. The payment will be made with regular shift pay. If a member elects to use this provision in one calendar year, the members cannot carry over vacation time in any amount to the succeeding calendar year.

2. Add a new Section 10 – Line-of-Duty Injury, as follows:

In the event a member is absent from duty due to a line-of-duty injury but is able to go on a pre-scheduled vacation, he/she/they shall be required to utilize accrued vacation and/or personal time. The employees' injured-on-duty status and compensation will not be affected.

Union's Response

No Change

Findings

Based upon the arguments of the Parties, the Panel finds insufficient evidence to award the Town's proposal.

Award

None

7. Holiday Language (Article 5)

Union's Proposals

Amend Article V, Section 2 to read:

"... Holiday pay shall be twelve (12) hours pay at the employee's base hourly rate of pay or ata (sic)." Tour off, at the employee's discretion."

The Union also argued to amend Section 2 to remove the requirement that members must give the Chief four (4) days prior notice before taking a holiday off.

Town's Response

No Change

Findings

Based upon the arguments of the Parties, the Panel does not find sufficient justification to award the Union's proposals.

Award

None

III. AWARD SUMMARY

1. Wages

Effective 7/1/2024: 2%

Effective 7/1/2025: 1%

Effective 7/1/2026: 1%

Effective 1/1/2027: 1%

2. EMT Stipend

Effective 7/1/2024: 0.5%

Effective 7/1/2025: 0.5%

Effective 7/1/2026: 0.5%

3. Active Shooter / Hostile Event Response ("ASHER") Incentive Pay (Article 17)

The Panel does not award the Union's proposal.

4. Educational Incentive Pay (Article 13)

Effective July 1, 2026, the educational stipends shall be:

- a. Associate's degree: 5% of wages (\$3500 minimum)
- b. Bachelor's degree: 6.5% of wages (\$4500 minimum)
- c. Master's degree: 7.5% of wages (\$5500 minimum)

5. Health Insurance (Article 10)

The Panel does not award the Town's proposal.

6. Vacation Language (Article 7)

The Panel does not award either of the Town's proposals.

7. Holiday Language (Article 5)

The Panel does not award either of the Union's proposals.



Sheila Mayberry, Neutral Chair



David Gagne, Management Committee Member



Robert Green, Labor Committee Member

June 24, 2026