



National Volunteer Fire Council

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Fact Sheet

The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) is the leading nonprofit membership association representing the interests of the volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services. Organized in 1976, the NVFC serves as the voice of the volunteer fire and emergency services in the national arena and provides invaluable tools, resources, programs, and advocacy for first responders across the nation. Each state firefighter's association elects a representative to the NVFC Board of Directors.

We welcome you to browse our web site at www.nvfc.org to learn more about the volunteer fire and emergency services and information regarding membership, training, legislation, and meetings.

This Fact Sheet was produced in order to provide an overall picture of today's volunteer fire and emergency services.

- **Volunteers comprise 72% of firefighters in the United States.**

Of the total estimated 1,140,900 volunteer and paid firefighters across the country, 823,950 are volunteer.¹

- **Communities served by volunteer firefighters depend on them to be their first line of defense for many types of emergencies.**

Volunteer firefighters are summoned to a wide array of emergencies across the country every day including fires, emergency medical incidents, terrorist events, natural disasters, hazardous materials incidents, water rescue emergencies, high-angle and confined space emergencies, and other general public service calls. The public relies on the volunteer emergency services to be their first line of defense in these emergencies. Volunteers spend an enormous amount of time training to prepare for these emergencies.

- **The majority of fire departments in the United States are volunteer.**

Of the total 30,635 fire departments in the country, 21,449 are all volunteer; 5,134 are mostly volunteer; 1,731 are mostly career; and 2,321 are all career.²

¹ *U.S. Fire Department Profile Through 2006*. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA, November, 2007.

² Ibid

- **Services contributed by volunteer firefighters save localities across the country an estimated \$37.2 billion per year.**³

- **The number of volunteer firefighters in the United States has declined by over 8% since 1984.**⁴

Major factors contributing to the decline include increased time demands, more rigorous training requirements, and the proliferation of two-income families whose members do not have time to volunteer. The two greatest sources of increased time demands are increased volume of emergency calls and increased training hours to comply with training standards.

| Year | Number of Volunteer Firefighters |
|------|----------------------------------|
| 1984 | 897,750 |
| 1985 | 839,450 |
| 1986 | 808,200 |
| 1987 | 816,800 |
| 1988 | 788,250 |
| 1989 | 770,100 |
| 1990 | 772,650 |
| 1991 | 771,800 |
| 1992 | 805,300 |
| 1993 | 795,400 |
| 1994 | 807,900 |
| 1995 | 838,000 |
| 1996 | 815,500 |
| 1997 | 803,350 |
| 1998 | 804,200 |
| 1999 | 785,250 |
| 2000 | 777,350 |
| 2001 | 784,700 |
| 2002 | 816,600 |
| 2003 | 800,050 |
| 2004 | 795,600 |
| 2005 | 823,650 |
| 2006 | 823,950 |

- **Recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters** is one of the key issues being addressed jointly by the NVFC and U.S. Fire Administration (USFA). The NVFC and USFA have released a report entitled [*Retention and Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services: Challenges and Solutions*](#). The report addresses the primary challenges departments face regarding retention and recruitment and then outlines proven solutions to overcome these obstacles. It is available for free download on the NVFC web site at www.nvfc.org.

The NVFC has also been instrumental in the launch of Fire Corps, a national initiative to recruit community members into local fire and EMS departments to perform non-emergency roles. This allows department members to focus on training and emergency response while at the same time increasing the services and programs the department can offer. Fire Corps is a component of the Department of Homeland Security’s Citizen Corps initiative and is administered on a national level by the NVFC. For more information, visit www.firecorps.org.

³ *Economic Impact of the Volunteer Fire Service Project*. National Volunteer Fire Council Foundation, Washington, DC, May 2004.

⁴ *U.S. Fire Department Profile Through 2006*. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA, November, 2007.

Retention and Recruitment Root Causes ⁵

| Sources Of Challenge | Contributing Factors |
|--|---|
| Time Demands | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the two-income family and working multiple jobs• increased training time demands• higher emergency call volume• additional demands within department (fundraising, administrative) |
| Training Requirements | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• higher training standards and new federal requirements• more time demands• greater public expectation of fire department's response capabilities (broader range of services such as EMS, Hazmat, technical rescue, etc.)• additional training demands to provide broader range of services• recertification demands |
| Increasing Call Volume | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• fire department assuming wider response roles (EMS, Hazmat, technical rescue)• increasing emergency medical call volume• increase in number of automatic fire alarms |
| Changes In The "Nature Of The Business" | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• abuse of emergency services by the public• less of an emphasis on social aspects of volunteering |
| Changes In Sociological Conditions (In Urban And Suburban Areas) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• transience• loss of community feeling• less community pride• less of an interest or time for volunteering• two-income family and time demands• "me" generation |
| Changes In Sociological Conditions (In Rural Areas) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• employers less willing to let employees off to run calls• time demand• "me" generation |
| Leadership Problems | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• poor leadership and lack of coordination• authoritative management style• failure to manage change |
| Federal Legislation And Regulations | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fair Labor Standards Act interpretation• "2 in, 2 out" ruling requiring four firefighters on scene before entering hazardous environment• Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) live-fire burn limitations |
| Increasing Use Of Combination Departments | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• disagreements among chiefs or other department leaders• friction between volunteer and career members |
| Higher Cost Of Housing (In Affluent Communities) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• volunteers cannot afford to live in the community they serve |
| Aging Communities | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• greater number of older people today• lack of economic growth and jobs in some towns |
| Internal Conflict | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• disagreements among departmental leaders• friction between volunteer and career members |

⁵ *Retention & Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services: Challenges & Solutions*. National Volunteer Fire Council and United States Fire Administration (FA-310), May 2007.

• **Fire department call volumes continue to increase.**⁶

Most fire departments across the country have experienced a steady increase in calls over the past decade. This is a major source of the increased time demands on volunteer firefighters. The increase in calls, coupled with the decline in the number of volunteer firefighters, means that fire departments have to do more with less. Most of the increase is attributed to a sharp increase in the number of emergency medical calls and false alarms. The number of fire calls has actually declined over the period.

| Year | Total |
|------|------------|
| 1986 | 11,890,000 |
| 1987 | 12,237,500 |
| 1988 | 13,308,000 |
| 1989 | 13,409,500 |
| 1990 | 13,707,500 |
| 1991 | 14,556,500 |
| 1992 | 14,684,500 |
| 1993 | 15,318,500 |
| 1994 | 16,127,000 |
| 1995 | 16,391,500 |
| 1996 | 17,503,000 |
| 1997 | 17,957,500 |
| 1998 | 18,753,000 |
| 1999 | 19,667,000 |
| 2000 | 20,520,000 |
| 2001 | 20,965,500 |
| 2002 | 21,303,500 |
| 2003 | 22,406,000 |
| 2004 | 22,616,500 |
| 2005 | 23,251,500 |
| 2006 | 24,470,000 |

• **Small and mid-sized communities rely heavily on volunteer firefighters.**⁷

Small communities (those with populations under 10,000) across the United States are typically protected by all volunteer departments. In some cases, however, these communities have hired a few paid firefighters to assist. Mid-sized communities (those with populations above 10,000) are typically served by combination volunteer and paid departments. Large communities (those with populations over 100,000) are most often protected by combination volunteer and paid departments that consist of primarily paid staff. There are very few purely paid fire departments in the United States, but those that exist are primarily found in very urban areas.

Volunteer and Paid Firefighters in the U.S. by Population Protected, 2006

| Population Protected | Career | Volunteer | Total |
|----------------------|---------|-----------|-----------|
| 1,000,000 or more | 39,800 | 500 | 40,300 |
| 500,000 to 999,999 | 30,850 | 6,400 | 37,250 |
| 250,000 to 499,999 | 24,850 | 3,950 | 28,800 |
| 100,000 to 249,999 | 46,500 | 2,350 | 48,850 |
| 50,000 to 99,999 | 44,800 | 7,100 | 51,900 |
| 25,000 to 49,999 | 49,100 | 21,950 | 71,050 |
| 10,000 to 24,999 | 46,150 | 84,950 | 131,100 |
| 5,000 to 9,999 | 17,750 | 112,400 | 130,150 |
| 2,500 to 4,999 | 10,300 | 159,200 | 169,500 |
| under 2,500 | 6,850 | 425,150 | 432,000 |
| | 316,950 | 823,950 | 1,140,900 |

⁶ *Fire Department Calls*, National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA, 2008

⁷ *U.S. Fire Department Profile Through 2006*. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA, November, 2007

• **68 of the 118 firefighters who died in the line of duty in 2007 were volunteers.**⁸

The leading cause of death for on-duty firefighters was stress/overexertion, resulting in 55 deaths. Of these, 52 were caused by heart attack. The second leading cause of death was vehicle crashes, claiming 27 firefighters.

The NVFC has embarked on an aggressive campaign to reverse the trend of firefighter deaths by heart attack. The NVFC Heart-Healthy Firefighter Program is the nation's only heart attack awareness campaign targeted at all fire and emergency medical personnel, both volunteer and career. The Program's components include a trade show booth that provides free screenings to emergency personnel for heart disease risk factors such as cholesterol, blood pressure, and body composition, as well as healthy cooking demonstrations; the *Heart-Healthy Firefighter Resource Guide*; a *Cookbook*; a monthly e-newsletter; a bi-monthly printed newsletter; and much more. Visit the Program's web site at www.healthy-firefighter.org. The Heart-Healthy Firefighter Program is a collaboration of the NVFC and the Department of Homeland Security.

Starting in August 2007, the NVFC also sponsors an annual National Firefighter Health Week to focus attention on a broad range of firefighter health issues.

• **Volunteer firefighters and emergency medical technicians across the country meet national and/or state training standards.**

Each state adopts its own training requirements that apply to volunteer firefighters. Many states require that volunteers meet the National Fire Protection Association's *Standard 1001: Firefighter Professional Qualifications*. This establishes a very rigorous course of classroom and practical evolutions for basic training. This same standard is commonly used to train paid firefighters. Likewise, volunteer emergency medical responders are trained to the national training criteria established by the U.S. Department of Transportation and other standards setting bodies.

• **Volunteers invest a large amount of time serving their communities.**

There is no national average of the amount of time a volunteer firefighter gives to his or her community. Volunteering in the fire and EMS service, however, is one of the most demanding volunteer activities today. Time commitments include operational responses (often at a moment's notice), training, fundraising, vehicle and station maintenance, and various administrative duties.

• **The cost to train and equip a firefighter is approximately \$27,095.**

Below are average expenses associated with firefighting:

| | | | |
|---------|----------|-----------------|---------|
| Helmet: | \$ 225 | Gloves: | \$ 95 |
| Coat: | \$ 1,200 | SCBA: | \$4,300 |
| Pants: | \$ 900 | Radio: | \$3,700 |
| Boots: | \$ 235 | Thermal Imager: | \$8,600 |
| Hood: | \$ 40 | Training: | \$7,800 |

⁸ *Firefighter Fatalities in the United States in 2007*, U.S. Fire Administration, Emmitsburg, MD, June 2008.

- **Firefighting and emergency medical equipment is very expensive.**

The cost of firefighting equipment is listed below. Equipment can range in cost depending on features and specifications.

Fire pumper: \$150,000 - \$400,000

Ladder truck: \$400,000 - \$750,000

Ambulance: \$80,000 - \$150,000

Advanced life support medical equipment: \$10,000 - \$30,000

- **The U.S. has one of the highest fire death rates in the industrialized world, with 12.4 deaths per million population in 2005.⁹ In 2007:**

- Fire killed more Americans than all natural disasters combined.
- There were 3,430 civilians that lost their lives as the result of fire.
- 84 percent of all civilian fire deaths occurred in residences.
- There were an estimated 1.6 million fires.
- Direct property loss due to fires was estimated at \$14.6 billion.¹⁰

⁹ *Survey of Fire Departments for 2005 U.S. Fire Experience*. National Fire Protection Association.

¹⁰ *The Overall Fire Picture – 2007*, U.S. Fire Administration web site.