

# White Paper on Volunteer Firefighter Training

By The National Volunteer Fire Council

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## Introduction

In 2008, the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) adopted a policy position that all volunteer fire departments should establish a goal to train all personnel to a level consistent with the mission of the fire department, based on the job performance requirements outlined in *NFPA 1001: Standard for Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications*. The NVFC is committed to ensuring that volunteer firefighters have an appropriate level of training to safely and effectively carry out the functions of the department(s) that they belong to.

The roles and responsibilities of the fire service have evolved over the years. As the breadth and scope of what it means to be a firefighter has expanded, to varying degrees depending on the jurisdiction, the necessity for training within the fire service has grown. Unfortunately, a large number of volunteer fire departments are still operating with personnel who are not trained to a level consistent with national consensus standards for basic firefighter preparedness. This can lead to ineffective and unsafe responses that put lives and property at risk.

As the need for proper training has become more urgent, many volunteer fire departments are finding it increasingly difficult to attract new members. The average age of volunteer firefighters has risen steadily over the past two decades, as many young people move out of rural areas and the ones who stay find themselves with less free time to devote to training.

The NVFC has identified three broad areas that constitute major challenges for volunteer fire departments with regard to training personnel:

**Time Constraints** – Americans in general, but particularly residents of rural communities, are spending more time commuting to and from work. Labor force participation among adults has been rising steadily since 1950. As individuals find themselves with less free time available, devoting their nights and weekends to obtaining firefighter training and certification is becoming increasingly difficult. Training and certification delivery methods must be calibrated to minimize the time demands that they place on volunteer firefighters.

**Resource Constraints** – Volunteer fire departments are often located in communities that have small tax bases and/or high poverty rates. According to *Four Years Later – A Second Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service*, a cooperative study published in 2006 that was produced by the United States Fire Administration (USFA), Directorate of Preparedness, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), shows that volunteer fire departments tend to have older equipment and apparatus, are unlikely to have a budget for apparatus replacement, and generally depend on private donations to balance their operating budgets. Expanding the availability of low- and no-cost training opportunities for volunteer firefighters is essential.

**Leadership** – The individuals comprising the leadership in many volunteer fire departments came up in the fire service during a time when most training was performed informally within the fire department. Drawing on decades of experience, many of these individuals view the modern training standards and requirements as unnecessary. Gaining the buy-in of volunteer fire chiefs and officers regarding the importance of training and certification is critical.

## The Value of Training

The role of the fire service has evolved over the years to encompass far more than traditional fire suppression. Fire suppression itself has become a more multi-faceted undertaking, as improvements in technology have revolutionized the way that firefighters attack a working fire. As the breadth and scope of what it means to be a firefighter has expanded, the necessity for training within the fire service has grown. Untrained firefighters responding to emergencies can be unsafe, dangerous, and inefficient.

According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), an estimated 233,000 firefighters, most of them volunteers serving in rural communities, are involved in structural firefighting without having sufficient or formal training in that capacity. Twenty-seven percent of fire department personnel delivering emergency medical services in rural areas lack formal training. The figure rises to 40 percent when examining the number of responders insufficiently trained to respond to a hazardous materials incident.

While the mission of fire departments is influenced by various factors, including the size, geographic location, and population served, it is essential that all members responding to emergencies be trained to safely and effectively carry out the mission of the department. Training helps to reinforce proper techniques and practices and leads to better decision-making on the job. Not only is the on-scene firefighter safer when properly trained, but the department as a whole benefits by improved operations, positive public relations, and higher morale.<sup>1</sup>

Insufficient training can have negative economic impacts as well, both on the department and the community. Liability issues can be a serious problem for departments. A lack of training could be perceived as negligence. In 1989, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *City of Canton v. Harris* that a city can be held liable for failing to properly train its employees. In Canada that same year, firefighters in the Province of Quebec were found liable for damages caused by the negligence of its firefighters. An inclusive training program is essential in protecting a department from potential litigation.<sup>2</sup> Firefighter injury or death can also create an economic burden for departments and communities. Jurisdictions are expected to absorb the direct costs resulting from the death or injury of a firefighter. These costs include: loss of work time; higher insurance premiums; disability payments; and the cost of training replacement personnel. One study conducted by the TriData Corporation estimates that \$2.8 to \$7.8 billion is spent per year addressing firefighter injuries and efforts to prevent them.<sup>3</sup>

## Time Constraints

According to the United States Census, the population in rural areas, where most volunteer fire departments are located, is aging as young people move to suburban or urban areas, in many

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, James P. "Benefits of Training," *Firehouse*. April 1996, Volume 21, Number 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ross, David. "Training to Decrease Liability" *Health and Safety for Fire and Emergency Service Personnel*. July 1992, Volume 3, Number 7.

<sup>3</sup> TriData Corporation. *The Economic Consequences of Firefighter Injuries and Their Prevention*. United States Department of Commerce. August 2004.

cases to obtain employment. The impact of this geographical shift is reflected in statistics compiled in the National Fire Protection Association's annual *United States Fire Department Profile*:

#### **Age Profile of Firefighters by Size of Community, 1987**

Size of Community	Percent Fire Fighters under Age 30	Percent Fire Fighters Age 30-39	Percent Fire Fighters Age 40-49	Percent Fire Fighters Age 50 and up	Total
Mostly Volunteer Firefighters					
10,000 to 24,999	33.0%	33.8%	20.6%	12.6%	100.0%
5,000 to 9,999	35.8	32.4	19.1	12.7	100.0
2,500 to 4,999	34.6	32.5	19.3	13.6	100.0
Under 2,500	29.7	33.5	20.9	15.9	100.0

*Source: NFPA Survey of Fire Departments for U.S. Fire Experience, 1987.*

#### **Age Profile of Firefighters by Size of Community, 2005**

Size of Community	Percent Firefighters under Age 30	Percent Firefighters Age 30-39	Percent Firefighters Age 40-49	Percent Firefighters Age 50 and up	Total
Mostly Volunteer Firefighters					
10,000 to 24,999	28.4%	31.2%	25.1%	16.3%	100.0%
5,000 to 9,999	31.0	29.4	22.5	17.1	100.0
2,500 to 4,999	29.5	28.4	23.1	19.0	100.0
Under 2,500	25.9	25.8	24.8	23.5	100.0

*Source: NFPA Survey of Fire Departments for U.S. Fire Experience, 2005.*

The average age of volunteer firefighters is increasing in all community sizes that are protected mostly by volunteer firefighters. In communities of less than 2,500, which tend to be the most rural and are almost exclusively protected by volunteer fire departments, nearly 50 percent of firefighters are 40 or older, compared with less than 37 percent that were 40 or older in 1987.

One of the major challenges that volunteer fire departments face in implementing training programs that are based on national consensus standards is the time constraints of their members. As training standards have evolved over the years to require more information and additional competencies, curriculum developed by national and state training organizations has become more time consuming to complete. Upon completion of the requisite training, additional time is spent being tested for the purpose of acquiring certification and, periodically thereafter, re-certification.

Even as the time commitment for training has increased, the number of individuals with time available to become the next generation of volunteer firefighters is shrinking. Most volunteer firefighters have full-time jobs outside of the fire service, which means that they can only train on nights and weekends. According to the United States Census, between the 1980 and 2000, Americans spent 17.5 percent more time commuting to and from work. The percentage of adults in the labor force has increased from 55 percent in 1950 to 62 percent in 1990 and was over 66

percent as of 2005. To the extent possible, training opportunities need to be made available locally at convenient times or electronically to reduce or eliminate the time that volunteers spend traveling.

State training agencies are a critical resource for developing and delivering training to volunteer fire departments. Many states have regional training facilities located in or near rural areas. The Maryland Fire and Rescue Institute (MFRI), for instance, maintains six regional training facilities which each provides courses, seminars, and field program services to between three to six counties. MFRI's regional training facilities offer training and certification services on-site and locally throughout the regions that they serve.

Courses developed by state training agencies and the National Fire Academy (NFA) are often offered locally at county fire training facilities or community colleges. County governments and community colleges are essential components of training and certification delivery to volunteer fire departments because they are fixtures in communities across the country, even in areas where regional state training facilities are not present or accessible. Train-the-trainer programs teach fire service instructors about course materials and methods of delivery. Upon completion of these workshops, instructors return to their local jurisdictions with a complete course package and can train other instructors as well as end-users.

Over the past decade, distance learning tools in the form of online course offerings have become important mechanisms for delivering training to volunteer fire departments. Through online courses, a large portion of the material that in the past was only disseminated in a classroom setting can be accessed by volunteer firefighters at their departments or even in the comfort of their homes. Online courses allow volunteer firefighters to train in their spare time and reduce the need for travel.

## **Resources**

National needs assessments have shown that many volunteer fire departments struggle to purchase up-to-date equipment and training for their personnel. Without low- to no-cost training options, many volunteer fire departments may view training their personnel to a baseline level consistent with national consensus standards as an unobtainable goal.

There are steps that volunteer fire departments can take to reduce the cost of training. Just as many departments make use of mutual aid systems for emergency response, departments can pool resources with other local departments to purchase training. By sharing the overhead costs of putting on a training event, departments can reduce their overall per-person training cost.

Departments should also be aware that there are significant resources available at the federal, state, and local level as well as from various non-governmental organizations to defray or fully cover training costs. Volunteer fire departments should work closely with their county and state fire training agencies to identify low- and no-cost training options.

The most significant source of federal funding for training volunteer firefighters is through the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program, a competitive grant program that awards funding directly to fire departments. Although most AFG applications are for equipment and apparatus, the grant criteria requires departments to adopt a plan to train their personnel to a level consistent with NFPA 1001 in order to be eligible to receive funding. Directly or indirectly, AFG funds are prompting many volunteer fire departments to pursue additional training for their personnel.

While governmental and non-governmental training and certification resources available for training firefighters are substantial, there are a number of steps that could be taken to enhance the value of these resources for volunteer fire departments.

Many states require separate instructors for administering courses and testing/certification. This can be problematic in rural areas where there is a shortage of instructors. Eliminating the requirement that separate instructors be used for teaching and testing/certification would make it much easier for volunteer firefighters to access training based on national consensus standards.

Federal funds for training first responders are often spent on contractors or directed to state emergency management offices rather than being distributed to state fire training agencies, which have a proven track record of successfully delivering services to volunteer fire departments. In delivering National Incident Management System (NIMS) training, DHS has tended to pursue strategies for bringing together large groups of emergency responders at one time, including holding training on weekdays at centralized locations near transportation hubs, reimbursing for travel expenses, and paying for backfill. This approach ignores the needs of the volunteer personnel, who would have to take time off of work and travel significant distances in order to participate.

In recent years, the extent of federal assistance to state fire training agencies has been \$24,000 annually, provided through NFA. State fire training agencies are not eligible to compete for funds under AFG or other federal programs that pay for firefighter training. Increasing assistance to state fire training agencies would be the single most effective way to encourage additional training of volunteer firefighters.

## **Leadership**

As much as national and state organizations work to promote the adoption of training standards, volunteer fire departments are operated and controlled locally. The leadership within those departments has significant influence in determining the level of training that will ultimately be required. Volunteer firefighters are rightfully proud of their departments' history of service and tend to resist outside efforts to impose changes on their operations. Without the buy-in of the leadership in individual volunteer fire departments, efforts to encourage increased adoption of training standards are likely to be unsuccessful.

In the past, the majority if not all training for volunteer firefighters was provided informally by the local fire department. Many of today's volunteer fire chiefs and officers got their start in the fire service when this approach to firefighter training was prevalent. Some volunteer fire chiefs and officers view modern training standards as unnecessary for their department and resent being asked to obtain formal certification to perform duties that they have been successfully carrying out for decades. Others are concerned that they won't be able to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters if they increase training requirements – particularly in departments that may only respond to a handful of fire calls per year.

In order to implement a new training regimen, the leadership of the fire department needs to feel that the additional training is not only necessary but something that they can afford and can reasonably expect their personnel to undertake. Time constraints and resources play a big role here.

How accessible are available training and certification options? If training can't be offered at the department, what sort of travel is required and when is the training offered? If a volunteer fire chief doesn't feel justified in asking personnel to commit the time necessary to obtain additional training, they will be reluctant to implement a training program, even if they are convinced that the additional training is important.

What will be the cost to the department, not only to obtain the initial training and certification but in the future, for new recruits and maintenance training and re-certification of all personnel? Will personnel end up bearing any of the costs of additional training themselves? Is the department devoting resources that would have been earmarked for equipment and apparatus replacement in order to pay for new training? Volunteer fire departments regularly make due with what they have instead of worrying about what they don't have. Volunteer fire chiefs are unlikely to implement additional training requirements if the financial costs are too significant.

Even if time and resource constraints are not significant impediments to adopting training consistent with national consensus standards, volunteer fire chiefs need to be made aware of training resources that are available to them. Government agencies and non-government organizations that provide training should consider targeting volunteer fire departments in future marketing efforts. Chief-to-chief outreach networks can spread the word about training opportunities as well as provide peer support to volunteer fire chiefs that are considering adopting a new training program. Leadership training can be an extremely useful tool in helping volunteer fire chiefs devise and implement a training program in their department.

## **Conclusion**

As the breadth and scope of what it means to be a firefighter has expanded, the necessity for training within the fire service has grown. Widespread adoption of standardized training by fire departments has led to significant increases in the safe operations and effectiveness of the fire service generally.

Despite the considerable progress that has been made, many volunteer fire departments continue to face serious challenges in implementing training programs consistent with national consensus standards. This can lead to ineffective and unsafe responses that put lives and property at risk. With the average age of volunteer firefighters rising steadily over the past two decades, the importance of adopting successful strategies to train the next generation of volunteer firefighters is clear.

For a variety of cultural reasons, prospective volunteer firefighters have less time to devote to training than they used to even as training standards have evolved over the years to include more information and competencies. In order to make widespread adoption of training standards a viable option for a number of volunteer fire departments, training and certification opportunities must be made available locally and online. Regional and state training facilities, county training facilities, and local colleges all play an important role in delivering training and certification services that are accessible to volunteers.

Volunteer fire departments are prevalent in communities with small tax bases and high poverty rates. Low- to no-cost training options are a necessity if volunteer fire departments are to adopt more rigorous training regimens. Volunteer fire departments can pool resources with other local departments to bring down per-firefighter training costs. There are significant existing resources available to volunteer fire departments in many areas of the country already, including through

DHS' AFG program. However, DHS should do a better job of making fire service training resources accessible to volunteers, potentially by partnering with state training agencies.

The leadership in some volunteer fire departments is resistant to adopting training standards. Many volunteer fire chiefs view training standards as unnecessary while others are concerned about the reaction of their firefighters if asked to spend more of their free time training. Government agencies and non-government organizations that provide training should consider targeting volunteer fire departments in future marketing efforts. Chief-to-chief outreach networks can spread the word about training opportunities as well as provide peer support to volunteer fire chiefs that are considering adopting a new training program. Leadership training can be an extremely useful tool in helping volunteer fire chiefs devise and implement a training program in their department.

Volunteer fire chiefs that are interested in implementing a training program based on national consensus standards, but concerned about where they can obtain training or how they will pay for it, should work closely with their state and county training agency to learn about all of the resources available to them. Volunteer firefighters and fire chiefs can also contact the NVFC to learn about additional existing training resources that they can take advantage of.