

# Volunteer Retention Research Report

Prepared for National Volunteer Fire Council



**August 2020**  
Marketing for Change

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## RESEARCH GOALS

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The specific goals of this research included:

- **Understanding the institutional drivers of why volunteers leave the fire service** in order to develop targeted strategies aimed at stabilizing and increasing retention. This entailed building a more robust understanding of:
  - the differences between firefighters who stay and those who leave
  - how those insights can be used to extend length of service in the volunteer sector
  
- **Developing a stable, repeatable measure of retention rates across the volunteer fire service.**
  - This included the development of a scale that is meaningful to a range of industry stakeholders and can be used to track progress of retention efforts over time. This work will result in a concise series of questions and analysis procedures that NVFC can regularly implement, perhaps in partnership with the NFPA's Fire Department Profile survey.

## METHODOLOGY

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This research study unfolded over three phases:

**The initial phase of research** included interviews with current and former volunteer firefighters (N=20) as well as department leadership in the fire service (N=7). Participants were identified by NVFC and through an online recruiting screener that was distributed by the NVFC team and key committee members. The purpose of the leadership interviews was to discuss their perceptions of what's working and what's not as well as how they measured retention. For the volunteer interviews, the purpose was to understand reasons for staying and leaving the service, with an emphasis on developing a hypothesis about programs to improve retention to test further.

**The second phase** included a synthesis session with the NVFC's SAFER Work Group to share and prioritize findings and implications from the interviews and develop content for the follow-up survey.

**The last phase** was a quantitative survey of current and former volunteers, as well as current department leadership. The survey was fielded between April 10 and May 11, 2020 and broadly distributed through NVFC's email list, social media, and partners organizations. Respondents included a total of 1,030 volunteers, including current (N=922) and former (N=108) members.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Magnitude of the Retention Issue

Results from the survey of current and former members show that over two thirds of respondents feel their departments have (or had) a problem with volunteer retention. This includes nearly 70% of current department leadership.

Additionally, nearly half of all current volunteers have considered leaving the fire service at some point.

### Reasons for Leaving

Former volunteers cited a lack of department cohesion and unsupportive leadership as their main reasons for leaving the service in the survey, which reinforces feedback received in the qualitative phase of research. The specific reasons for leaving most selected by former volunteers in the survey were:

- Department atmosphere full of cliques and groups that exclude others
- Department leadership that doesn't focus on or support the needs of members
- Department atmosphere where members of different generations don't get along
- Lack of camaraderie or sense of community among everyone in the department

Notably, the survey revealed current volunteers have a mostly different list of top reasons for why they think volunteers leave, focusing more on unclear expectations and how volunteering fits in with the rest of an individual's life. The top reasons cited by current volunteers were:

- Lack of support and flexibility in juggling volunteer responsibilities with other life commitments
- The realities of volunteering changed or didn't meet the expectations that were set before signing up
- Lack of clear expectations of how much time and effort will be required each week or month for meetings and trainings
- Department atmosphere full of cliques and groups that exclude others

It's worth noting that on the two most frequently mentioned reasons for leaving among former volunteers – department cliques and leadership that doesn't focus enough on member needs – there are significant differences between how big an issue these are among current volunteers and current leadership; current non-leaders are much more likely to cite them compared to leadership.

On the other hand, department leadership were much more likely to think juggling volunteering responsibilities was a problem than non-leadership and former volunteers.

This could be reflective of a disconnect between both the experiences of current and former members, as well as between leadership and rank-and-file members.

Members who considered leaving but didn't were bothered by leadership, cliques, and training requirements, but ultimately their desire to serve the community and sense of responsibility kept them at their departments.

	What do you think are the three biggest reasons that volunteers have left or would consider leaving your department?			What were the three biggest reasons that you stopped volunteering?
	CURRENT VOLUNTEERS			
	ALL Current Volunteers	Current Leadership	Current Non-Leadership	Former Volunteers
<i>SAMPLE SIZE</i>	922	445	477	108
Lack of support and flexibility in juggling volunteer responsibilities with other life commitments	37%	<b>41%</b>	<b>33%</b>	8%
The realities of volunteering changed or didn't meet the expectations that were set before signing up	30%	31%	29%	4%
Lack of clear expectations of how much time and effort will be required each week or month for meetings and trainings	28%	31%	26%	9%
Department atmosphere full of cliques and groups that exclude others	25%	<b>20%</b>	<b>30%</b>	22%
Lack of camaraderie or sense of community among everyone in the department	20%	18%	21%	13%
Lack of flexibility in training requirements and schedules	20%	20%	19%	7%
Lack of social life within the department, where members train and go on calls, but don't spend time together otherwise	19%	19%	18%	8%
Department leadership that doesn't focus on or support the needs of members	17%	<b>13%</b>	<b>21%</b>	18%
Department atmosphere where members of different generations don't get along	16%	15%	17%	14%

Bolded numbers indicate significant differences between current leadership and non-leadership.

## Positive Factors Impacting Retention

For all current volunteers combined – both leadership and non-leadership – a mentorship program between new volunteers and more experienced members was the top choice for having a positive impact on retention. This reinforced what we heard in the qualitative responses on why volunteers leave, as new recruits who feel isolated and were not a part of any group were frequently cited as much more likely to leave.

For former volunteers, the top choice for what could have had a positive impact on retention was conducting exit interviews when a volunteer leaves the department. The lack of this exit interview could be reinforcing their perception that leadership isn't concerned with the needs of members. Their second highest rated choice was conducting stay interviews with volunteers who have lapsed attendance and may be considering leaving the department.

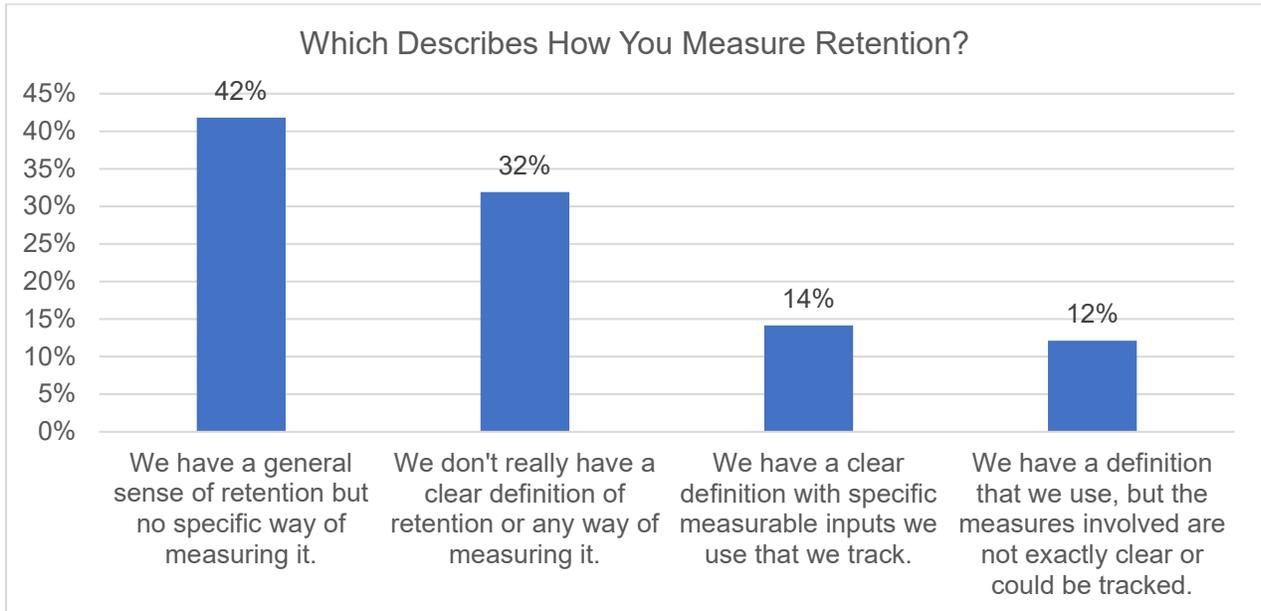
	Which, if any, of these do you think could have (have had) a positive impact on retention at your department (most recent department)?			
	CURRENT VOLUNTEERS			
	ALL Current Volunteers	Current Leadership	Current Non-Leadership	Former Volunteers
<i>SAMPLE SIZE</i>	922	445	477	108
A mentorship program that pairs new volunteers with more experienced members	61%	<b>60%</b>	62%	<b>42%</b>
Giving out awards or honors when members reach service milestones (1 year, 5 years, 10 years, etc.) and/or superlatives at the end of the year	58%	<b>61%</b>	54%	<b>44%</b>
Conduct stay interviews with volunteers who have lapsed attendance and may be considering leaving the department	56%	54%	58%	53%
Conduct exit interviews when a volunteer leaves the department	50%	49%	51%	57%
Providing new volunteers with advice on how to fit volunteering into the rest of their life	52%	<b>56%</b>	47%	<b>29%</b>

Bolded numbers indicate significant differences between current leadership and former volunteers.

Also, note in the above table the discrepancy on “providing new volunteers with advice on how to fit volunteering into the rest of their life” between current leadership and former volunteers. In the previous table, leadership had also cited “lack of support and flexibility in juggling volunteer responsibilities with other life commitments” as the top reason they think volunteers leave. There seems to be a gap between the importance leadership places on this versus former volunteers.

## Measuring Retention

Reflecting what we saw in the qualitative phase of research, the survey showed that a majority of leadership do not have clear definitions of retention or approaches for measuring it.



Having said that, when asked to assess a suite of potential tools aimed specifically at leadership, respondents ranked having a standard definition of recruitment and retention first, so there is a desire for one.

When prompted with an example way of measuring retention – dividing the number of members at the end of the year by the number of members at the beginning – a majority of leaders felt that calculation would be easy to use, but needed to incorporate other dimensions such as whether a member is active and tenure to be more accurate. Some leaders also felt that since every department's situation is unique to the area they're in, it would be challenging to develop a universal definition that would be meaningful to all.

## Implications and Recommendations

- While flexibility in training requirements and volunteering schedules remain important factors in retention, these data indicate that department leadership and culture are at least as, if not more, influential when it comes to volunteers choosing to leave the service.
- These findings provide guidance on a number of initiatives NVFC could spearhead, specifically:
  - Mentorship programs
  - Recognition efforts

- Touchpoints/interventions such as the stay and exit interviews
- Volunteer engagement kits
- The development of a foundational – if imperfect – retention measure as a starting point to establish the norm, such as this one suggested by a respondent: *The number of active firefighters at end of year divided by the number of active firefighters at beginning of year, plus new volunteers added during year.*

## FINDINGS FROM THE QUANTITATIVE SURVEY WITH CURRENT AND FORMER MEMBERS

Overall, more than 6 out of 10 respondents think their current or former departments have a retention problem, including nearly 7 out of 10 current leadership. [For purposes of the survey, leadership was defined as the following positions: Chief, Assistant Chief, Battalion Chief, Captain, President, or Fire Marshal.]

	In your opinion, do you think your department has a problem with retention?			In your opinion, do you think your most recent department had a problem with retention?
	CURRENT VOLUNTEERS			
	ALL Current Volunteers	Current Leadership	Current Non-Leadership	Former Volunteers
<i>SAMPLE SIZE</i>	922	445	477	108
<b>Yes</b>	64%	68%	61%	63%
No	35%	32%	39%	37%

Almost half [47%] of all current volunteers said they have thought about no longer volunteering at their department.

	Have you ever considered no longer volunteering at the department?		
	CURRENT VOLUNTEERS		
	ALL Current Volunteers	Current Leadership	Current Non-Leadership
<i>SAMPLE SIZE</i>	922	445	477
<b>Yes</b>	47%	47%	47%
No	53%	53%	53%

## **Reasons for Considering Leaving**

In an open-ended question, it was reported that problems stemming from leadership was one of the most common reasons for volunteers thinking about leaving their department. Many cited the “old school” mindset as an issue with their leadership – an unwillingness to adapt to the times, listen to new ideas, and poor treatment of the volunteers who don’t conform to their norm.

***“Because the volunteers are treated like second class citizens. The volunteers are treated like they are just disposable assets.”***

***“Don’t find that my dept is working towards the future. It’s pretty much been stuck in the 1990s for the past 30 years.”***

***“Fire Chief is not trained to state best practices, or to a standard, nor are any chief officers required to have any training.”***

***“Plainly said, the good old boys club is the problem.”***

Favoritism in leadership and cliques were also frequently mentioned in regard to poor leadership and were a contributing factor to many volunteers leaving. The favoritism can lead to bitterness – not everyone at the department is held to the same standards. The cliques cause isolation for those not included, which causes new recruits to leave and creates silos that lead to poor collaboration and camaraderie among members.

***“Department is very cliquey and only those who conform to the clique survive, the majority of members do not and a typical new member lasts no more than a year or two.”***

***“Lack of respect for the members who do the bulk of the call response, and favoritism towards the boys who grew up local. It’s very demoralizing to run rescue calls all week then get bumped from a fire apparatus by a member who runs in just for the fire call. Despite a requirement for members to make 10% of calls, these local boys have not met their 10% for years but there are no consequences for them. It makes those of us doing the bulk of the calls feel disrespected and unsupported.”***

***“A lot of silos built in the department and groups of people who team together to obtain power of the department.”***

The time commitment of being a volunteer was cited as another big factor in why volunteers decide to leave as it can be very taxing to a volunteer juggling a full-time job and/or a family. Training was at the top of the list for why the time commitment of being a volunteer is so demanding. While the volunteers recognized the importance of training, many spoke to the inflexibility of training times offered. Others spoke of the

frustration of having to attend more than the “essential” amount of training necessary to do their job as a volunteer. Some believe any training not deemed “essential” should be an option for more engaged volunteers.

Other reasons cited for considering leaving their department were age, emotional burnout, depression, and personal conflicts within the department, sometimes between the paid/career side and volunteer.

### **What Could Have Kept the Former Volunteers from Leaving**

In an open-ended question, former volunteers cited many of the same reasons as things that would have had to have changed in order for them to stay on, namely:

- More appreciative, fair leadership
- More flexible training and staffing requirements
- Less cliques and better department interactions

***“Lighten up the government-mandated training requirements.”***

***“Nothing [could have made them stay] the upper management is all about cliques versus what you can bring to the table.”***

***“The Fire Chief needed to be a leader and stop being a politician, internally and externally. We had older FFs and Officers putting down the new generations and crippling our retention efforts. Chief did nothing to fix it, too worried about re-election!”***

***“Respect, more appreciation, leadership who cares about individuals.”***

***“Wellness contacts. Know your people and be available for them and their families if needed. Leaders should always keep in contact if a member is away for an extended amount of time. More structure so everyone knows their place and can function appropriately when the need arises. More mentorship involvement and leadership development. Assign relevant tasks with clear and timely goals, focusing on mentorship and leadership. By all means reward accomplishment. Create more social activities to include member families.”***

***“Development of an Auxiliary firefighter program that did not require 24/7 response to emergency calls.”***

***“Improved morale within the department. It became more of a popularity contest and members treated it as a social club rather than taking it seriously. Members who pursued further training and improving their skills were ridiculed and voted out of the department.”***

***“Stop the good old boy system. I was tired of having to do everything and then told I was wrong. I went to over 300 hours of training every year. I [was] always told that most of the training was dumb and we won’t do that.”***

***“My station required a minimum 12 consecutive hour shift per week. Same night every week. i.e. - Monday crew, etc. Difficult for people with shift work jobs to commit to always working the same duty night each week. In some cases, it makes sense to work with trained committed members to stay on rather than hold to rigid policies.”***

### **Reasons for Staying**

For current volunteers who considered leaving but did not, their reasons for staying were less diffuse and generally came back to the original reasons they began volunteering – their desire to give back to the community and help people. They spoke of honor, not wanting to leave the community in need, a desire to help mentor younger firefighters, and to try to bring about departmental change from within.

***“Well, if the old guys quit there will be no one to respond.”***

***“Will serve the community regardless of bad leaders.”***

***“Love helping people.”***

***“Too many young members that don’t know what they are doing.”***

***“I went on a call and remembered why I was here!”***

***“Still enjoy it, still active, like to teach the young new ones.”***

***“I have to remember that I do this because I love it and I’m here for my community.”***

***“Committed to Community. Didn’t volunteer due to leaders.”***

***“I am still volunteering so department won’t fail.”***

### **Reasons for Leaving**

We asked current members what they think the three main reasons are that cause volunteers to leave the force. We also asked former volunteers what their three main reasons were for leaving the department. We saw some notable differences between former and current volunteers, as well as between current leadership and non-leadership.

Current volunteers' top three reasons were:

- Lack of support and flexibility in juggling volunteer responsibilities with other life commitments
- The realities of volunteering changed or didn't meet the expectations that were set before signing up
- Lack of clear expectations of how much time and effort will be required each week or month for meetings and trainings

These were relatively lower in the list for former volunteers, who cited their top reasons as:

- Department atmosphere full of cliques and groups that exclude others
- Department leadership that doesn't focus on or support the needs of members
- Department atmosphere where members of different generations don't get along

It is worth noting that current non-leadership also cited two of the top reasons former members left – cliques and leadership that doesn't support members – much higher than current leadership.

	What do you think are the three biggest reasons that volunteers have left or would consider leaving your department?			What were the three biggest reasons that you stopped volunteering?
	CURRENT VOLUNTEERS			
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The realities of volunteering changed or didn't meet the expectations that were set before signing up	<b>30%</b>	31%	29%	<b>4%</b>
Lack of clear expectations of how much time and effort will be required each week or month for meetings and trainings	<b>28%</b>	31%	26%	<b>9%</b>
Department atmosphere full of cliques and groups that exclude others	25%	20%	30%	22%
Lack of camaraderie or sense of community among everyone in the department	<b>20%</b>	18%	21%	<b>13%</b>

Lack of flexibility in training requirements and schedules	<b>20%</b>	20%	19%	<b>7%</b>
Lack of social life within the department, where members train and go on calls, but don't spend time together otherwise	<b>19%</b>	19%	18%	<b>8%</b>
Department leadership that doesn't focus on or support the needs of members	17%	13%	21%	18%
Department atmosphere where members of different generations don't get along	16%	15%	17%	14%
Department culture that doesn't engage members outside of calls or training	16%	14%	17%	12%
Department leadership that is rigid and does not support or allow for new ideas and new leaders	15%	11%	19%	13%
Department culture that isolates new members	10%	7%	14%	6%
Lack of trust and cooperation between volunteer and career sides of the department	8%	5%	10%	9%
Department atmosphere that is too serious and not enough fun	6%	7%	6%	2%
Lack of support and professional development for volunteers who want to move to the career side	4%	3%	5%	5%

Bolded numbers indicate significant differences between current and former volunteers.

### **Positive Factors Impacting Retention**

When asked what initiatives or programs could have a positive impact on retention, current volunteers cited:

- A mentorship program that pairs new volunteers with more experienced members
- Giving out awards or honors when members reach service milestones (1 year, 5 years, 10 years, etc.) and/or superlatives at the end of the year
- Conducting stay interviews with volunteers who have lapsed attendance and may be considering leaving the department
- Conducting exit interviews when a volunteer leaves the department
- Providing new volunteers with advice on how to fit volunteering into the rest of their life

A mentorship program between new volunteers and more experienced members was the top choice among current volunteers for having a positive impact on retention. This would help address what we heard in the qualitative responses that new recruits who feel isolated and not a part of any group are much more likely to leave. This also could help address any generational tension in a department – which we know can cause issues with retention – by potentially forming bonds between younger and senior members.

	Which, if any, of these do you think could have (have had) a positive impact on retention at your department (most recent department)?			
	CURRENT VOLUNTEERS			Former Volunteers
	ALL Current Volunteers	Current Leadership	Current Non-Leadership	
<i>SAMPLE SIZE</i>	922	445	477	108
A mentorship program that pairs new volunteers with more experienced members	61%	60%	62%	42%
Giving out awards or honors when members reach service milestones (1 year, 5 years, 10 years, etc.) and/or superlatives at the end of the year	58%	61%	54%	44%
Conduct stay interviews with volunteers who have lapsed attendance and may be considering leaving the department	56%	54%	58%	53%
Conduct exit interviews when a volunteer leaves the department	50%	49%	51%	57%
Providing new volunteers with advice on how to fit volunteering into the rest of their life	52%	56%	47%	29%
Hold essential training sessions on multiple days	47%	48%	46%	45%
Offer online training for nonessential training	47%	48%	45%	44%
Allow and encourage new and younger members to own specific projects and tasks	47%	52%	42%	32%
Leadership providing a clearer understanding to new volunteers of the monthly time commitment, goals, and responsibilities that are expected so they're on the same page	46%	48%	44%	33%
Having department leadership actively participate in training to lead by example	38%	40%	35%	27%
Have department leadership hold more regular and personal check-ins with new volunteers	37%	39%	35%	30%
Offer micro-volunteer opportunities (1 day or 1 week a month) for those that are unable to commit to traditional volunteer time commitments	36%	35%	36%	29%

Build the essential training calendar around members with less flexibility in their schedule	33%	36%	30%	39%
Set up a comment box for anonymous feedback and/or create dedicated office hours to provide members a clear opportunity to express their opinions	33%	33%	32%	21%
Enrolling rising volunteers in an officer candidate course to gain leadership skills and training	31%	29%	32%	20%
Break up cliques and groups by assigning members to workgroups they wouldn't normally choose	27%	27%	27%	25%
Offer virtual reality training modules	26%	26%	26%	21%
Create a database of former volunteers to stay in touch with them and try and re-engage on future opportunities	25%	22%	29%	19%
Holding cross-generational training to help members and leaders of different ages better understand each other	25%	27%	24%	18%
Following a set of national leadership standards and core competencies	21%	22%	20%	25%
Leadership making it clear up front the minimum length of service they expect of new recruits	21%	22%	20%	12%
Immersive virtual reality/360-degree video of firefighting experiences as part of training modules and morale boosts	21%	20%	21%	10%
Make it easier to compare your department's retention rate and efforts with other departments	18%	17%	20%	16%
Create a Chief People Officer at the department who constantly takes the temperature of members' happiness and satisfaction	14%	12%	17%	15%
Holding joint trainings with career and volunteer staff	14%	13%	15%	16%
Providing department leadership with training focused on managing combination departments	13%	14%	12%	21%
Providing department leadership with sales and marketing training	12%	14%	9%	5%
Mentorships with career members for volunteers who are career-bound	11%	10%	11%	7%

## **Leadership Tools**

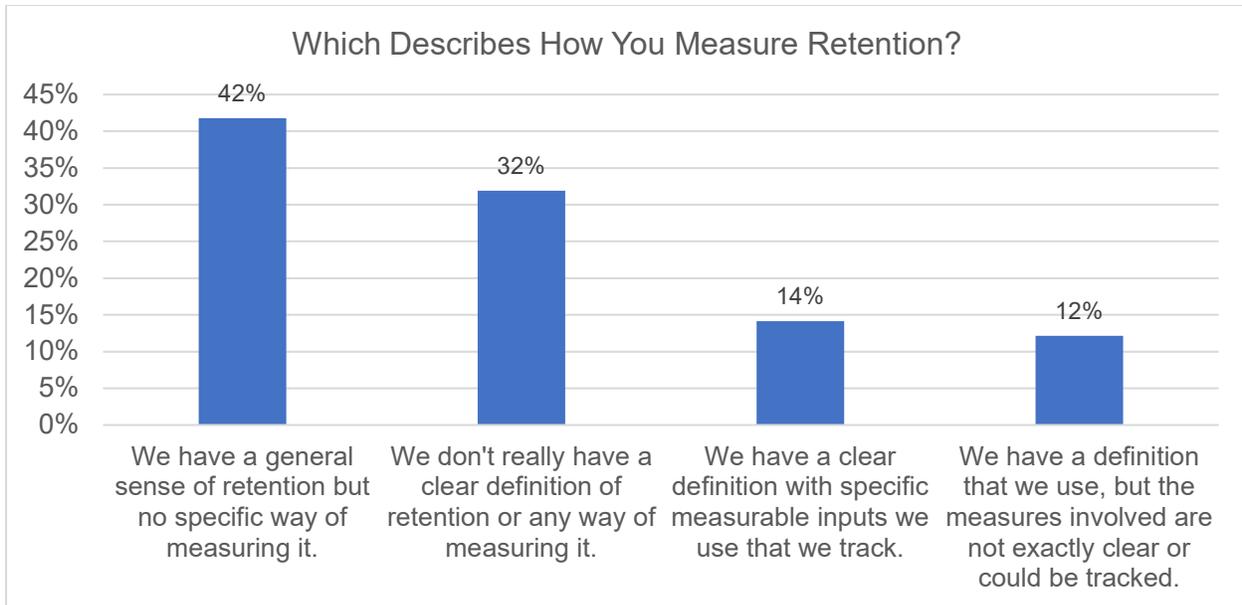
Current leadership were asked to assess a suite of potential tools aimed specifically at leadership. Respondents ranked having a standard definition of recruitment and retention first, followed by an immersive training experience and then volunteer engagement kits.

<b>Potential Leadership Tool (Ranked by Usefulness)</b>	<b>Ranked 1st</b>	<b>Ranked 1st or 2nd</b>
Standard definition of recruitment and retention success that can be shared and compared among departments	31%	44%
An immersive 360-video of firefighting experience (a first-hand point-of-view video that places the viewer in the boots of a volunteer during an emergency) to show as a training module and morale boost	23%	41%
Volunteer engagement kits with guidance and materials, including a webinar series, highlighting and discussing retention strategies and tools	19%	48%
Recruitment and retention video collection of simple, peer-to-peer videos focused on retention challenges and solutions from other department leaders	16%	43%
Online training transition support that offers tools and guidance on how to move in-person training to an online platform.	11%	25%

## **Measuring Retention**

Over 7 out of 10 (74%) of current department leadership reported either having a general sense of retention but no specific way of measuring it or not having a clear definition of retention at all.

Another 12% reported having a firmer retention definition, but that the data involved aren't clear or trackable. Only 14% of leadership said they have a clear definition and trackable data.



For those who have a clear definition, the measures they offered revolved around how they define a volunteer as an active member and that member's length of service. The most common measures given were if a member stays active for 3 or 10 years. Some of the respondents' measures are noted below.

Defining an "active" volunteer

***"30% of calls, 36 hours per year of training, up to 12 allowed outside the department, 10 hours of community service through the department, and 1, 3, 5, 10, 15, 20, etc. years of service milestones."***

***"Active member=attends 50% of all meetings and trainings and attends 25% of all calls."***

***"Members making 20% of the events."***

***"Members must make 30% of calls and 50% of training."***

***"20% calls OR combination of calls, trainings, events, certifications that equal 50 points or more."***

***"The firefighter must attend 80 percent of all calls practices and 50 percent of all calls."***

Measuring retention

***"A member is in good standing for a period of 10+ years."***

***"Keeping members active for more than 3 years."***

***“Does not leave for 10 yrs.; makes VIP points annually.”***

***“Keeping members active members past 3-year mark.”***

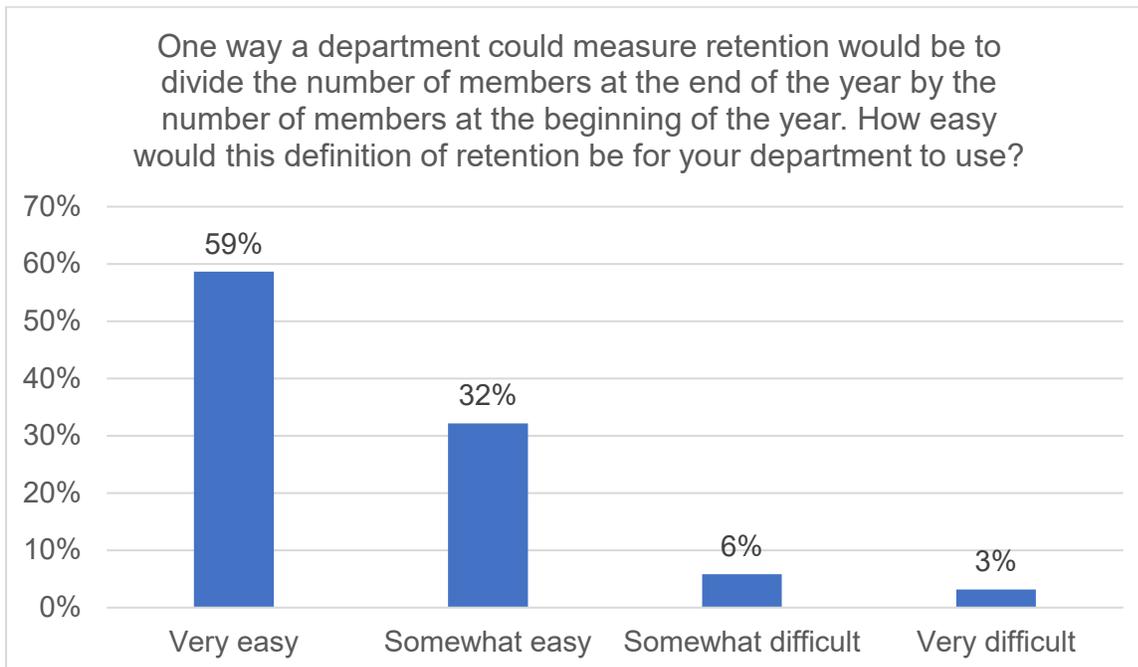
***“Member remains on active status for 3 or more years.”***

***“We try to keep them on for at least 10 years.”***

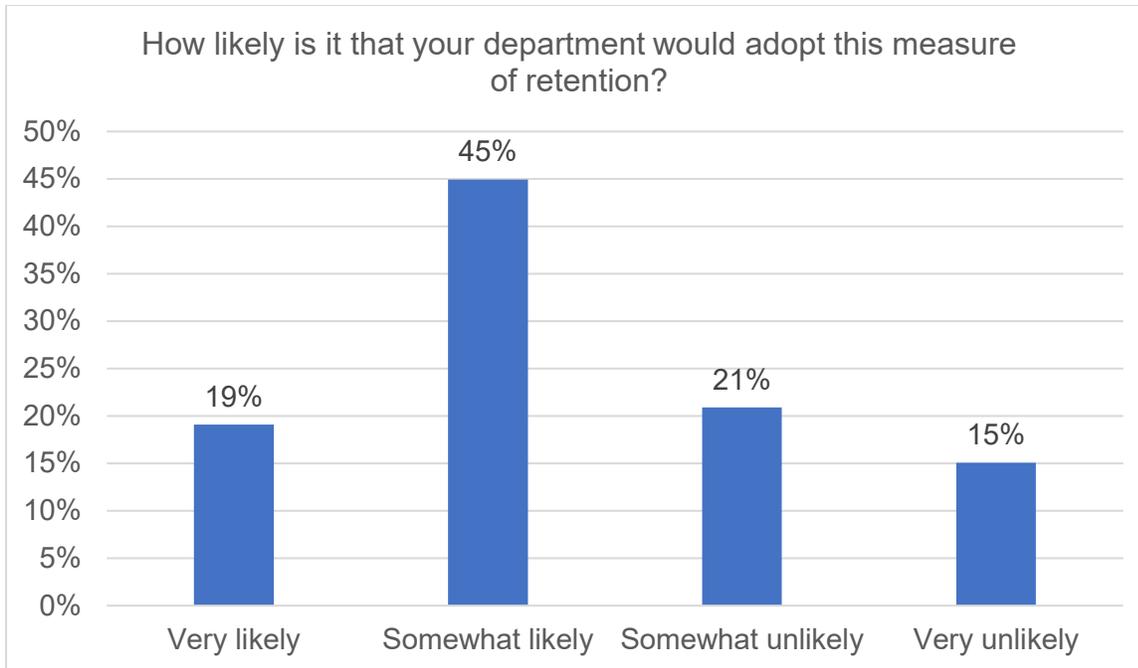
The number of volunteers who join compared to those who leave was mentioned by some respondents as a way of measuring retention.

***“The number of members that we take in, compared against the number of members who progress through the length of service. Normally, our first year is the lowest number of retention. Mostly due to new members with training requirements, and even though we explain everything, they still leave because of commitment.”***

When prompted with an example way of measuring annual retention – dividing the number of members at the end of the year by the number of members at the beginning – a majority of members felt that calculation would be easy to use.



While almost 1 in 5 leadership respondents said they'd be very likely to adopt this measure, 45% reported softer support, and 36% said they would be unlikely.



In an open-ended follow-up question, many respondents noted that in the definition of retention, the issue of active versus inactive volunteers needs to be addressed. If a department gains one new member who turns out to not be very active, it may not replace the amount of work lost if a veteran volunteer retired. Many felt other data needed to be factored into any definition, such as how much time a volunteer gave versus the amount they had to offer, or their tenure. Otherwise, an overall number could disguise a retention problem in a department.

Multiple respondents also mentioned they understand retention and how to track it, but the issues are going to be unique to every department, so it would be hard to come up with a universal definition for all departments.

***“We know what retention is. Our issues are unique to our area.”***

***“Your start of year divided by end of year is impossibly vague. You need much more data to view trends within the department.”***

***“Gaining one recruit is not making up for losing a 20-year veteran.”***

***“Retention should look at individuals' tenure, not at the overall number. Using overall number would disguise a retention problem and not lend itself to analyzing the causes of drop out.”***

***“The number of active firefighters at end of year divided by the number of active firefighters at beginning of year, plus new volunteers added during year.”***

***“Length of service and qualifications achieved during tenure. If we just measure beginning and end of year membership, we could potentially have a zero-sum. We lose 4 during year, gain 4 during year doesn't define retention. We need longevity.”***

## FINDINGS FROM QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WITH LEADERSHIP AND CURRENT AND FORMER VOLUNTEERS

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Prior to conducting the quantitative survey discussed above, we conducted exploratory, qualitative research with current and former volunteers, as well as department leadership. We specifically did the following:

1. **Conducted 7 one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with department leaders**, identified and selected in partnership with the NVFC team and key committee members, to reflect environments with both optimal retention among volunteers, as well as those struggling with retention. The purpose of this design was to discuss leadership perceptions of what's working and what's not. We also discussed how they measure retention, including getting their reactions to potential alternative approaches.
2. **Interviewed 20 current and former volunteers**. The discussions delved into reasons for staying and leaving the service, with an emphasis on using prior findings to have more in-depth conversations, as well as exploring reactions to potential ideas designed to stem attrition. Participants were identified, recruited and selected in two primary ways – 1) having been identified by the NVFC team, key committee members, and leadership interviewees and 2) through an online recruiting screener that was distributed by the NVFC team and key committee members.

The goal of this initial phase of research was to build on prior investigations into volunteer retention to validate hypotheses and develop items to incorporate into the quantitative survey that was to follow.

The main findings from this discovery phase are recapped below.

## **Current Results Reinforce Existing Research**

Findings from the interviews aligned with other retention research as all participants spoke the most about time (a lack of it), training (a lot of it), and interpersonal department tensions as the key obstacles of retention.

Past research conducted by the NVFC in 2015 similarly showed that unmet expectations, isolation within the department, frustration with department leadership, and lack of support from family and employers are factors that can make it difficult for volunteers to continue serving.

Going further back, a 2007 U.S. Fire Administration report<sup>1</sup>, developed in partnership with the NVFC, included survey results that revealed lack of time, organizational conflicts, leadership issues, and training requirements were the most frequently cited reasons volunteers left departments.

### **What Makes Your Members Leave Your Organization?\***

No time to volunteer .....	92.3%
Conflicts in organization .....	47.8%
Organizational leadership created adverse atmosphere .....	46.7%
Too much training .....	45.6%
Attitude of existing personnel to newcomers .....	39.1%
Criticism received from officers/older members .....	38.0%
Lack of camaraderie .....	19.5%

*\* Many respondents indicated more than one reason for leaving the organization*

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<sup>1</sup> Retention and Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services Challenges and Solutions FA-310/May 2007

Given the exploratory nature of the interviews, participants were encouraged to reflect and elaborate on the dimensions impacting the volunteer service experience. They touched on far-ranging issues impacting both recruitment and retention, from broad societal trends to detailed dynamics impacting departments today. The most frequently discussed topics are presented below, all of which helped inform specific questions that were incorporated into the survey.

### **Departments are reflections of their communities.**

Participants commented, for example, that more rural areas of the country where volunteers are needed often face a level of malaise within the department leadership that is reflective of their community. They cited that these communities are often struggling with poverty, depression, health complications, and rapidly aging and shrinking populations. Many leaders talked about a loss of culture, community, and history that seems insurmountable and can lead to a particularly uninspired form of leadership.

Continuing with the theme that departments mirror their community, a few of the leaders interviewed characterized NVFC's push for diversity in recruitment as unrealistic, as it is not reflective of their community demographics.

Additionally, for many departments, being continually understaffed has become the norm, so their focus is more on recruitment than retention.

### **Departments face different challenges, making uniform solutions difficult.**

We spoke with volunteers and leadership in a range of different types of departments (all volunteer and combination) and in different geographic areas. The stories we heard varied significantly.

For example, departments in rapidly growing areas (exurbs of growing metropolitan areas) where the population requires (and the tax base supports) a broad presence may be struggling with issues of transitioning to a combination department model. By contrast, in shrinking rural areas, volunteer departments are closing down, forcing fewer departments to service a broader area.

### **Generational differences are often cited.**

Both volunteers and leadership often brought up generational issues as impacting retention.

- Repeatedly, more experienced leaders (including those at departments relatively more effective at retention) talked about how “volunteering just isn’t the same today.” In discussing this they mentioned things like neighbors not knowing each other, people developing a different sense of community, and a resulting decline in altruism. A universal undercurrent was the *perception* that younger

generations, particularly millennials, were uninterested in volunteering and more focused on self-interests.

- Some department leaders looked at this as a gulf in generational attitudes that could not be overcome (often refusing to adjust their own expectations), whereas other leaders looked at it more as a challenge of what the volunteer experience was and recognized that they needed to adjust their expectations and offer to meet newer, younger recruits with an approach they were looking for.
- Younger volunteers spoke of older leaders who were resistant to change on issues ranging from being willing to modify service schedules, to how they communicated with volunteers (not being willing to text notifications on last minute training schedule changes, for example).

Age and tenure were also said to sometimes be factors contributing to cliques within departments that can alienate new members. As one volunteer put it: *“If you aren’t dating someone, related to someone, or not in a clique, you don’t matter.”*

### **Lack of clear expectations impacts retention, particularly on length of service.**

Leaders from departments reporting more success with retention said they provide clear expectations of what to expect in the first year or so of volunteering. Conversely both rank-and-file volunteers and leaders from departments struggling with retention acknowledged that such expectations were not always shared in their departments.

- Department leaders that balanced setting clear expectations about the amount of training and time required with a clear commitment of their own to help deliver often had better retention results.
- Regardless of leadership effectiveness, however, expected length of service was rarely, if ever, discussed or even considered. Many leaders expressed a desire for lifelong participation and to see volunteers outlast themselves.
- While that’s the ideal, when pressed, the leaders tended to have more realistic expectations, simply hoping to get 3-5 years out of a volunteer.
- The non-leadership volunteers, however, seemed to have less defined expectations of their service; rather, they’ll do it as long as their home/work schedule allows, and, importantly, they get value out of it.
- Both leadership and non-leadership volunteers held the view that out of the TOTAL volunteers at departments, usually half or less are considered “active.”
  - “Active” was typically defined by respondents as showing up consistently at the firehouse, especially for calls and trainings.

### **Life stage fit is an important consideration.**

Leaders recognized the NVFC’s focus on younger member recruitment, but at least a few of them noted that life stage was the more important dimension to consider than simply age. By this they meant that sometimes recruiting slightly “older” or “more

established” recruits was preferable (e.g. in their thirties and established / settled in the community, homeowners, etc.), explaining that these recruits are more likely to be long-term members of the community, and as long as they’re in the community, they’ve got a better shot at retaining them or bringing them back into the fold if they leave for family commitments.

- This is contrasted with younger recruits still figuring out life plans who may be more likely to move out of the area for jobs or college.
- All participants noted the clear need for the volunteer force to get younger, so this discussion is one of nuance to a degree, but the notion of life stage is an important factor in retention.

### **The career/volunteer dynamic can be tricky.**

From all participants, we heard several stories of tension between career and volunteer members within combination departments. Often these stories of tension came from departments that were transitioning to a combination model.

We heard that career members often distrust volunteers and can be critical of their approach (on matters big and small). This often comes from a real place of concern, as less active volunteers may not have enough training (there tends to be less tension with active volunteers) and certainly have less familiarity with each other as a team.

On the other hand, we also heard that volunteers often look at career members as both entitled, with little regard for the sacrifices being made by volunteers, and as a threat, feeling their roles and responsibilities within the department slipping away.

- Departments that have had successful transitions tend to have leaders with experience on both the career and volunteer side, and who put systems in place to force more combined trainings and cross-functional experiences.
  - They also spoke of the importance of having both volunteers and career firefighters celebrating the contributions from both sides, and placing trust in their volunteers (at least two department leaders mentioned the importance of letting the crew who first arrived continue to lead at the scene of a fire, especially if the first to arrive is a volunteer crew).

An additional part of this equation is that numerous volunteers we spoke with said that serving as a volunteer was largely to gain experience to get hired on the career side (a stepping-stone approach that was often advised by other career firefighters). Once they get the experience and training, they will try to find a career position. Those who made this transition and had good volunteer experiences, and helpful department leaders who were supportive of their career goals, often continued volunteering even after they attained a paid position.

**Retention measures are rare.**

Every leader we talked with had given considerable thought to the issue of retention. However, none of them had a clear definition or measurement that they used to judge their department. That realization generally made them recognize they needed a standard way of measuring retention, indicating they're open to suggestions and clear steps to do this.

Having said that, record keeping and data availability vary significantly by department, so any measure which depends on self-reported data will need to recognize this reality.

### **Department Leadership Interview Guide**

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. We really appreciate it and promise not to take up too much of your time. I want to make sure that I get to all our questions within the 45 minutes I have you. Because of that, I may interrupt you at a certain point to ask us to move on to something else, but know that it's not because I'm not interested in what you're saying.

Just to give you a little background, I'm working on a project with the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) to better understand the issues around retention in order to help work on ways to improve it.

We're planning to talk with both longer-serving rank-and-file members as well as former members to compare their experiences and try to understand the similarities and differences. But we first wanted to start with the perspective of department leadership.

The most important part of this process is to hear the truth about what people like yourself think. So really all I'm looking for is your honest perspective, not what you think NVFC wants to hear, what somebody else wants to hear, or even what you may wish was the case. I'm independent, meaning you won't offend me or get me in trouble with any of your feedback. None of your feedback will be connected with you personally. We'll be combining everything we hear to paint a big picture of the issue. You also don't have to worry about your name being connected to any of your feedback. I hope you will be comfortable speaking openly.

Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

#### **Role, Experience, and Department**

I'd like to start by getting to know you and your department a bit better.

1. Let's start with you. Can you talk to me a bit about your role at your department?
  - a. Day-to-day, what does that look like?
  - b. What are the big picture things you focus on?
2. How long have you been in this role? How long have you been in the volunteer service overall?
  - a. Are there any other leadership positions you hold?
3. In your role, what do you wish you got to do more of? What do you wish you had to do less of? How come?
4. Tell me about the area you serve.
  - a. Rural, suburban, urban?
  - b. Socio-economic?

- c. Demographics?
- 5. Tell me a bit more about your department.
  - a. Capabilities and services?
  - b. How many members?
  - c. What is the call volume like?
  - d. Typical call?
- 6. Tell me about your volunteers.
  - a. Backgrounds?
  - b. Similar? Diverse?
  - c. Demographics?
- 7. Who is your typical new recruit? What are they looking for?
  - a. What are their expectations? How long do they expect and plan to participate?
  - b. How long do you expect them to participate? Want them to participate?
  - c. Is that time frame ever communicated? How?
- 8. How would you describe the atmosphere in the department? What's the attitude like? What's the culture like?
  - a. How do you think long-term members would answer that question?
  - b. What about new recruits?
- 9. What are the things your volunteers enjoy most about being part of the department? Please try and be specific.
  - a. What are some specifics you'd expect them to complain about?
  - b. Do those things differ between longer-serving members and newer recruits? How so?
- 10. I want to ask about a few specific things that could be part of the volunteer experience, but don't have to be and may not always be. In either case, I'd like you to tell me any specific things you do around these issues and what the interest and involvement is like from your team.
  - a. Having an active presence in the community, being recognized by the community, giving back
  - b. Learning AND teaching new skills that are unique to the service and that could be applied outside the service
  - c. Team development, traditions, camaraderie
  - d. Fun and excitement

### **Retention Definitions**

As I mentioned at the beginning of the call, this project is about retention. Pretty much the rest of our interview will be about that.

11. First, how does your department define what “retention” is? Do you have a set definition?
  - a. Are there other definitions you’ve heard from other departments? What do you think of those?
12. Thinking about a new recruit, how would you decide if that person had been successfully retained?
  - a. Is there a certain point in the process? Some milestone they complete? What about reaching a different rank?
  - b. Is there a specific length of service?
  - c. At what point do you think you’ve recouped the cost of training somebody? Is that a fair definition of retention? Why/why not?
13. Thinking about those definitions of successful retention you gave me, does that mean anything less than that is considered a failure at retention?
  - a. **IF NO** So what is the bare minimum to meet the definition of retention?
14. Have you ever looked at retention as a measure related to specifics of the department as a whole? **IF YES**, How so?
  - a. Let me give you some examples and you can react to each if it makes sense as a measure of retention or not. Tell me what works about it and what doesn’t.
    - i. Having fewer open positions in the department than the year before.
    - ii. The average service tenure for the department as a whole.
    - iii. Having more long-term members than new recruits
    - iv. Lower percentage of recent recruits who leave
    - v. More equal distribution of newer and longer tenured members

### Retention Experience

15. Regardless of the definitions that departments could use to define it, how do you think your department does on retaining its volunteers?
  - a. How do you think it compares to other departments? Much better, somewhat better, about the same, or worse? What makes you say that?
16. What departments do you think tend to do the best at retention?
  - a. Retention aside, how are they different from yours? How are they similar?
17. Which members are the easiest to retain? Which are the hardest? What’s the difference?
  - a. Thinking specifically about newer recruits (someone in their first year or so, let’s say) — who are the ones that tend to stay and who are the ones that tend to leave? Describe them. How are they different?
18. What are the things that make retention hard? What could make it easier?
19. What are the reasons you tend to hear from recruits on why they’re leaving?
  - a. Do you keep in touch with ex-volunteers? Where do they end up?

20. I want to get your reaction to some reasons we've heard in the past. I'm curious if you've heard the same.
- a. Lack of time to volunteer because of increased work and home-life demands
  - b. Health issues and concerns associated with fire service
  - c. Poor department leadership
  - d. Negative experience on a call
  - e. Negative experience in the department
  - f. Lack of support or inclusion in the department
  - g. Lack of training and resources
  - h. Lack of career opportunities nearby, complicating how easily volunteers can meet requirements
  - i. Increased training requirements
  - j. The financial cost
  - k. Lack of financial reward
21. At what point in the journey of becoming and being a volunteer firefighter do you tend to lose the most volunteers? Why do you think that is?
22. What's going well with retention? Have you had success with any specific initiatives or approaches to improve retention? Describe them to me. Why do you think that was so effective?
- a. Have you heard about any initiatives or approaches in other departments that have been successful?
23. What's going poorly with retention? What are some things you've tried or you've heard about other departments trying that haven't been very successful? Why do you think they fell flat?

### **MMAF UX Interview Recruiting**

24. Before I let you go, I have one last question for you. Have you ever heard of the Make Me A Firefighter web tool that NVFC developed to help with recruiting, including tracking of recruits?
- a. IF YES: Have you ever used it?
    - i. IF YES: Do you still use it?
      - 1. IF YES: How often? And what do you find valuable in it?
      - 2. IF NO: Why'd you stop?
25. As part of this project for retention, we're also helping to update this web tool, and we're looking for department leaders who will share their experience in using the revamped tool later. Would you be willing to help us out with another interview down the line to test this tool?

### **Wrap Up**

26. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. Before I let you go, I always try to give people an opportunity to ask me any questions or provide any final thoughts on what we've discussed. Is there anything else you'd like to add that you think would be helpful for us to know or are there any questions you have?

**[THANK AND END]**

## APPENDIX B

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### **Volunteer Interview Guide**

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I'll be leading our conversation. This is opinion research, which means there are no wrong answers. I am interested in everything you have to say. You are the expert.

I am an independent researcher, so I have no stake in what you say. You will not offend me or get me in any trouble. My only goal is to hear your honest opinions. So please be as open and candid as you can be.

We have a number of questions to get through and I don't want to keep you longer than the hour that we agreed to. So that may mean, at some point, if I ask that we move on, it's just because I want to make sure we get to everything. It has nothing to do with what you're saying or what I think about what you're saying.

I am recording our conversation. This is just so I don't miss anything. The recording is entirely confidential. There may also be people listening to this interview to help me take notes and to understand what was said. Ultimately, this interview will be combined with other interviews we're conducting, and we'll write a report and make some recommendations. Your name won't be used in the report, and none of your feedback will be connected with you personally.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

### **Background and Personal Life**

We'll talk more about the purpose of these interviews and this project in a little bit.

For now, I think what would be most useful is to get to know who you are a little bit more.

1. Maybe you could tell me.
  - a. Your first name.
  - b. A little bit about your family.
  - c. What you do for a living or something you do for fun.
2. Where do you live?
  - a. What's one thing you love about the area where you live?
  - b. What's one thing you wish was different about the area where you live?
  - c. Are you originally from there? How long have you lived there?
  - d. What are the people like where you live?

This is all helpful background for me. I appreciate it. As you probably know, we're working on this project for the National Volunteer Fire Council. The point of the project is to help them better understand the volunteer experience to see what they can do to improve it.

### **FORMER VOLUNTEER — Role, Experience, and Department**

My notes show that you used to be a volunteer, but that you aren't involved with a department currently. Is that correct? Perfect. We want to make sure to talk to people who have left the service.

3. When did you first sign up?
4. What made you sign up to begin with? What was it that motivated you to take that step?
5. What did you expect volunteering to be like when you first signed up?
  - a. What lived up to your expectations? What fell short?
  - b. How long did you expect you'd be a volunteer? Did you have any expectations?
6. What was your department like?
  - a. Capabilities and services?
  - b. How many members?
  - c. What was the call volume like?
  - d. Typical call?
  - e. Modern? Rundown?
7. What were the other volunteers like?
  - a. Backgrounds?
  - b. Similar? Diverse?
  - c. Demographics?
  - d. Things in common?
8. What about the leadership?
  - a. Active? Passive?
  - b. Supportive? Critical?
9. Overall, how would you describe the culture?
10. I want to read you a few statements that may have to do with what a volunteer experience may or may not be like. For each one, I want you to rate your department on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 means your department did a terrible job at it and 10 means your department did an excellent job at it. Please explain your rating as we go.
  - a. Having an active presence in the community, being recognized by the community, giving back
  - b. Learning AND teaching new skills that are unique to the service and that could be applied outside the service

- c. Team development, traditions, camaraderie
  - d. Fun and excitement
11. How long did you volunteer before you left?
    - a. What was your role there?
    - b. What did that look like on a day-to-day basis?
  12. When did you first think about leaving? Why?
  13. Why did you decide to stop volunteering? [PROBE FOR MULTIPLE REASONS]
    - a. Do any of the following sound like reasons why you stopped?
      - i. Lack of time to volunteer because of increased work and home-life demands
      - ii. Health issues and concerns associated with fire service
      - iii. Poor department leadership
      - iv. Negative experience on a call
      - v. Negative experience in the department
      - vi. Lack of support or inclusion in the department
      - vii. Lack of training and resources
      - viii. Lack of career opportunities nearby, complicating how easily volunteers can meet requirements
      - ix. Increased training requirements
      - x. The financial cost
      - xi. Lack of financial reward
  14. What do you think was the most important reason why you left? [REPEAT LIST IF NECESSARY]
  15. Were there any triggering events? Things that may have been the last straw?
  16. What were the good things or the positives that happened for you when you left?
    - a. What were the drawbacks to leaving? What did you lose?
  17. What about while volunteering? What were the good things you got from that?
    - a. What were the drawbacks to volunteering? What did you lose?
  18. What are the things that made volunteering difficult?
    - a. How could they be made easier?
  19. What do you wish you got to do more of as a volunteer? What do you wish you had to do less of?
  20. Is there anything that could have been done differently that would have made you stay?
  21. Think about the people at the department who are the lifers? What are they like?
    - a. Other than that they still volunteer, how are they different from you? What do you have in common with them?
  22. How long do you think is a reasonable expectation for a volunteer to stick with a department? Why that amount?
  23. How do you think your department did at retaining its volunteers?

- a. How do you think it compared to other departments? Much better, somewhat better, about the same or worse? What makes you say that?
24. What departments do you think tend to do the best at retention?
- a. Retention aside, how are they different from yours? How are they similar?

### **CURRENT VOLUNTEER — Role, Experience, and Department**

My notes show that you're currently a volunteer. Is that correct? Perfect.

25. When did you first sign up?
26. What made you sign up to begin with? What was it that motivated you to take that step?
27. What did you expect volunteering to be like when you first signed up?
- a. What lived up to your expectations? What fell short?
  - b. How long did you expect you'd be a volunteer? Did you have expectations?
28. What is your current role at the department?
- a. What does that look like on a day-to-day basis?
29. What is your department like?
- a. Capabilities and services?
  - b. How many members?
  - c. What is the call volume like?
  - d. Typical call?
  - e. Modern? Rundown?
30. What are the other volunteers like?
- a. Backgrounds?
  - b. Similar? Diverse?
  - c. Demographics?
  - d. Things in common?
31. What about the leadership?
- a. Active? Passive?
  - b. Supportive? Critical?
32. Overall, how would you describe the culture?
33. I want to read you a few statements that may have to do with what a volunteer experience may or may not be like. For each one, I want you to rate your department on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 means your department does a terrible job at it and 10 means your department does an excellent job at it. Please explain your rating as we go.
- a. Having an active presence in the community, being recognized by the community, giving back

- b. Learning AND teaching new skills that are unique to the service and that could be applied outside the service
  - c. Team development, traditions, camaraderie
  - d. Fun and excitement
34. What are the good things, the positives, that you get from volunteering?
- a. What are the drawbacks to volunteering? What do you lose?
35. What are the things that make volunteering difficult?
- a. How could they be made easier?
36. What do you wish you got to do more of as a volunteer? What do you wish you had to do less of?
37. Have you ever thought about stopping? When? In what moments?
- a. What made you decide to stay?
38. Think about the people who've left the department for reasons other than retirement or things outside of their control. What are they like?
- a. Other than that they've left the department, how are they different from you? What do you have in common with them?
39. Do you keep in touch with anybody who has left? What are they up to instead?
40. What are the reasons you've heard why volunteers leave?
41. I want to get your reaction to some reasons we've heard in the past. I'm curious if you've heard the same of if you've heard of other reasons as well.
- a. Lack of time to volunteer because of increased work and home-life demands
  - b. Health issues and concerns associated with fire service
  - c. Poor department leadership
  - d. Negative experience on a call
  - e. Negative experience in the department
  - f. Lack of support or inclusion in the department
  - g. Lack of training and resources
  - h. Lack of career opportunities nearby, complicating how easily volunteers can meet requirements
  - i. Increased training requirements
  - j. The financial cost
  - k. Lack of financial reward
42. At what point in the journey of becoming and being a volunteer firefighter do most people leave? Why do you think that is?
43. How long do you think is a reasonable expectation for a volunteer to stick with a department? Why that amount?
44. How do you think your department does on retaining its volunteers?
- a. How do you think it compares to other departments? Much better, somewhat better, about the same or worse? What makes you say that?

45. What departments do you think tend to do the best at retention?
- a. Retention aside, how are they different from yours? How are they similar?

**FOR ALL — Wrap Up**

46. Before we wrap up, I'm curious, do you know anybody else who has left a volunteer fire department where if they're experience had been different maybe they would have stayed?
- a. Would you mind sharing their contact information or putting me in touch with them? I'm very interested in learning more about their experience. I would only reach out to conduct an interview similar to the one we just did.
47. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. Before I let you go, I always try to give people an opportunity to ask me any questions or provide any final thoughts on what we've discussed. Is there anything else you'd like to add that you think would be helpful for us to know or are there any questions you have?

**[THANK AND END]**

## APPENDIX C

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### Leadership and Volunteer Retention Quantitative Survey Questionnaire

Fire and EMS departments may use different terms to describe similar things. If you don't see the exact term your department uses in these questions, try to pick the closest one that applies.

The first section of the survey is about you, your department, and your experience.

1. Are you currently a volunteer firefighter or EMS provider?
  - a. Yes - current volunteer
  - b. No - former volunteer
  - c. I was never a volunteer **[TERMINATE]**
2. Which of the following describes your position at your current fire department?  
Please select all that apply.
  - a. Chief
  - b. Assistant Chief
  - c. Battalion Chief
  - d. Captain
  - e. President
  - f. Fire Marshal
  - g. Safety Officer
  - h. Training Officer
  - i. Volunteer Firefighter
  - j. Volunteer EMS Provider
  - k. Non-operational support
  - l. Other (please specify)
3. How long have you been/were you a volunteer firefighter or EMS provider with your **current/last department**?
  - a. Less than a year
  - b. 1 to 2 years
  - c. 3 to 4 years
  - d. 5 to 6 years
  - e. 7 to 10 years
  - f. 11 to 19 years
  - g. 20 years or more
4. How long have you been/were you a volunteer firefighter or EMS provider, **overall**?
  - a. Less than a year
  - b. 1 to 2 years

- c. 3 to 4 years
  - d. 5 to 6 years
  - e. 7 to 10 years
  - f. 11 to 19 years
  - g. 20 years or more
5. How often do you spend time volunteering with your current fire department?
- a. Several times a week
  - b. Once a week
  - c. A couple times a month
  - d. Once a month
  - e. Less than once a month
6. Is your current department all volunteer or is it a combination department?
- a. All volunteer
  - b. Combination department
    - i. **[FOLLOW-UP]** Approximately what percentage of your department is volunteer?
      - 1. 10% or less
      - 2. 11-20%
      - 3. 21-30%
      - 4. 31-40%
      - 5. 41-50%
      - 6. 51-60%
      - 7. 61-70%
      - 8. 71-80%
      - 9. 81-90%
      - 10. 91-100%
7. Has your current department ever merged or consolidated with another department, either volunteer or career? Please select all that apply.
- a. Yes, with another volunteer department
  - b. Yes, with a career department
  - c. No **[EXCLUSIVE]**
8. Please enter the zip code where your current department is located.  
**[FIVE DIGIT OPEN END]**
9. Which of the following best describes the area your current department serves?
- a. All or mostly urban
  - b. All or mostly suburban
  - c. All or mostly rural
10. Approximately how many calls does your current department handle each month?
- a. 0 to 9
  - b. 10 to 24

- c. 25 to 50
  - d. 51 to 74
  - e. 75 to 99
  - f. 100 or more
11. Approximately how many total volunteers does your current department have?
- a. 1 to 10
  - b. 11 to 20
  - c. 21-50
  - d. 51-80
  - e. 81-99
  - f. 100 or more
12. How many members would you consider active?
- a. All
  - b. More than half
  - c. About half
  - d. Less than half
  - e. None
13. Do you consider yourself to be an active volunteer?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
14. How do you define if a member is active? Please select all that apply.
- a. Attends a certain percentage of calls
    - i. **[FOLLOW-UP]** Which of the following is the minimum percentage of calls that an active member attends?
      - 1. 10%
      - 2. 20%
      - 3. 30%
      - 4. 40%
      - 5. 50%
      - 6. 60%
      - 7. 70%
      - 8. 80%
      - 9. 90%
      - 10. 100%
  - b. Attends a certain percentage of trainings
    - i. **[FOLLOW-UP]** Which of the following is the minimum percentage of trainings that an active member attends?
      - 1. 10%
      - 2. 20%
      - 3. 30%

- 4. 40%
  - 5. 50%
  - 6. 60%
  - 7. 70%
  - 8. 80%
  - 9. 90%
  - 10. 100%
- c. Attends a certain percentage of department meetings
- i. **[FOLLOW-UP]** Which of the following is the minimum percentage of meetings that an active member attends?
    - 1. 10%
    - 2. 20%
    - 3. 30%
    - 4. 40%
    - 5. 50%
    - 6. 60%
    - 7. 70%
    - 8. 80%
    - 9. 90%
    - 10. 100%
  - d. Reports for a majority of their assigned shifts and finds coverage if has to miss a shift
  - e. Other (please specify)
15. Have you ever considered no longer volunteering at the department?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
16. If yes, why did you consider leaving and why did you decide to keep volunteering? **[OPEN END FOR BOTH]**
17. How old are you? **[OPEN TWO-DIGIT NUMERIC]**
18. Which gender do you identify with most?
- a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Non-binary/third gender
  - d. Transgender
  - e. Prefer not to say
19. Do you consider yourself Hispanic or Latino?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
20. Which of the following best describes your race?
- a. American Indian or Alaska Native

- b. Asian
  - c. Black or African American
  - d. White or Caucasian
  - e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - f. Mixed race
  - g. Other (please specify)
21. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- a. Some high school
  - b. High school graduate
  - c. Some college
  - d. College graduate
  - e. Post graduate studies or degree

### **MAIN QUESTIONNAIRE**

The second section of the survey is about the issue of retention at volunteer fire departments.

22. In your opinion, do you think your department has a problem with retention?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
23. What do you think are the three biggest reasons that volunteers have left or would consider leaving your department? / What were the three biggest reasons that you stopped volunteering? **[RANDOMIZE ITEMS]**
- a. Lack of clear expectations of how much time and effort will be required each week or month for meetings and trainings
  - b. The realities of volunteering changed or didn't meet the expectations that were set before signing up
  - c. Lack of support and flexibility in juggling volunteer responsibilities with other life commitments
  - d. Department leadership that is rigid and does not support or allow for new ideas and new leaders
  - e. Department leadership that doesn't focus on or support the needs of members
  - f. Department atmosphere full of cliques and groups that exclude others
  - g. Department atmosphere where members of different generations don't get along
  - h. Department culture that isolates new members
  - i. Department atmosphere that is too serious and not enough fun
  - j. Department culture that doesn't engage members outside of calls or training
  - k. Lack of social life within the department, where members train and go on calls, but don't spend time together otherwise

- l. Lack of camaraderie or sense of community among everyone in the department
- m. Lack of trust and cooperation between volunteer and career sides of the department
- n. Lack of support and professional development for volunteers who want to move to the career side
- o. Lack of flexibility in training requirements and schedules
- p. Something else (please specify)

24. And what do you think could be done to address these issues and keep the volunteer? / What do you think could have been done to have kept you as a volunteer? **[OPEN]**

25. Please look at this first set of items a department could do to impact retention. Which, if any, of these do you think could have a positive impact on retention at your department? Select all that apply. **[INCLUDE NONE OF THESE OPTION]**

**[ONBOARDING PRACTICES]**

- a. Leadership providing a clearer understanding to new volunteers of the monthly time commitment, goals, and responsibilities that are expected so they're on the same page
- b. Leadership making it clear up front the minimum length of service they expect of new recruits
- c. Providing new volunteers with advice on how to fit volunteering into the rest of their life
- d. A mentorship program that pairs new volunteers with more experienced members

**[COMBINATION DEPARTMENT SOLUTIONS, ASKED ONLY OF COMBINATION DEPARTMENTS]**

- e. Providing department leadership with training focused on managing combination departments
- f. Holding joint trainings with career and volunteer staff
- g. Mentorships with career members for volunteers who are career-bound

**[FINDING NEW LEADERSHIP]**

- h. Enrolling rising volunteers in an officer candidate course to gain leadership skills and training
- i. Following a set of national leadership standards and core competencies
- j. Providing department leadership with sales and marketing training
- k. Having department leadership actively participate in training to lead by example

**[BROADER MEMBER SATISFACTION PRACTICES]**

- k. Holding cross-generational training to help members and leaders of different ages better understand each other
- l. Create a Chief People Officer at the department who constantly takes the temperature of members' happiness and satisfaction

- m. Have department leadership hold more regular and personal check-ins with new volunteers
- n. Allow and encourage new and younger members to own specific projects and tasks
- o. Break up cliques and groups by assigning members to workgroups they wouldn't normally choose

26. For each thing you selected, please tell us how much of a positive impact you think it would have on volunteer retention. **[SHOW ITEMS PREVIOUSLY SELECTED IN Q22]**

Slight impact

Moderate impact

Major impact

27. Now, please look at this second set of items a department could do to impact retention. Which, if any, of the following do you think could have a positive impact on retention at your department? Select all that apply. **[INCLUDE NONE OF THESE OPTION]**

**[FUN STUFF]**

- a. Giving out awards or honors when members reach service milestones (1 year, 5 years, 10 years, etc.) and/or superlatives at the end of the year
- b. Immersive virtual reality/360-degree video of firefighting experiences as part of training modules and morale boosts

**[FEEDBACK OPPORTUNITIES]**

- c. Conduct exit interviews when a volunteer leaves the department
- d. Conduct "stay" interviews with volunteers who have lapsed attendance and may be considering leaving the department
- e. Create a database of former volunteers to stay in touch with them and try and re-engage on future opportunities
- f. Set up a comment box for anonymous feedback and/or create dedicated "office hours" to provide members a clear opportunity to express their opinions
- g. Make it easier to compare your department's retention rate and efforts with other departments'

**[FLEXIBILITY]**

- h. Offer "micro-volunteer" opportunities (1 day or 1 week a month) for those that are unable to commit to traditional volunteer time commitments
- i. Build the essential training calendar around members with less flexibility in their schedule
- j. Hold essential training sessions on multiple days
- k. Offer online training for nonessential training
- l. Offer virtual reality training modules

28. For each thing you selected, please tell us how much of a positive impact you think it would have on volunteer retention **[SHOW ITEMS PREVIOUSLY SELECTED IN Q24]**

Slight impact

Moderate impact

Major impact

29. **[TOOLS FOR LEADERSHIP, SHOWN ONLY TO LEADERSHIP]** You've looked at a lot of possible ideas. Now take a look at some developed specifically for department leadership and let us know what you think of them.

Please rank the below items starting with the one you think could be the most useful for you to the one that you think would be the least useful.

- a. Standard definition of recruitment and retention success that can be shared and compared among departments
  - b. Volunteer engagement kits that provide guidance and materials, including a webinar series, highlighting and discussing retention strategies and tools
  - c. Recruitment and retention video collection of simple, peer-to-peer videos focused on retention challenges and solutions from other department leaders
  - d. An immersive 360-video of firefighting experience (a first-hand point-of-view video that places the viewer in the boots of a volunteer during an emergency) to show as a training module and morale boost
  - e. Online training transition support that offers tools and guidance on how to move in-person training to an online platform
30. **[RETENTION MEASURES, SHOWN ONLY TO LEADERSHIP]** Which of the following best describes how your department defines and measures volunteer retention, if at all?
- a. We have a clear definition with specific measurable inputs we use that we track
  - b. We have a definition that we use, but the measures involved are not exactly clear or not easy to track
  - c. We have a general sense of our retention but no specific way of measuring it
  - d. We don't really have a clear definition of retention or any way of measuring it
31. **[ASK IF Q30=A]** Please share the specific definition you use to define retention. **[OPEN]**
32. **[ASK IF Q30=A]** How exactly do you measure it? Please be as specific as possible. **[OPEN]**
33. One way a department could measure retention would be to divide the number of members at the end of the year by the number of members at the beginning of the year.

How easy would this definition of retention be for your department to use?

- a. Very easy
- b. Somewhat easy
- c. Somewhat difficult
- d. Very difficult

How likely is it that your department would adopt this measure of retention?

- a. Very likely
- b. Somewhat likely
- c. Somewhat unlikely
- d. Very unlikely

34. Thinking about the retention definition we just looked at — number of members at the end of the year divided by the number of members at the beginning of the year — how helpful would it be to be able to look at those numbers in each of the below ways:

- a. The entire membership population
- b. Looking at rank-and-file
- c. Looking at leadership
- d. Looking at new recruits
- e. Looking at different tenure lengths
- f. Looking at active members only
- g. Looking only at cases where the department has influence (for instance, removing cases where members moved out of the area)
  - i. Very helpful
  - ii. Somewhat helpful
  - iii. Somewhat unhelpful
  - iv. Very unhelpful

How easy would it be for your department to look at this retention measure among each of the below dimensions?

- a. The entire membership population
- b. Looking at new recruits
- c. Looking at rank-and-file
- d. Looking at leadership
- e. Looking at different tenure lengths
- f. Looking at active members only
- g. Looking only at cases where the department has influence (for instance, removing cases where members moved out of the area)
  - i. Very easy
  - ii. Somewhat easy
  - iii. Somewhat difficult
  - iv. Very difficult

35. What is another definition of retention that departments should consider using?

**[OPEN]**

a. I don't know