

Firefighter Strong

Recruitment & Retention Special Edition



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ABOUT THE

National Volunteer Fire Council

The NVFC is the leading nonprofit membership association representing the interests of the volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services. The NVFC serves as the voice of the volunteer in the national arena and provides resources, programs, education, and advocacy for first responders across the nation. Focus areas include recruitment and retention, health and safety, leadership, and department funding, among others.

Membership in the NVFC is low-cost and provides a wide array of benefits, including an AD&D policy, free training in the Virtual Classroom, access to the Volunteer Voices membership community, and much more. Join at www.nvfc.org/join. Learn more about the NVFC and access resources at www.nvfc.org.

DISCLAIMER

The information and resources presented in this document are for informational purposes only. They are not intended to offer any staffing or legal advice. This document does not provide a comprehensive listing of resources that are available.

Staffing for a Strong Fire Services

The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) is pleased to provide this Firefighter Strong newsletter to volunteer and combination fire and EMS departments. This edition has a special focus on two of the most significant challenges facing the volunteer fire services – recruitment and retention.

Many departments across the U.S. struggle to maintain adequate staffing to keep up with community needs. Having enough volunteers to keep our nation's fire and EMS departments effective, safe, and ready to respond is a priority for the NVFC. This is why the NVFC has developed guides, training, research, and tools that are designed to find solutions to the staffing challenges.

In 2014, the NVFC launched the Make Me A Firefighter program to provide resources and tools to help departments recruit and retain volunteers while also raising public awareness of the need for more people to step up and serve. This program is supported by a Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response grant from FEMA.

Through the Make Me A Firefighter program, fire and EMS departments can add their volunteer opportunities to a national database so that prospective volunteers can find them, generate custom recruitment materials,

track recruits through the process to ensure proper follow-up, and access other resources to help plan a successful recruitment campaign. No need to reinvent the wheel – utilize the campaign to save time, resources, and money.

Best of all, it is completely free. Register at <https://portal.nvfc.org>.

But recruiting is just half the battle – retention of volunteers is just as important. The NVFC's resources and training also provide best practices and strategies to help keep volunteers engaged and fulfilled so that they remain valuable and productive members of the department.

The articles and resources contained in this newsletter highlight some of the critical issues relating to volunteer recruitment and retention and present ideas that departments can consider. Use these as a starting off point to re-energize or enhance your department's existing recruitment and retention initiatives.

The greatest asset any fire department has is its people. Making sure that both departments and volunteers have the support they need is the best way to keep the volunteer fire service strong now and in the future.

Learn more about the NVFC, access additional resources, and join at www.nvfc.org.

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Recruitment & Retention Success with the Make Me A Firefighter Campaign

In early 2017, I was introduced to the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) and its Make Me A Firefighter campaign by a good friend and someone I consider part of my extended family, Dr. Candice McDonald. She and I, along with the chief of my department, Dan Krushinski, taught a recruitment and retention course in Myrtle Beach, SC, at the NVFC Training Summit.

Upon my return home, I became acquainted with how the Make Me A Firefighter department portal worked and its resources, including the searchable database of volunteer opportunities, the customizable marketing materials, and the additional resources and training. I then used the portal to create the East Franklin Fire Department volunteer opportunity listing page to connect with potential recruits through the public web site at MakeMeAFirefighter.org. The department has also used the materials generator to create flyers and cards to give our community members during community and fire department events.

Since we posted our volunteer opportunities on the site, our department has had prospective members reach out to us from all over New Jersey, from as far as 50 miles away. Through our Make Me A Firefighter volunteer opportunity

listing page, we can give prospective members a brief run-down of what it takes to be a volunteer firefighter in our company, including the required time commitments and the benefits, both short term and long term. We have also allowed potential volunteers who have accessed our fire department through Make Me A Firefighter to connect with our other platforms, such as the East Franklin Fire Department's web site and Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube pages.

As a fire department of approximately 65 active members, we have had at least 30 or more applicants obtain our information through the Make Me A Firefighter database and go through the application process from beginning to end, including nearby Rutgers University students. Due to many different factors, including time commitments and family obligations, not all of the applicants have remained active. Regardless, we have seen many benefits to using the Make Me A Firefighter campaign,

including increased awareness across our area and state through the searchable database, the customizable marketing materials to promote open volunteer positions, and the training resources. An unforeseen benefit has also been that, once prospective volunteers discover us, our recruitment opportunity potential has branched out further when they notified their family, friends, and acquaintances about the opportunity to volunteer for the East Franklin Fire Department.

If there is a fire department not currently utilizing the Make Me A Firefighter campaign, I suggest you stop what you are doing and create a profile through the department portal at <https://portal.nvfc.org>. I thank the NVFC and especially Dr. Candice McDonald for introducing the East Franklin Fire Department to the Make Me A Firefighter campaign and these opportunities for success to help us boost the number of firefighters that we have been able to onboard. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Daughton has been a volunteer firefighter for over 20 years and is currently the assistant chief of the East Franklin Fire Department in Somerset, NJ. As part of his duties, he facilitates his department's recruitment and mentorship programs.



Back Against the Wall, the WBFD Had to Rebuild Itself – And It Did

It was either fix it and start providing excellent service or go away.

By Chief Joe Maruca

In March 2021, the West Barnstable Fire Department (WBFD) received 40 volunteer applications. If we took them all, it would have almost doubled our size. We couldn't, though, as our budget can't afford to equip and train them all and we only have 630 calls a year. As it is, with 50 members, the department sometimes struggles to get plenty of action for each member.

This is what I call "happy trouble." The WBFD is in a position where it can be choosy about who it selects to join. Ultimately this year, we added 14 new volunteers.

How did the WBFD get to a position where it has more applicants than it can add?

It took 15 years of hard work to get to this point. Success at this scale doesn't happen overnight. It starts with a vision for what the department could be. Leadership, both within the department and at the community political level, must be working together and playing the long game. Then, each year, it requires making incremental changes, building on what has been accomplished the year before.

There were mistakes along the way. When something didn't work or was having a detrimental effect, the department had to recognize the issue and make adjustments, and sometimes even dump a particular idea and try something else. We had to toggle back and forth between the small and big pictures to keep perspective and forward motion. No single change was a silver bullet.

Let me start at the beginning. Seventeen years ago, the WBFD had about 20 volunteers on paper, with about a dozen

routinely turning out for emergency calls. The quality of operations was poor. Training met minimum standards, and as a result performance was minimally acceptable. Responses were slow – sometimes patients quit waiting for an ambulance and drove to the hospital instead. Houses burned into their cellars. In a non-binding referendum, the village voted to get rid of the WBFD.

It was either fix it and start providing excellent service or go away.

Updating Information

We started with the basics: job descriptions and applications. As with so many departments, our documents and policies were old and outdated. The volunteer application we were using in 2005 was written in 1984 and asked unlawful and irrelevant questions. It also just looked sloppy. We created a new job description, attached it to a new application and placed a stack of them at the front counter of the fire station so that any firefighter could grab one to give someone.

We now revise the application every three to five years to keep it relevant and lawful. We have added an extra attachment that provides an overview of what being a volunteer firefighter/EMS provider is like, including the rewarding and enjoyable aspects of public service.

Changing Behaviors

The WBFD had to tame reckless driving to emergencies and the oppositional behaviors that had given the department a bad name. In 2004, we weren't viewed as professionals, just as a necessary evil. So we wrote new rules and regulations and started holding members accountable

for their behavior. We also started more rigorous training. Some volunteers left because they didn't want to be told what to do, and the rest of the department found out they were happier and better off without them.

The WBFD has increased training each year. Currently, the typical firefighter does 195 hours of training annually. We discovered that most of the firefighters who complained about "too much training" complained about everything and were mostly involved for their own glory and not helping people. Today, nobody quits our department saying we do too much training. In fact, most of the time when people leave it's because they have gotten career positions with bigger departments, in large part because of our training.

Response Model

Fifteen years ago, the response plan was to blow the siren and activate the pagers and see who showed up. The response was unpredictable, with a small group of firefighters carrying most of the load. It was terrifying to be responding to a call for, say, an unresponsive toddler and not know who would show up with you to help. The WBFD was over-utilizing the mutual aid system to cover its failures, and neighboring departments were complaining.

To fix this, four response groups were created. Each group was on-call eight nights a month on a rotating schedule (one on, one off, one on, five off). If your group was on-call, you had to respond to any call unless you prearranged coverage or an absence. It took six or seven years for this system to fully take hold and for the resisters to either leave or embrace it.

Today, each group is led by a career captain or lieutenant/paramedic and a volunteer lieutenant, and typically has two engineers and six firefighters. Each group is capable of handling most emergency calls during their overnight coverage without calling out the entire department. They have dinners together on their coverage nights, followed by group training, truck checks, station cleaning, and individual driver training. There are liberal allowances for swapping shifts and missing group coverage for work and family matters.

Performance Standards

Over the years, we have adopted written performance standards for EMS responses, building fires, hazmat responses, wildland fire responses, and storm coverage/operations. We started by tracking how many people came to each call and printed a monthly response report. Then we started tracking response times and how long it took to get multiple units at each incident. We used NFPA 1720 and the Standards of Cover Model from the Center for Public Safety Excellence to create these standards and reports.

Today, the performance standard for EMS calls is to have an ambulance with a paramedic and an EMT on location in eight minutes or less 90% of the time. The building fire response says to get an engine and six firefighters on location in 14 minutes or less 80% of the time, and ultimately get a full first alarm response of 12 firefighters, two engines, a ladder, and 4,000 gallons of water (in tankers) to the scene in 24 minutes.

Improved Community Communication

The department provides a written quarterly report to the community showing compliance to performance standards. It lists and explains each incident when the department didn't meet the standard. Additionally, the WBFD annually mails a report to every household outlining the budget, emergency call activity, response times, an organizational chart, and a narrative of operations for the prior year.

The WBFD Facebook page has become a critical part of telling our story and

attracting new volunteers. A strong, positive, and constantly updated presence on Facebook has translated into public support, better funding, and more volunteers. We post photos of training, promotions, awards, new members, or responses to incidents almost daily.

Today, the community sees the WBFD as a highly capable group of professionals who place the community's needs first. It was when the community image shifted from negative to positive that more people wanted to join.

Updating Membership Requirements

We used data to better understand the community and inform our perspective on recruiting. For example, the WBFD learned how calls were increasing while the population remained the same simply because the village was aging. About 30% of village residents are over age 60. That's not a good demographic for attracting new members from the community, and we realized we had to start seeking and accepting volunteers from far and wide.

So we threw out our counterproductive residency rules, and we also started accepting members who choose to be an EMS provider or a firefighter, but not both. We found that requiring members to be both was preventing people from joining. The approach has been to get the volunteer in the door doing what they want to do, and then let them learn about the other aspects of the job at their own pace.

The WBFD has also rejected the traditional paramilitary management model that

most fire departments follow. We still uses ranks and the paramilitary structure at emergency incidents and in training, but have moved all other operations to a management model that is more like a nonprofit charity. New firefighters might find themselves managing a project and having officers collaborate with them, instead of the other way around. Flattening the chain of command for non-emergency and routine matters results in a more productive force overall, and morale is higher.

Seeing the Results

As we started to improve, the community started to see the WBFD in a better light and our reputation among area fire departments improved. Today, the department has some volunteers who are college students in Boston, 65 miles away. They spend one weekend a month at the fire station. Some volunteers who live 10 to 20 miles away are at the station each night their group is on-call. And volunteers are driving past other fire departments to join the WBFD. WBFD alumni are present on 15 area career departments, and as far away as Bridgeport, CA. Three of our alumni have become chief officers at other departments. The word is out that we have the best volunteer training around, and a great work environment.

This has been a success story, but it's also been a long – and sometimes rough – ride. And it will only continue to be a success story if we continue to strive to improve. The takeaway is that this sort of success is replicable. It's my hope that our experiences can help you improve your own department. Take what's here and make it your own. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The **West Barnstable (MA) Fire Department** is located on Cape Cod. It responds to 630 calls per year from a single station. The department has five full-time firefighter/paramedics and 45 volunteers. The community has a population of 3,200 people or about 1,100 households, over 14 square miles. The community is mostly residential and rural, but there is a large public beach, a community college, a YMCA, and a highway with a rest stop/gas station/food service. The author, Joe Maruca, has been chief of the WBFD since 2005 and is a member of the National Volunteer Fire Council Board of Directors.

Recruitment and Retention

TIPS AND TRICKS

By Caroline Stachowiak

Recruitment and retention strategies are unique to each department based on a multitude of factors including size, budget, location, demographics, leadership, etc. In 2019, the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) started its Department Spotlight on Recruitment and Retention series to share ideas and highlight success stories from volunteer fire departments across the country. The tips and tricks below come from organizations that have signed up and use the NVFC's Make Me A Firefighter recruitment campaign.

TIP 1 - Maintain a Social Media Presence

East Franklin (NJ) Fire Department has a very strong presence on social media. The department has a Facebook account which includes a link to their volunteer application. They also have accounts on Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn, and an active web site at Station27.com. Through these outlets, the department shows the public what they do on a day-to-day basis with respect to emergency responses, as well as the good work their membership does in the community.

Silver Hill (MD) Volunteer Fire Department & Rescue Squad, Inc. suggests being visible on social media. New prospects want to see that your station runs calls, not just advertising social hour and/or bingo.

TIP 2 - Recruit High Schoolers/Junior Members

Mulvane (KS) Fire Rescue has a very active Junior Fire Reserve Program. This program recruits 14- through 18-year-olds in high school. Several of the junior members have a family member on the department, while others are pursuing a related career field after high school. They allow these fire reserves to join the department when they turn 18 without going through a new member training class, upon reserve advisor recommendations.

One of South Windsor (CT) Fire Department's longest-running methods to recruiting is still their best, their Explorer program. The numbers fluctuate, but they average 15-25 young adults, male and female between the ages of 14-18. Generally, about 75 percent continue on to join the department as regular firefighters.

Lewisville (NC) Fire Department has partnered with the school system and NC Department of Public Instruction to bring a vocational fire academy to local high schools. This program certifies students to be firefighters and EMTs as a part of their curriculum, providing local volunteer departments with fully qualified fire/EMS responders right out of high school.

TIP 3 - Collaborate with Community Colleges and Students

The Rapid Valley (SD) Volunteer Fire Department implemented a student resident program, providing a dormitory-style residence, kitchen, living area, rooms for school work, and high-speed internet for four students per school year. The students live in the station and respond to incidents overnight. The students receive a monthly stipend, a small scholarship, and all their training and certifications to be a full-trained member.

Daggett (CA) Fire Department consistently collaborates with local community colleges by offering students enrolled in an EMT course the opportunity to apply for the department. Once accepted, the new hires are required to continue and complete their EMT course to be eligible to continue with the department. Once the candidate completes their EMT course, they are ready to begin their in-house fire training.

TIP 4 - Offer In-House or Paid Training

Foothills (CO) Fire & Rescue provides in-house training programs for new recruits to receive state certification at no charge.

The department also provides weekly training classes throughout the year for continuing education and recertification hours, partnering with neighboring departments for well-rounded training.

South Windsor (CT) Fire Department, thanks to local government support, provides new members everything they need, including a full NFPA 1582 physical, a full NFPA-compliant set of turnout gear, pager, access to I Am Responding, and full coverage of insurance by the town. All training, from tuition to books, is covered in addition to a training stipend and use of department vehicles to travel to/from training.

TIP 5 - Provide a Positive Culture and Support

Moscow (ID) Volunteer Fire and Ambulance involves newer members in training and onboarding of the newest volunteers. This provides buy-in and leadership opportunities. The department also offers social gatherings and fun team building events like laser tag, escape rooms, etc.

Lewisville (NC) Fire Department has focused on changing their environment more than any other factor. They found that money is a short-term motivator. Stipend expenditures are still an option to offset out-of-pocket costs for volunteers, but at the end of the day, they found that much like new recruits, they must make current members "want" to be there. Positivity has been key. The fire service is often quick to judge, yet slow to praise. Members have been challenged to self-reflect before voicing a complaint and then offer one or more idea on how to improve in that area.

TRICKS - Think Outside of the Box

Lewisville (NC) Fire Department tries to be forward-thinking regarding emerging technologies. They recently added a UAV (drone) program to their arsenal of

abilities. The department has experienced more interest in this program than any service delivery addition in over two decades.

Mulvane (KS) Fire Rescue has a statewide Firefighter Relief Benefit Fund sponsored through the Kansas Insurance Department. Money is received each year to purchase insurance benefits for firefighters and issue a \$10,000 retirement annuity to each member at 10 years of service. Volunteers receive the annuity with interest after they retire with a minimum of 20 years of service.

Brighton (NY) Fire Department, Inc. has implemented many innovative programs, including creating a "cafeteria plan" of participation models (on-duty, POV response from home; on-duty flycar response from home; on-duty at the firehouse; bunker program for college students; off-duty POV response from home; etc.). They have also engaged with an executive coach from the business community (without fire service experience) to mentor officers, create and

facilitate an advisory team to collect input on big issues and decisions from across the membership, and bring the key leadership team members together on "organizational culture improvement."

Kiowa (CO) Fire Protection District suggests tailoring leadership towards millennials and gen Z and recruit for this demographic as well. Millennials are more committed to volunteering than previous generations, but they need to know it will lead to a career or goal of theirs. Millennials and gens Z follow nonprofits they admire and trust. Being authentic in the public eye builds trust, and authenticity will inspire recruits to join your cause.

No matter the path your department decides to take to recruit and retain volunteers, this advice from the Woodstock (VA) Fire Department rings true: "In order to recruit and retain people, you have to do something. It won't always be right, but you can adjust to continue what is working and to reevaluate what is not. A department that simply stands around complaining that no one is around is the only one doing the wrong thing."

Thank you to all the departments featured here for sharing your tips and tricks with the NVFC. Find the full Department Spotlight on Recruitment and Retention series on the NVFC web site at www.nvfc.org. ■ ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Caroline Stachowiak serves as program manager for the National Volunteer Fire Council. In this role, she oversees initiatives relating to recruitment and retention, health and safety, training, and other critical fire service topics.

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Mentorship Programs for Volunteer Fire Departments

By Jason Decremer, PhD

Your volunteer fire department has gone through the hard work of recruiting a new member.

The new member began as a prospect, with little to no knowledge of what your fire department is tasked to complete on a daily and weekly basis. The prospect became a candidate and successfully went through the interview and background check. The candidate became a probationary member and is beginning the onboarding process. It is at this point in the membership lifecycle that your department should match the probationary member with a mentor.

Volunteer fire departments throughout the United States are facing high turnover rates in their ranks. It is difficult to successfully recruit new members for the long-term until the retention issues are solved. This article will focus on the critical role mentorship programs can play in the retention process and detail tips to build a successful program.

Mentoring as a Retention Tool

Keeping the lines of communication open with new members is a critical piece of their retention. Throughout my years of service in volunteer organizations, I have witnessed multiple occasions when communication with new members simply stopped. As the days and eventual weeks passed, it finally became noticed that the new member(s) were nowhere to be found. The finger pointing began as to who and why there was significant communication breakdown. Developing and successfully managing a mentorship program is one solution to prevent the communication breakdown.

There is a great deal of work that is required to build and properly execute a mentorship program, but when you consider the amount of work

and resources it takes to recruit and onboard members, the investment in the mentorship program is worth it to reduce the chance of losing them.

Building a Mentorship Program

Building a mentorship program is not a task that can be solely managed by one individual. The first step is to form a mentorship committee. This committee should be made up of a member of the recruitment and retention committee, membership committee, a line officer, and two or three other members with interest in building a program. The committee will have several tasks to accomplish, including but not limited to reviewing the department's mission and value statements, developing an SOP/SOG, identifying potential mentors within the department, and selecting a chairperson to spearhead the efforts.

The policy that is developed around your mentorship program needs to include roles and responsibilities for both mentor and mentee. Create a policy that includes how mentors are selected, what their responsibilities will be with their mentees, how often and for how long they need to connect with their mentees, and what are the responsibilities of the mentee to successfully complete the program. Set very clear goals and objectives that can be measured, with the inclusion of timelines. The policy should also include a training section for mentors that teaches them the skills and attributes of becoming an effective mentor.

Roles of the Mentor and Mentee

The individuals that are selected as mentors should be experienced members of your volunteer fire department. They should be goal orientated, calm, caring, and have a positive attitude. A good mentor is also an individual that is a great communicator and is willing to spend time with a new member at least on a weekly basis. The mentorship committee should

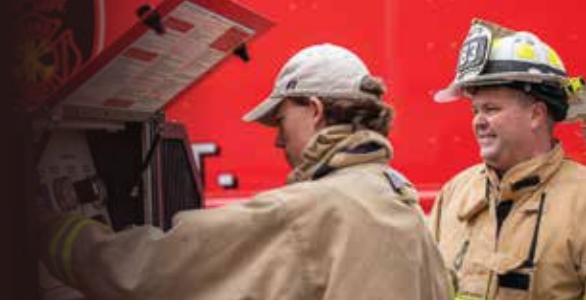
find a mentor that best matches the new member they will be paired with for the next six months or year. When determining how many mentees one person can successfully mentor, a good "rule of thumb" is the span of control model, 3 to 7 with 5 being the ideal maximum. As your mentorship program gets started, it is recommended that mentors work with no more than two mentees at the same time.

The mentee also has responsibilities in this program to ensure that it is successful. They need to be committed to the process and meeting with the mentor on a regular basis. It is important for mentees to be coachable and self-motivated. Mentors need to be encouraging and guide mentees through your established SOPs/SOGs, bylaws, apparatus, equipment, member introductions, etc. Develop a checklist for mentees to complete during the program. Ensure that the checklist is something the mentee can reasonably accomplish – they do not need to know everything in the first six months!

Get to know what skills the mentee can bring to the department. This will help you identify some things they can do right away to get involved in the operation of your volunteer fire department. The precise nature of what they can do is dependent on how policies are written, how long the probationary period lasts, and what the requirements are for completing an entry-level firefighter course. Set these expectations with the mentee at the very beginning of your onboarding program and introduce them to their mentor as soon as possible.

Getting Department Buy-In

A mentorship program is going to be successful if department members are fully invested in the program. This is especially important for department leadership. They must get behind the program 100% and become active, vocal supporters from the very beginning.



Simply stated, the program will not last if not supported by the leadership. As your volunteer fire department begins the exploratory process of beginning a mentorship program, include leadership in the discussions. When the mentorship committee is formalized, ensure that lines of communication are open between the committee chairperson and department leadership. The committee needs to complete the research and be prepared to answer questions regarding the creation of a mentorship program and how it is going to be managed.

Final Thoughts

Your volunteer fire department must always be preparing for the future. Recruit your successor today and begin to build a plan for their long-term success in your organization. The long-term stability of your volunteer fire department is dependent upon identifying future leaders and putting a plan in place for their eventual succession into leadership positions. It starts with your mentorship program. Get leadership behind it, select a committee to manage it,

craft policies that take into account goals and objectives, select the best mentors that are available, and set expectations of the program with mentees.

The mentorship program is a critical piece of your overall retention program. In fact, a survey of current and former volunteers conducted by the National Volunteer Fire Council in 2020 found that establishing a mentorship program was one of the top things respondents indicated would

have a positive impact on department retention. Mentoring is a product of positive encouragement that can lead new members to be inspired and motivated in pursuit of their own goals. Do not discount the impact a good mentoring program can have on morale and engagement in your volunteer fire department. It will help solve your retention problems, which will enable you to more aggressively and successfully recruit. ■ ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jason Decremer, PhD, is the director of certification for the Connecticut Commission on Fire Prevention and Control. He is responsible for over 40 levels of national certification testing for approximately 20,000 firefighters statewide. He also is an adjunct professor at the University of New Haven and Goodwin College and teaches recruitment and retention courses for the International Association of Fire Chiefs. He has been in the volunteer fire service for 20 years and has a PhD in public policy and administration and a master's degree in curriculum design and education.

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SCAN ME

05.26.21 - 06.26.21

Together towards Tomorrow



By Chief Quentin Cash

How many times have you been sitting around the firehouse over the past few years and heard the veteran firefighters and officers complaining about the younger generation? It appears to be as much of a fire service tradition as it is to keep the apparatus in pristine condition. Those same generational complaints were made about us when we started, and about the groups ahead of us. It is not because of our work ethic or attitude; it is because each generation has a different way of doing things. Yet this attitude has an impact; the National Volunteer Fire Council's "Volunteer Retention Research Report" published in August 2020 found that the number three reason that volunteers left their department was generational conflict (14%).

The fire service is starting to move past some of the challenges related to COVID-19, but one big challenge that remains is retention. The National Fire Protection Association's "U.S. Fire Department Profile" report shows that 2017 had the lowest recorded levels of volunteer firefighters since 1983, and the number for 2018 was the second lowest.

Another consideration is the call for social, cultural, and political change sweeping our nation. There is a huge push for diversity and inclusion. People want to be heard

and treated equally. So, we need to turn these two challenges into opportunities to actively retain volunteers. We can better recruit and retain by utilizing our members' differences and generational strengths, not bashing them, to become better departments.

To see how different generations meld together in your department, I compare it to a championship football team like recent champs, Tampa Bay. The roster included 53 players ranging from 21-year-old rookie Devin White to 42-year-old veteran Tom Brady. Brady was a rookie when White was born. The team has offensive, defensive, and special team players. No one person plays the entire game, and no one player makes the difference. It is the combined efforts and skills of all 53 players who work together to win. The coach knows each players' strengths, so he or she uses their talents in the role and position that suits them best; hence the reason defensive linemen do not play wide receiver.

Doesn't a fire department resemble a sports team? Our teams are made up of many different aged individuals with numerous diverse skill sets. The chief acts as the coach and must use their members for their skill sets. So, is your department diverse and are you inclusive of all

members from the new junior firefighter to the 40-year veterans?

If not, think about how you can help each generational group best serve your department. There are lots of different charts that compare generations, but are all similar. One example can be found at <https://kpcompanies.com/how-to-manage-a-multi-generational-workforce/>.

Knowing the characteristics and motivators of each generation is the starting point for using their strengths to benefit the department.

Baby Boomers are goal-oriented, disciplined, team players with strong work ethics. They are motivated and committed to their roles, but they are demotivated by change. They make great mentors, and you should be using them in your department to mentor the younger generations. Just ensure you're recognizing them for these efforts, and do not let them complain about the younger generations' work ethic.

Gen X-ers probably make up most of your department. They are resourceful, self-sufficient, and independent. They love to collaborate with others and enjoy learning new things. These members are looking for good mentors to help them reach the

peak of their careers. They are your "go to people" for juggling multiple projects at once and are demotivated by time-consuming jobs and micromanagement. They are looking for the chance to do more, so allow them opportunities to do the jobs of the rank ahead of them so they can grow. For example, let them lead a training session or manage the equipment inventory records for the department.

Gen Y, or Millennials, are first and foremost passionate. They support causes, love transparency, and are ambitious. They like very flexible work schedules and thrive in a technological world. They are demotivated by being criticized, ambiguity, and slow processes. Allow them to analyze some of your technological items in the department to find areas for improvement, and encourage them to be on the apparatus or equipment committee. They are willing to try new things and enjoy doing the research on them.

Gen-Zers are tech-savvy and multi-taskers. They are highly motivated, love to support

social causes, and love their independence. They are entrepreneurs by nature. They are always "on" because they have been connected to the internet, tablets, and phones for their entire life. They utilize technology to help solve problems and have a short attention span. They look for problems and questions to fix and answer quickly. Use the Gen-Zers to help recruit new members. Let them run your social media, using set parameters. Allow them to be your guinea pigs on new ideas, because they can pick up new developments quicker than any other generation.

No matter what generation you are dealing with, you need to respect the

core values of each group, tailor your communications styles, and give support and feedback as needed.

People are the most important asset of a department. We need to ensure that we are doing everything possible to help our members grow, so our departments continue to thrive. Society is changing and our departments must adapt. Every single person is great at something. Sometimes a good leader must dig a little deeper to find out what. The next generation will be joining departments before we know it, so start preparing now! ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chief Quentin Cash is a volunteer assistant chief with the Cherryville (NC) Fire Department and a career battalion chief at the Shelby (NC) Fire and Rescue Department. He has been in the fire service for 22 years. He also currently serves on the executive board of the North Carolina State Firefighters' Association.

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FSRI

The Psychologically Healthy Fire Department and Volunteer Retention

By Dr. David W. Ballard

Recruiting new volunteers is an important activity for any fire service organization, but retaining the members you already have can be even more important. In the National Volunteer Fire Council's (NVFC) recent research on volunteer retention, two-thirds of respondents indicated that their departments had a retention problem, and almost half of the volunteers said they had considered leaving the fire service at some point.

Turnover can have a major impact in terms of both training costs and department cohesiveness and performance. Studies also show that high turnover and struggling to retain members can increase stress and burnout risk and negatively affect morale for those who continue to serve.

Drivers of Turnover

The reasons volunteers leave vary, but research suggests that organizational issues, such as poor leadership, ineffective training, and a lack of communication, play a major role and can even cause more stress and dissatisfaction than operational factors. Former volunteers who responded to the NVFC survey cited a department atmosphere characterized by exclusion, conflict, and a lack of camaraderie, and unsupportive leadership as their most common reasons for leaving.

Combined with the high stress and exposure to potentially traumatic experiences that emergency responders routinely face, these organizational issues, can contribute to depression, burnout, and turnover intent, as well as amplify the impact of traumatic exposure on psychological distress. Poor mental health is the primary cause of disability worldwide and the impact on lost productivity, absenteeism, and turnover is often greater than those related to physical health concerns. So, retaining volunteers and keeping them at the top of their game requires a department-wide effort.

The Psychologically Healthy Fire Department

The critical role organizational factors play in member well-being and volunteer retention highlights the importance of creating a psychologically healthy fire department that supports members while enhancing department performance. Fire service leaders can create a positive department culture that also helps attract and retain top-quality personnel by:

- Involving members in problem solving and decision making;
- Promoting health and safety, including behavioral health;
- Helping volunteers juggle their fire service and other life demands;
- Providing opportunities for professional development;
- Ensuring volunteers feel appreciated for their service; and
- Communicating effectively.

The American Psychological Association routinely found organizations that developed a psychologically healthy workplace had average turnover of less than half the rate in the U.S. workforce as a whole.

You can find more information in the NVFC's *Psychologically Healthy Fire Departments: Implementation Toolkit* available at www.nvfc.org/help.

Taking Action

Here are some other ways departments can support the mental well-being of members and retain volunteers.

- **Demonstrate leadership support.** Train department leaders to communicate openly and transparently, employ effective recognition techniques, provide constructive feedback, involve members in decision-making, manage conflict within the department, and serve as positive role models.
- **Prevent and address counterproductive behaviors.** Set clear expectations about civility and respect, take disciplinary action when bullying, harassment, or discrimination occurs, and promote and model a culture of trust, fairness, and inclusion.
- **Strengthen behavioral health efforts.** Regularly include mental health topics in your department communications, make information about behavioral health resources easily available, train department leaders in how to engage and support members around mental health, and develop a peer support team that can respond when a member needs assistance.
- **Support your veteran members.** Some research suggests that emergency responders who have served longer may have higher risks of behavioral health problems and receive less social and leadership support. Make sure your long-term volunteers get the help they need, too.

By taking a broad-based approach to supporting member well-being and attending to the organizational issues that can facilitate or impede those efforts, departments can create a culture where morale is high and volunteers are committed to each other and to long-term service to the community. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David W. Ballard, PsyD, MBA, is an organizational consultant specializing in promoting employee well-being and organizational performance through the integration of psychology and business. During his time at the American Psychological Association, he led the Office of Applied Psychology, Center for Organizational Excellence, and Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program.

You Have the Power to Make Your Department a Place People Want to Be

Diversity is a FACT.



DIVERSE

Inclusion is an ACT.



versus

INCLUSIVE

DIVERSITY refers to people of different ages, cultural backgrounds, physical abilities, genders, religions, personalities, educational backgrounds, skills sets, sexual orientation, and more.

INCLUSION is an environment where all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully, have equal access to opportunities and resources, and contribute fully to the department's success.

Actions to Create an Inclusive Department:

- **Empowerment.** Encourage your team to learn new skills, bring ideas to the table, and solve problems. Provide opportunities for growth.
- **Respect.** Treat others as you want them to treat you. Learn from different points of view and seek to understand. Handle disagreements in a constructive and professional manner.
- **Equity.** Different people need different things to reach the same goal or demonstrate a skill. As long as the job gets done and safety protocols are followed, it is okay to make adjustments for differences such as height or strength.
- **Accountability.** Take responsibility for your decisions and performance. Have pride in your successes, learn from mistakes, and be open to criticism in areas you can improve.
- **Acceptance.** Make room for everyone in your department. Each individual brings skills, knowledge, and experience that can benefit the team.
- **Camaraderie.** Lift up instead of tear down. Remember that we are all on the same team. Help each other out.
- **Courage.** Stand up for what you think is right, even when it means taking a risk. Try to find others who can support you.

Benefits to a Diverse & Inclusive Department:

- Strengthens our organization
- Builds better communities
- Helps with recruitment and retention
- Enables effective communication
- Helps us meet our mission



An Honest Look at Work-Life-Volunteer Balance and How to Level the Scales



BY DR. CANDICE MCDONALD

The concept of work-life-volunteer balance is not something new to me. In fact, the need for volunteer firefighters to establish a healthy balance between home, career, and volunteer life was one of the key themes in a three-year research project I conducted from 2013 – 2016 on retention in the volunteer fire service.

Like many, when I first joined the fire service I had a strong passion for service, and I gave a 110% at a local, state, and national level. For the first several years, I proudly held the title of being in the Annual Top Three First Responders. As the founding EMS Officer, I invested a lot of time to start our township's EMS program. I had a strong passion to keep serving and growing our efforts.

Fast forward 15 years, to the era in my life where I became my research and started to resent the fire service. As my kids started to age, our weeknights started to fill with soccer, swim, and band activities. I found myself being forced to pick between the fire service and being on the sidelines to cheer my kids on. When I landed my dream job, it came with a 1.5-hour commute. I

was forced between driving straight to the firehouse after work or going home to help my youngest with homework. No matter what choice I made, guilt and resentment of either being a bad fire sister or a bad mom weighed heavy.

If I didn't show up for my kids, I would see disappointment in their faces. If I picked staying home to help my child with a research project, I knew someone was bound to tell the chief my car was in the driveway and that I chose NOT to come on a call or to a training. When I was at the firehouse, I felt grumpy all the time, because I wanted to be home to help my kids, or I couldn't stop thinking about the huge work project I needed to finish when I got home.

The volunteer fire service has a long history of being an "All or Nothing" culture. We expect our volunteers to be ALL things. When volunteers don't show up for a time period, then come back, we make jokes like, "Who are you? Would you like an application?" I am just as guilty as the next firefighter for being a part of this negative culture, back when I was boastfully in the "Top Three" ranking. I am ashamed that I thought and behaved that way towards

others. Every second one volunteers is valuable. It doesn't matter if you are in the top or the bottom, it just matters if you serve.

We need to embrace that people want to give, not the amount of time that they can give. I made judgements because I didn't understand the need for Work-Life-Volunteer Balance for retention and mental health wellness. I was only looking at life through my own lens, not that of those with different situations.

Many of our volunteer firefighters are working full-time jobs AND a part-time job (or two), raising families, taking care of aging parents, taking classes to grow their skills, working to get a promotion in their career, etc. In today's era of busy, any amount of time a volunteer can donate to the fire department is a true gift. We need to treat even the smallest amount of time as a just that.

During my research, I found that 70% of volunteer firefighters report a failure to balance volunteer and family commitments. This lack of balance can lead to emotional exhaustion,

disengagement, and even resentment. Fire service leaders should consider the needs of their internal stakeholders to avoid volunteer burnout.

I offer the following six tips to level the Work-Life-Volunteer Balance scales:

1

Training Schedule Accommodation

Schedule accommodation was one of the top strategies found in my research for addressing volunteer retention. Move away from the typical Monday night weekly training and offer multiple days for volunteers to attend training. Develop a lesson plan based on the training topic and repeat that same training on different days. Include your standard training night, another training session during the day during the week, and one on the weekend. Offering a training during the day allows those who work afternoons or midnights to attend. Offering a day on the weekend allows those with other commitments (family or work) during the week to attend. We need to remove the tug-a-war between home life and fire department life.

2

Hours NOT Percentages

Another schedule accommodation solution is the need to move away from a required percentage of calls to be an active member and move to a number of hours you can donate in a month approach. We can't predict when emergencies happen, but we can predict how many hours we can donate to the fire service. Allowing firefighters to move to a duty calendar over a percent requirement gives the volunteer control to balance the scales. One firefighter could meet their 10 hours of service requirement for the month by scheduling to spend an entire Saturday at the station washing trucks, being available to run calls, cleaning the stations, teaching fire prevention, inspections, etc. Another firefighter might need to break those 10 hours up and do a couple of hours each week based on when they have childcare. Allowing our volunteers to decide when they donate time helps to remove the guilt of having to be away from family or the firehouse.

3

Move from an All to Some Culture

Allow your firefighters that are struggling to balance the scales by giving them the opportunity to give SOME without expecting ALL. Instead of forcing a volunteer to resign, or pick the fire department over family/work, allow the volunteer to reduce their duties. For example, give them permission to only do fire prevention and fire inspections, WITHOUT making them feel guilty for reducing duties. These are two activities that can be scheduled. Forcing a member to resign because they can't make calls or training is a loss of a financial investment for the department. Allowing a member to stay on to do some duties allows the department to continue to get a return on the initial training investment. Chances are, when life slows down (job or family), the volunteer will move back to wanting to take on more duties.

4

Allow for Leaves of Absence WITHOUT Ridicule

Make it ok for a member to take a leave of absence while they are taking care of an aging parent, taking care of an infant, taking on extra duties at work, going back to college, etc. If a member needs to take a six-month respite from the fire service, let them WITHOUT ridicule. Show the volunteer you support them by offering

the break. Continue to reach out to keep connected with them so that they know you care and that there is a spot waiting for them when they are ready to return.

5

Encourage Family Inclusion

Another big theme for successful retention was a need for family inclusion. The research indicated that when family support was present, volunteer firefighters were more likely to engage. Engaging the family in the fire service can help level the scales by offering events that the family can do together. Some ideas for engagement include hosting family activities, offer (but don't force) opportunities for family members to help out, and survey families on how the department can better meet their needs.

6

Family and Member First Culture Change

Develop a culture where family and individual needs come first. Let members know that the department values them and their families. Make sure members know they don't have to pick between little Johnny's soccer game and the fire department; little Johnny comes first. Let members who are trying to excel at their job by attending extra training or working overtime know that you are cheering for them. Create a culture of support to avoid volunteer resentment. ■■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Candice McDonald has served her community for almost two decades as a firefighter, EMT, EMS officer, CE instructor, fire inspector, and PIO. She is the 2nd VP for the Cumberland Valley Volunteer Firemen's Association, trustee with Women in Fire, member of the FDIC/Fire Engineering Advisory Board and serves the National Volunteer Fire Council as a Fire Corps State Advocate. She works for NASA in the Office of Protective Services as a special agent/physical security specialist. She is an adjunct marketing professor for Eastern Gateway Community College. She holds a doctor of business administration with a specialty in homeland security, a master's in organizational leadership, a bachelor's in organizational management, and an associate's in human services. Connect with Dr. Candice @KSUCandice www.CandiceMcDonald.com

Local Government Can Provide Needed Support to Help with Fire Department Staffing Needs

By Thomas J. Wieczorek

Across the United States, fire departments are struggling to attract, recruit, and retain volunteers. In many communities, the lack of volunteers is becoming critical. Fire and EMS agencies need people to perform the tasks necessary to return an emergency back to a state of normalcy. If people are not volunteering, the fire and EMS services are left critically short when emergencies occur.

The demands on chief officers are also mounting. Anyone who has been chief quickly finds out that the position does not just function at emergencies. Emergencies and calls for service often make up one of the smaller time challenges for a fire and EMS chief. It is all the “other stuff” that is required of a well-run and well-organized department that can quickly consume all the available time of the chief.

So, what can be done to help departments meet these challenges? There are many opportunities for local departments to collaborate with local governments to find solutions.

Forming a Partnership with Local Government

Volunteer, paid on call (POC), and combination departments provide critical public safety services to municipalities – or “the authority having jurisdiction” (AHJ).

The first step in working in conjunction with your AHJ may require education; elected and appointed officials need to fully understand the role that your agency plays in providing emergency services to the community. Too often the only appearance by the department is when something is needed – usually an engine, ladder truck, or expensive piece(s) of PPE.

But do you interact in between these times? Do you attend council or board meetings and provide updates on what your organization provides to the community? As one looks at the expense side for local governments, the least expensive operation are fully volunteer departments that continue to struggle for members. The next least expensive option is POC followed by combination departments. Showing the level of value that your organization provides to the community is a great way to begin discussions on how both the AHJ and department can work together to get continued value. You can use the National Volunteer Fire Council’s Cost Savings Calculator tool found on their web site to help calculate the savings your local department provides.

During a recent visit to Europe, the President remarked how valuable in-person, face-to-face meetings were to establishing good working relationships. That value is not just for high-ranking federal officials; the same holds true for

chiefs of volunteer and combination departments and the AHJ officials that receive service. Often those people only hear when things are in crisis, or something happens of a critical nature. Having a good working relationship can often diffuse misunderstandings and establish trust.

In addition, inviting elected and appointed officials to a training session – letting them feel and touch the equipment, interact with your membership, and see all the department does for the community – can not only develop a better understanding of how each can help the other but also allows an opportunity to show the community what a value they receive through the fire and EMS department.

Sharing strategic plans will also educate the AHJ, and may assist with recruiting people who want to serve the community in an excellent service. Developing and asking to present an annual report shows not only the AHJ but members of the community (who may be candidates for recruitment) what opportunities exist.

Working Together for the Common Good

Local governments can assist chiefs with many of the time-consuming areas that take place in identifying, recruiting, and retaining members.



- Does the AHJ have an HR department? Can it assist in advertising on a regular basis for attracting volunteers and POC through city web sites, on water/utility bills, on tax bills, and at meetings with businesses and groups in the community?
- Can the AHJ help with screening applicants, performing background checks, and ensuring that applicants meet the standards of the AHJ and department?
- Can the AHJ include the members of the department in governmental service award programs and appreciation events? Most volunteers contribute their time and talent to help their community – not for money. Recognizing when an outstanding job is delivered (lifesaving, sudden cardiac arrest saves, quick fire attacks) can go a long way with ensuring that volunteer or POC members feel appreciated for their efforts.
- Are new members introduced at official governmental meetings? Perhaps sworn in before the AHJ? Many people have never met the mayor, city manager, or other officials; adding that opportunity can develop a good morale and feeling that this is an organization one wants to become affiliated with.
- Can the AHJ set up personnel files and retain the records for the required periods of time?

In one community with which the Center for Public Safety Management worked, we met a woman who was widowed but loved the fire service. She was one of the only full-time employees paid by the county. She became an invaluable promoter for the fire department. If you went into a business or factory, you saw a recruiting poster. Water bills, tax bills, and city newsletters all had "We Want You" advertisements. Schools had posters and notes in materials regularly sent home with students. She also included the spouses and families of department members in activities ranging from pizza nights to a summer carnival. The result was that the department had 130 volunteers in a community of 13,000 residents. Not only did the members feel engaged, their spouses and families felt appreciated. And those sometimes make the best recruitment pools for the future.

Getting to those levels requires effort – usually around a relationship – but can save countless hours on the part of the chief and other department personnel while reaching people who may never have realized these openings exist.

Raising that community awareness is key. In my own department, our volunteers (POC) had dwindled to about three active members when I took over as chief. We partnered with the local government to advertise throughout the community and in very short order had 33 applicants wanting to join the department. About 20-25 made it through training and were either active or regular contributors to the department.

Outside of the front office, one of the most valuable relationships my department established was with the public works and public utilities departments. Many communities have state-certified labs within their public utilities department that can assist with everything from air sampling to water quality. Their employees are often looking for other opportunities to serve the community. They may not always be available to fight fire or make an EMS run, but handling chemicals, maintaining data bases for hazardous materials, and other similar services can help the department avoid penalties if inspected as well as allow the department to engage with the community.

Public works agencies can also help with barricades, plowing ahead of heavy equipment during winter months, building various tools (ours built our first hose washer out of surplus parts and pipe at \$0 cost), or even maintenance of tools

and equipment. Public works employees can often be interrupted during the day and may provide needed staff, but it takes support of the AHJ.

All these suggestions require understanding the needs of each other. For many in local government, they know the fire and EMS services exist, but they come to the forefront only when a problem develops. Building relationships ahead of time is critical to the success of departments and enables the community to continue to utilize one of the least expensive options for service delivery. ■ ■ ■

UPCOMING RESOURCE

The National Volunteer Fire Council and U.S. Fire Administration are developing a new guide on *Retention & Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services*. This guide will cover:

- Challenges facing fire and EMS departments
- Strategies for recruitment and retention
- Equity and inclusion
- Marketing tactics
- Critical role of local government and collaborating with them
- Utilizing data to drive R&R efforts
- Funding R&R efforts
- Real-life examples and case studies

The guide is expected to be released later this calendar year and will be available on the NVFC and USFA web sites.

Stay tuned for information on its release at www.nvfc.org and www.usfa.fema.gov.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Wieczorek is the director of the Center for Public Safety Management. He has served as a police officer, fire chief, director of public safety, and city manager, and is former executive director of the Center for Public Safety Excellence. Among his many roles, he is past president of the Michigan Local Government Manager's Association, served as the vice chair of the Commission on Fire Officer Designation and the Commission on Fire Accreditation International, and represents ICMA on the Emergency Management Assistance Compact board of directors and the NFPA 1710 and 1730 committees.

Professional Tactics for Recruiting (And Keeping) Fire and EMS Volunteers

By Tiger Schmittendorf

Attracting new recruits may be more challenging than ever, but the tools available are more effective than ever. From specialized support programs to targeted advertising and technology, fire departments should leverage all their options to gain the attention of quality candidates.

Utilize Free Tools

The first place to begin is with the National Volunteer Fire Council's free Make Me A Firefighter program. It provides U.S.-based volunteer fire and EMS departments with a variety of tools for recruitment efforts, including invitations, postcards, posters, and social media images, all of which departments can customize to fit their own needs. There are also guides on marketing, ideas for recruitment events, and more – including a national database where departments can post their volunteer opportunities for candidates seeking positions in their area.

Apply for a SAFER Grant

To take things up a notch, departments can apply for FEMA's Staffing for Adequate Fire & Emergency Response (SAFER) grant. SAFER grants can be used to fund recruitment and retention efforts such as marketing programs, member progression incentives, PPE for new recruits, and more. Departments should check the program web site for the next deadline to apply, and plan time to read the guidelines and prepare.

Take Advantage of Google for Nonprofits

Departments that are qualified 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations can sign up

for the Google for Nonprofits program, which includes a value of \$10,000/month in search advertising that departments can use for recruitment, fundraising, event promotions, and more. It also offers organizations unlimited free email accounts, Google Drive storage, shared calendars, and YouTube enhancements.

Focus on Your Web Site

No matter how prospective new recruits first hear of a department, their next stop is nearly always the web site. This is where they size up a department's volunteering opportunities, benefits, membership expectations, culture, and yes, their professionalism. It's vital to make a good impression.

A single page with a logo and address is not going to cut it. A page that hasn't been updated this year – or this decade – is not going to cut it. Departments need to show who they are. Personalization is the key to standing out from the crowd, as well as connecting with those candidates that are most likely to align with their needs and expectations.

Display recruitment information prominently on the home page and make it the first menu item in the top navigation so it can't be missed. Personalize the site with stories on how and why members became volunteer firefighters or EMTs. Highlight the department's history, as well as what makes members proud to participate today. Also cover all the logistics of joining. Include any tangible benefits of being a volunteer, what training and equipment is provided/required, and answer any frequently asked questions. The recruitment webpage should have an online inquiry form for candidates to easily apply and get the volunteering conversation started.

Market Your Opportunities

To draw candidates to a fire department web site, departments need to advertise. Facebook and Instagram are among the easiest and most effective ways to target potential volunteers, but don't be afraid to experiment with other platforms. For very little cost, these campaigns can bring a quick and significant return. To fully leverage social media advertising campaigns, departments should look into

targeting specific demographics, as well as "boosting" posts on Facebook (such as status updates, videos, and photos) to reach more people and get more mileage from their content.

To take a fire department's online presence to the next level, video is key. Video posts on Facebook are the leading driver of volunteer recruitment interest among the departments we serve at First Arriving. Whether they are phone-snapped or professionally produced, they make a difference.

Videos should aim to show what makes your department different. This means going beyond basic lights and sirens response videos, which may look exciting, but also all look similar. Departments should show things like the types (and volume) of calls they run, their people and culture, their fleet, their community engagement, and more. These are what tell each department's story and help recruits connect.

Departments can take their advertising even further with local radio, TV, and other media outlets, as many provide free advertising to local nonprofit and community organizations. To inquire, departments should call the main number at their local media outlets and request the contact for community relations and public service announcements.

Host Recruitment Events

Hosting scheduled recruitment events gets prospective members in the door. It helps to set a fixed schedule for these events (such as once per month, or once per quarter) and to post these dates online, on signs in front of the station, and on community calendars so recruits know when to come and current members can better coordinate.

During these events, departments can provide tours of their facilities and equipment, have prospective recruits meet other members, and walk them through all the next steps from this initial visit through their first year or two of membership.

It's vital that departments are clear about their time commitment and other requirements, as this is the final

opportunity to identify the best prospects and weed out those who will not be able to meet the stated expectations. Recruitment is more about quality than quantity.

Finally, departments should provide a Prospective Member Guide, application packets, and plenty of time to answer questions. They should be ready to schedule ride-alongs or whatever else comes next in their process.

Keep New Recruits Engaged

Once a department has qualified applicants, it's important to track them through the entire recruitment process to ensure no recruit is lost due to lack of follow-up from the department. Make next-steps simple with tools such as online scheduling for background checks and training. Have a centralized recruitment calendar and multiple people to share the recruitment workflow so it stays on track. Keep prospects engaged with emails, phone calls, and invitations to any events or ride along programs. Provide a clear

point of contact to address any questions, concerns, or issues they may have during the recruitment process.

Once a new member is on board, set them up for success. Consider assigning a more experienced member to help walk them through their first experiences. Track their training progress to see if they need help. Provide them with a "New Member Guide" with all the information they'll need. To

create this document, ask longstanding members what they wish new members knew sooner – and ask newer members what they wish they had known sooner.

Departments should continually evaluate the impacts of their recruitment programs. It's ok to adjust or end any strategies that aren't working to ensure that time and resources are well-spent, and that any membership growth remains positive. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tiger Schmittendorf is vice president of strategic services for First Arriving, a full-service marketing team supporting the public safety community. He served the Erie County Department of Homeland Security & Emergency Services (Buffalo, NY) for more than 20 years before retiring as deputy fire coordinator in 2018. A frequent presenter on leadership, incident management, connecting generations, and recruitment and retention, he is a nationally certified fire instructor and has been a firefighter since 1980. Connect with him at tiger@firstarriving.com or visit his web sites: tigerschmittendorf.com, FireRECRUITER.com, RuntotheCurb.com, and Soldierfirefighter.com.



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ADAPTING FOR THE FUTURE:

How One State Rethought Training to Meet Volunteer Needs



By Sheri Nickel

As the recruitment and retention coordinator for my state fire association, I am often asked how we can improve recruitment and retention in our volunteer fire departments. I don't claim to be an expert in this field by any means. I have sat through classes presented by well known "experts" who claim to have the answers as to what we need to do to keep our departments fully staffed. But, at the end of the presentations when I have asked them how to overcome problems that we have in Oklahoma, I have not been greeted with healthy answers. Most often the responses are along the lines of: "Do you really want those kinds of people in your fire department?" Perhaps not, but not all of us have the luxury of a waiting list of people that want to be a volunteer firefighter, and we have to find the strengths in our citizens and utilize what someone can bring to the table.

Not only is it hard to get good firefighters into a department, it is hard to keep them. Getting minimum training out to our people seems to be more of a hassle at times than it is worth. People have messy lives and struggle with concerns at home

such as marriage, finances, or children who occupy their attention preventing them from sitting in a classroom two nights a week for six months. Yet as leaders, we have to figure out ways to train them and keep them safe.

With the financial assistance of a SAFER grant awarded to the Oklahoma State Firefighter's Association, we conducted a year-long study to identify the biggest needs of our fire departments. The most common answer was training. This isn't too surprising in a state without training mandates nor any permanent source of funding for our state's training agency.

To address this need, we were able to use the SAFER grant funds to enhance where we were lacking and began implementing online Firefighter 1 classes throughout Oklahoma. We offer them regionally and allow students to do their coursework at their own leisure, assigning deadlines for them to get their work done before they attend hands-on skills days. It may be argued by the nay-sayers that the quality of the firefighters that graduate from a hybrid program versus those who complete the traditional, in-person academy may be less desirable, but the average annual number of volunteers

trained to this level prior to 2018 was 45 and now it is 125. It is easy to see that the majority of the firefighters in these classes would have never completed a traditional in-person academy.

There are some students that feel overwhelmed that they are trying to learn this simply from a book and videos, while others are embracing the fact that they don't have to sit in a classroom. One guy described it as trying to "drink from a fire hydrant." However, most everyone agrees that is the nature of the beast for Firefighter 1 whether you are in a classroom or not.

We have identified all different types of issues that have inhibited our firefighters from pursuing training at this level and have adapted to their needs. Some aren't confident in their reading and testing abilities, while others have time restrictions making it difficult to sit down and read the material. This resulted in us working with Fire Protection Publications to develop an audio book that can be listened to as they read along or while they are driving their combines through their farm ground.

The camaraderie that is being built by mixing firefighters and instructors from

departments regionally far exceeds the expectations that we began with when designing this model. I have heard career firefighters talk about the lifelong friends they met while attending a traditional FF1 academy. I feel safe to say that this same "brotherhood" is being established with our model. Firefighters from different departments have said that they were intimidated to be in a class with other area departments that are bigger or better trained in their eyes, but in the end, after 40-hours of hardcore skills days with each other, the confidence to work with those departments is well established. The instructors are taking these classes very seriously and students are exhausted at the end of the day.

By offering an online FF1 class in the most rural parts of the state and having the success that we've seen demonstrates that these volunteer firefighters have the personal discipline to learn the curriculum on their own time while working as farmers/ranchers, teachers/coaches, bankers, cops, oilfield workers, or whatever

other jobs that may be required in small towns. They then report for skills days every other weekend for about 12 weeks.

Additionally, we offer new recruits a full NFPA firefighter physical that clears them for presumptive health issues that allows them to enter into the firefighter's pension system with a clean bill of health. We also provide these candidates with a full set of PPE once they pass the required IFSAC test at the end of their class. Additional financial incentives are available as well.

While training our firefighters is just one aspect of building a better fire department, it may be the most important

one to consider. Firefighters who invest the time to become certified are more confident and less likely to just walk away when things go south. By taking the training to them and letting them balance their own schedules, we are moving towards the new norm of training and removing a large majority of the excuses of why someone can't do it.

None of us want to have to report to a firefighter's family that their loved one has been injured and may not come home to them. So, whether this model will work for you or not, I encourage you to consider alternative ways to help your firefighters be the best they can be. Stay safe! ■■■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sheri Nickel is the administrative director and recruitment and retention coordinator for the Oklahoma State Firefighters Association. She is also a volunteer firefighter/EMT and the director from Oklahoma on the National Volunteer Fire Council's board of directors.

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Leadership's Impact on Recruitment and Retention



By Thomas A. Merrill

You don't have to be in the volunteer fire service to be aware that there is a serious problem when it comes to recruiting members. It seems like every day there are news stories highlighting the plunging membership rolls in America's volunteer fire departments. It's a serious problem, and there is a lot of time, energy, and money being put into the recruitment effort. Perhaps an even bigger factor in the staffing shortage is the challenge of keeping new members after we successfully get them on board.

I recently presented a class focusing on the problem of members leaving their volunteer fire department. I did quite a bit of research and found that department leadership has an impact on both recruitment and retention. Now certainly, there are some things that are out of the department leaders' personal control when it comes to losing members. For example, they can't prevent a member from relocating due to employment opportunities. But there are many things that are under the leader's control that can

help to bring in new members and keep the ones they have.

All Members are Recruiters

First and foremost, leaders need to ensure they are delivering the message that the department's entire membership are recruitment ambassadors. Sure, there may be a committee that puts together advertising campaigns or organizes membership drives, but every single department member has the potential to bring in additional members. Simple actions such as how they behave can serve to entice people – or dissuade them. Who wants to join an organization filled with mean spirited or belligerent members? Just the same, members who behave appropriately and demonstrate respect and proper decorum with those they come in contact with certainly serve as better recruitment ambassadors for the department.

Members should be encouraged to speak positively about the department and be careful not to paint a doomsday scenario. Who wants to board a sinking ship? Remind members to talk about the many positive attributes that come with the membership such as the great training,

the second family they become part of, and the bonds of friendships that will last generations. Leaders need to remind the membership of their impact on the recruitment process and at the same time, need to understand they are held to the same standards themselves.

Create a Recruitment Mechanism

Sometimes departments lose members even before they have them, and strong leadership can make a difference here. There was a 20-something who spent a couple years with my department before his wife's job took him several hundred miles away. He was a certified interior firefighter and an EMT, and any one of our department members would have given him a glowing recommendation. Who wouldn't want a new member of this quality?

Well, he stopped at his new local firehouse one night and the members there didn't know how to get an application into his hand. He stopped back a second time, and they took his phone number, but no one called him back. So, he went to their web site to try and find contact information for anyone who might be able to help him become a member only to

find the web site hadn't been updated in years. When he emailed one of addresses listed, it bounced back. He finally gave up and never joined. This volunteer fire department lost a member before they even had him. This is a failure of leadership on many levels.

This is also a pretty easy fix for department leaders. They should spend a little time ensuring that everybody in the department is well versed in the recruitment process. All members should know where the applications are kept and what to do and say when somebody expresses an interest in joining. At the very least, leadership should instruct them to get the interested person's name and phone number so a department representative can call them back. And then make sure there is a designated person who follows through and does call candidates back.

Keep Information Up to Date

A very simple expectation people have today is that a company's web site and social media pages are kept up to date with accurate information. Leadership should designate a person to be in charge of this because people will go to these sites seeking membership information. If the information isn't there or isn't up to date, they will move on to other things. These sites also need to be monitored in case a community member asks for membership information. If they are not contacted in a timely manner, it's easy to lose them. Think how upset you probably have gotten when a company's business web site was unorganized and outdated. You probably didn't form a very favorable opinion of it, and in our case, it will cost us members.

Onboard New Members

While putting together the presentation, it amazed me how many members left the organization after only a very short time. Further analysis indicated this was often the result of poor onboarding that left the new member confused and disengaged. Again, strong leadership putting together strong programs can help here.

A well-organized onboarding program will start a new member out in the right

direction. Done correctly, they are kept informed and involved and made to feel like an important member of the team from the start. Think of any job you may have had that had either a poor or really good onboarding process and how it impacted your impression of the organization. Gone are the days of simply throwing gear at a member and telling them to just start going to calls. That approach can leave them confused, disenchanted, and even unsafe.

Many leaders fail to realize just how important good onboarding can be when it comes to keeping members. Employees who participate in a structured onboarding program are 69% more likely to stay with an organization for three years. A formal orientation program is a great way to start new members off in their volunteer firefighting career, and leaders should ensure one is in place in their department.

Set the Tone

Leaders do not have to be everybody's best friend, but they certainly need to treat everybody with kindness and respect. Leaders set the overall organizational tone and that tone is palpable to the entire membership. If it's negative and filled with conflict, or members feel as if they are not valued, they will not be very motivated and may even choose to leave. Leaders also set the tone for accepted organizational behavior. It's 2021 and the volunteer fire service needs to be accepting, diversified, and inclusive. Bullying, harassment, and discriminatory actions cannot be condoned, and leadership sets the example that others will follow and emulate.

Leadership Development

Leaders need to be honest with themselves about the impact they are having on their organization. In one of the surveys I reviewed, 70% of current department leaders recognized that retention was a big problem for their agency, but the majority believed that members were leaving because they were having trouble juggling the time commitment for being a volunteer with their personal life. In the same survey, former members reported they left due to poor leadership. Wow!

Leadership training is paramount to learn how to better work with, understand, and motivate members. As members progress through the ranks and take on leadership roles, they need to continue to receive leadership education and training. Remember, not all leaders are officers. No doubt, we want strong officers to develop into strong and effective leaders, but true leadership is not defined by any collar insignia or fancy title. Any department member can be looked up to as a leader. And leaders can impact the retention of members in a very good way, or a very bad way.

The recruitment and retention of new members is of paramount importance for the long-term success and survival of any volunteer fire department. Agencies have spent a lot of money and put forth incredible effort in attempts to slow the membership bleed. The fact is, strong department leadership can be the most important link when it comes to not just bringing new members in, but keeping them as well. ■ ■

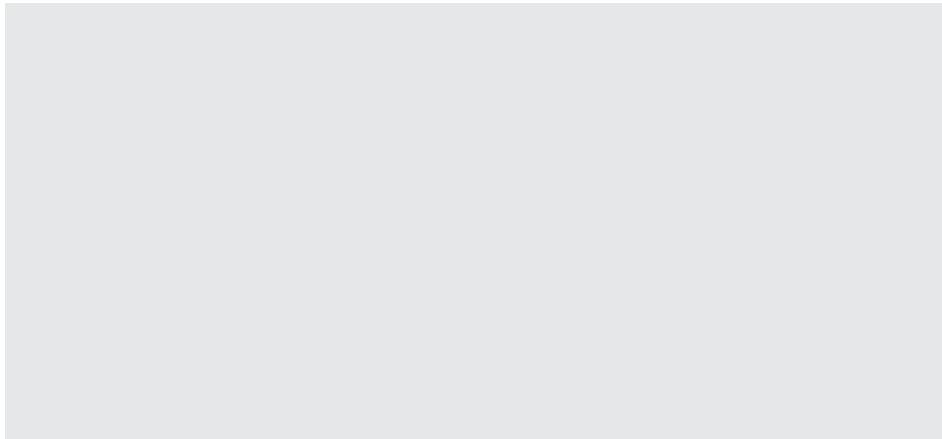
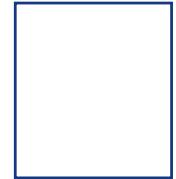


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Merrill is a 38-year fire department veteran and serves with the Snyder Fire Department in Amherst, NY. He served 26 years as a department officer, was chief of department from 2007-2012, and currently serves as fire commissioner for Snyder Fire District. Tom has conducted various fire service presentations throughout the country and is the author of the series of articles "The Professional Volunteer Fire Department" which is featured on Fire Engineering's web site. He hosts a Fire Engineering podcast as well.



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