

Guide to Best Practices in Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention

Facts

- The ranks of volunteer firefighters have declined from 300,000 in the 1970s to 70,000 in the 1990s and Pennsylvania State Fire Commissioner Edward A. Mann estimates that there are currently about 50,000 volunteers across the state.
- There are 2,400 fire departments spread across the state's 67 counties. Recent state legislation made municipal governments completely responsible for the provision of fire protection and emergency medical services.
- A study conducted by the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute (PFESI) in 2001 found that volunteer fire service companies yielded about \$6 billion in avoided costs to local governments. Figures from Independent Sector, a coalition of non-profit organizations, suggest that the hourly value of a Pennsylvania volunteer firefighter is \$20.51.
- Volunteer fire service programs receive approximately \$150 million a year through the Pennsylvania Volunteer Firefighter Relief Association Program and the Volunteer Ambulance Service Grant Program.

Myths and Misconceptions

- Many taxpayers believe that the local services tax funds fire departments. While some of the tax revenues are used by municipal governments to fund emergency services, volunteer fire departments do not receive any portion of the tax revenue.
- One common misconception about fire service programs is that stringent state training requirements were largely responsible for the difficulties such companies face in recruiting and retaining firefighters. Pennsylvania does not require any level of training for state firefighters.
- Some speakers stated that elected officials may not realize the dire financial circumstances facing many volunteer fire departments and that municipalities would have to hire career departments if they lost their volunteer companies.

Complaints and Concerns

- Mann claimed that the two main reasons why volunteer firefighters quit the company were due to firehouse politics and onerous fundraising requirements. Many firefighters stated their dissatisfaction with the time they spent hosting bingo games and chicken

barbecues. Exit surveys in Montgomery County, Pa., revealed that many volunteers were leaving due to frustration with bureaucratic red tape, such as the four-month process to replace a lost glove.

Innovative Solutions

Retention

Can Be Implemented Without Legislation

- Fire departments can issue exit surveys to determine why people are leaving the volunteer fire service. In Montgomery County, Pa., the department reduced its bureaucratic red tape after surveys demonstrated it was commonly cited as a reason for leaving.

Recruitment

Can Be Implemented Without Legislation

- Hampden Township shortened their application to one page and personally followed up with prospects via email and phone within two hours of receiving the application. They also granted temporary memberships after a background check through the police department.
- Hampden Township also developed a citizen's fire academy. The program aimed to train eight Firefighter One certified volunteer firefighters by the end of the four-year grant period and create a long-term recruitment program. The academy consisted of four sessions that taught the basics of firefighting and was advertised to the public. The academy had an overall budget of \$3,000 and was financed by a SAFER grant. In 2009, six members enrolled in the academy, yielding four active firefighting members. In 2010, the academy attracted 11 members. Academy enrollees included a township commissioner, a state government employee and a state representative.
- John M. Buckman III, Branch Chief of Indiana Firefighter Training stressed the importance of marketing volunteer departments to the younger millennial generation currently in their twenties. The millennial generation is more diverse and tech-savvy than those of the past. Chief Buckman advised departments to cater to millennials to attract and retain such individuals. He claimed that millennials value recognition for their efforts, limited bureaucracy, and friendly work environments.

Requires Legislation

- Elected officials can create incentives that benefit volunteers from each age group. They can offer tuition breaks for younger volunteers, student loan forgiveness for middle-aged volunteers, and length-of-service awards or retiree stipends for older firefighters.

- Elected officials could expand the FireVEST Scholarship Program across the state and to other universities. FireVEST was created by Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato in partnership with the Allegheny County Fire Academy and the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) and the program launched in 2009. FireVEST is a scholarship for a 65-credit associate's degree and includes tuition, fees, and books for any volunteer fireman. Firefighters can enroll in any of CCAC's 140 programs. Recipients commit to five years of volunteer fire service. Must meet minimum GPA of 2.00. The Region 13 Task Force is looking to build upon FireVEST and offer education opportunities at state universities to graduates of the FireVEST program. FireVEST scholars represent 60 different companies in Allegheny County and 14 different academic programs at CCAC and 60% of students currently enrolled in the FireVEST program have grade-point-averages above 3.0.

Retention and Recruitment

Can Be Implemented Without Legislation

- Departments can implement measures to reduce unnecessary runs such as calls for downed power lines and reduce the number of volunteers who are expected to respond to such calls by utilizing selective paging.
- Departments can improve their recruitment and retention efforts by issuing climate surveys of current volunteers in addition to exit surveys, since tracking down those who left the service is often difficult. Using climate surveys allows departments to be proactive in retaining volunteers.
- Eight volunteer fire departments in the Highlands School District in Allegheny County created the Highlands Emergency Services Alliance to provide EMS and firefighting training to high school students during school hours. The program covers the required essentials of Fire Fighting and Emergency Response certification hours. The program has existed for two years and enrolled 21 students in the first year and currently enrolls 22 students. Many enrollees in the program serve as junior firefighters in their local volunteer fire department.

Requires Legislation

- Only five or six recommendations outlined in the report issued in accordance with Senate Resolution 60 have been addressed by the state legislature. The implementation of additional recommendations will help volunteer fire departments in their retention and recruitment efforts.
- Elected officials could pass legislation offering tax and insurance incentives to volunteer firefighters. They can offer incentives for local income tax breaks, forgiveness of local fire tax, reinstating state income tax breaks, extending municipal group medical insurance rates to firefighters, increasing state grant programs from \$25 million to \$35 million, and allowing local matches for Length of Service Award Programs.

- Elected officials in Albemarle County in Virginia have funded incentives and cost recovery for volunteers so that they don't have to spend out-of-pocket to volunteer for their community.

Training

Can Be Implemented Without Legislation

- Departments can provide online training options to lessen the time and financial costs of training.
- Virginia's Montgomery County developed a county-wide system that featured a regionalized Volunteer basic Orientation Program to teach new firefighters the basics, such as CPR, blood borne pathogens, and how to put on gear in a class ran by a third-party nonprofit.
- Parkview Volunteer Fire Department in O'Hara Township has a points-based incentive system. Volunteers are awarded points for certain tasks, such as training, work detail and EMS shifts and at the end of the year members are given gift cards. The system is allowed by law and has been cost-effective for the department, costing Parkview roughly \$4,500.
- Fire chiefs should take a realistic inventory of the department's capabilities and determine which necessary skills they should focus upon. They should also tailor their training programs to the needs of their department and community.

Require Legislation

- Legislators could raise the tax on foreign fire insurance by half a percentage point from 2% to provide free training for volunteers. 73% of respondents in a recent poll conducted by PFESI and Penn State University positively responded to such a proposal.
- In Albemarle County, Virginia, the county funds volunteer leadership and management programs that supplement the technical skills required by the National Fire Protection Association.

Community Relations

Can Be Implemented Without Legislation

- Departments can do a better job of reaching local elected officials. There is often a lack of effective communication between volunteer fire departments and the government. Local elected officials often dislike funding volunteer fire departments because they feel as if they are blackmailed into paying for them.
- Departments can reach out to community for non-firefighting jobs. They can employ volunteers and third parties to perform tasks such as conducting financial reports and fundraising.

- William Rossey, Tarentum Borough Manager and volunteer firefighter found positive responses to the department after he gave council members a tour of the fire department and information about the apparatus.
- Departments should work towards building the trust of powerful neighborhood groups
- State Senator Solobay gave an example of how a mayor who intended to cut funding to the fire service changed his mind after being invited to ride along with the firefighters and learn about the department.

Requires Legislation

- Legislators could create a state-funded regional network of support staff to aid fire departments with information technology, administration, accounting, and other time-consuming projects.
- Legislators could restructure the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program. The numbers are somewhat antiquated in terms of what departments can borrow from the state (about 2 percent). Most volunteer fire departments are good credit risks.