



U.S. Fire Administration  
Working for a fire-safe America

# Retention and Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services

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FEMA



## **Mission Statement**

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We support and strengthen fire and emergency medical services and stakeholders to prepare for, prevent, mitigate and respond to all hazards.

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U.S. Fire Administration  
Working for a fire-safe America



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# Introduction

Recruitment and retention are the cornerstone of any volunteer fire or emergency medical services (EMS) department. Without proper staffing, fire and EMS departments cannot provide the services and protection their communities need. It is critical that volunteer departments have the necessary tools, information and support to assist in their efforts to recruit and retain volunteers.



The origin of this document begins in 1993 with a national workshop. This workshop, managed by the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) in cooperation with the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA), focused on recruitment and retention of the nation's volunteer fire and EMS. The result of that workshop was the 1998 document "Recruitment and Retention in the Volunteer Fire Service, Problems and Solutions." This document was also the companion text for a leadership course developed by the National Fire Academy (NFA).

In 2004, the NVFC and the USFA acknowledged the continuation of the challenges addressed in the 1998 document. A literature review and a field survey were conducted to determine the state of recruitment and retention in the volunteer emergency services. This resulted in the 2007 document "Retention and Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services, Challenges and Solutions."

In June 2018, representatives from national fire service organizations and leaders in the volunteer emergency services met at the USFA National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, Maryland, to discuss current trends in recruitment and retention in the volunteer emergency services and conduct a review of the 2007 document. This review led to the document today that incorporates more extensive research on recruitment and retention since the original 2004 field survey and encompasses a more holistic perspective of recruitment and retention, including the role of all community stakeholders and the important role local government plays in recruitment and retention success.

The USFA would like to thank the following groups and individuals who contributed to the development of this guide:

#### Organizations:

- ◆ International Association of Fire Chiefs — Volunteer & Combination Officers Section (IAFC-VCOS)
- ◆ International City/County Management Association (ICMA)
- ◆ National Fire Protection Association (NFPA)
- ◆ National League of Cities (NLC)
- ◆ NVFC
- ◆ VFIS Insurance
- ◆ Women in Fire

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# Part I: Critical Recruitment and Retention Challenges

Recruitment and retention have become 2 of the biggest challenges facing the U.S. fire and emergency services in recent decades. The NFPA, which annually tracks the number of firefighters in the U.S., found that the number of volunteer firefighters in 2020 was 676,900. This is compared to 897,750 in 1984, the year the NFPA began gathering this statistic.

Even a cursory scan of news reports shows how dire the situation is in some areas. Headlines from communities across the country proclaim that departments have reached a crisis point and that some may have to close if they cannot find more volunteers quickly.

The first step to address the challenges facing local departments is to better understand the factors that are contributing to the decline in volunteer numbers. Solutions can then be presented that meet the challenges that can be overcome and work around those that cannot.

The root causes of recruitment and retention challenges have remained similar over the past decade. What has changed is the pace of the contributing factors and the urgency needed to address them. The demand on time, increased training requirements and poor leadership are a few of the challenges volunteer fire departments face in recruiting and retaining members. Part I of this document discusses recruitment and retention challenges from a holistic perspective within a community.

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**Closer look:** Most of the time, it is not just one challenge that creates a barrier for departments to get and keep volunteers. Today's fire departments are facing a multitude of obstacles and changes that make it harder to recruit and retain members. As the Woodstock(Virginia) Fire Department notes:

"Our department faces many of the same challenges departments around the country are facing. These include increasing competition for volunteers among organizations, a decrease in the amount of time community members can contribute due to job and family commitments, and the growing demands of the fire service related to training requirements, fundraising, administrative tasks, and an increasing call volume.

"In addition, our general community is aging, a growing number of our local workers are commuters which limits the amount of time they can contribute to community organizations, issues with other departments in our area have created a negative stigma related to volunteer fire departments, and [there's been] a loss of connection between our department and the community as the demographics and population make-up continues to evolve."

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## Section 1: Changing face of volunteerism

Volunteerism has been an integral part of American society since the founding of our nation. From the earliest fire brigades, volunteers have built today's fire service from the ground up, evolving into a complex system estimated at 29,452 volunteer, career and combination departments of varying size, mostly protecting rural populations. According to the NFPA data for 2020, there are an estimated 1,041,200 firefighters in the U.S., with 676,900 (65%) of those estimated to be volunteers.

The number of volunteers today is down significantly from 1984, when 897,750 volunteer firefighters were reported. This decline of over 220,850 volunteers took place while the United States population grew from nearly 236 million to over 331 million in the same time frame, indicating that volunteerism in the fire and emergency services has not kept pace with population growth.

Volunteerism in general has slipped and surged over the past several decades, peaking for a brief time after 9/11 and reaching a low around 2015. In 40 years of tracking volunteers, the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL's) Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that volunteer rates tend to rise after the age of 20, peak between the ages of 35 and 44 when people tend to be more settled and have strong career and social networks, and then decline as individuals age. According to *Nonprofit Quarterly*, this decline is believed to be associated with retirement, diminished physical capabilities and loss of connections with established social networks.

In 2020, the NVFC conducted a national survey resulting in the report "Volunteer Retention Research Report." This survey of current and former members shows that over two-thirds of respondents feel their departments have (or had) a problem with volunteer retention. This includes nearly 70% of current department leadership. Additionally, nearly half of all current volunteers have considered leaving the fire service at some point.

Even with significant volunteer interest, changes in everyday life and family dynamics affect the ability to both retain and recruit volunteers. Today it is increasingly common for families to have 2 working parents, perhaps reducing the time and energy left to volunteer, or single-parent households where child care or other considerations inhibit volunteerism, particularly when volunteer hours may require overnight shifts or responding to calls at a moment's notice. Employers are also less likely to let their employees leave during the day to respond to calls than they were in the past, making fire department coverage during traditional working hours more difficult.

There are many unique recruitment and retention challenges facing emergency service volunteers. Unlike many other volunteer opportunities, the volunteer fire and EMS services require extensive training hours, sometimes rigorous and unconventional volunteer hours, and expertise in multiple areas from fire dynamics to hazmat operations. Another challenge to recruitment and retention is the increased risk to life and health, from fireground injuries to long-term exposures that could lead to cancer and other debilitating diseases. The fire and emergency services offer a much higher-stakes volunteer experience than what one may find volunteering in a school or local food pantry.

Added to these challenges is the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic may have on fire and emergency service volunteer numbers. During the pandemic, many departments

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had to cease or modify their recruitment initiatives and cancel fire academies or recruit training programs. Some volunteers left their departments due to concern for themselves or a loved one about the risks of getting COVID-19 or because their employer prohibited activities that put them at risk of getting COVID-19. Decreased in-person contact may also have left volunteers feeling disconnected and unsure of their desire to continue their service. In addition, impacts to department funding created by the pandemic means there are less available resources to use toward recruitment and retention efforts.

It is hard to know yet exactly what the long-term impact of the pandemic may be on fire and emergency service volunteerism. Despite the challenges, there are also areas of opportunity that may result from the pandemic. For instance, there is greater awareness in communities of the work of emergency responders. There may also be more people who retain teleworking schedules, eliminating commute times and potentially creating a new pool of people available for volunteering. The transition to hybrid training programs that include online components may help both new and longtime volunteers better fit training into their busy schedules.

It should also be emphasized that the volunteer fire and emergency services have many strengths that can help counter some of the factors making it challenging to attract or retain volunteers. This lifestyle comes with an unparalleled level of camaraderie, opportunities to gain valuable skills and experience that extend well beyond the incident scene, and a chance to give back in a way so meaningful that life often hinges on it. Perhaps most notably, becoming a fire or emergency service volunteer secures one's place in the fire service family, providing a lifetime, global network of family and friends.



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**Consider this:** The fire and emergency services have some unique challenges to recruitment and retention that other volunteer organizations do not face, such as the significant time commitment, lengthy training requirements, dangerous work environment, and potential lack of family support due to the time commitment and dangerous work environment. However, other challenges, such as identifying new pools of potential volunteers, reaching younger audiences and finding ways to make their volunteerism message resonate, are similar across the volunteer world. The fire and emergency services can learn a great deal from other volunteer organizations that have had success with recruiting. Fire and emergency services departments should look at the messaging and recruitment and retention campaigns used by other local and national organizations that have maintained high volunteer numbers in today's environment. Are there ideas, messages or concepts that could translate to the volunteer emergency services? Can aspects of what makes their recruitment and retention campaigns a success be applied to the local emergency services department?

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## Section 2: Aging of the volunteer fire service

The NFPA's "U.S. Fire Department Profile 2020" estimates that 50% of all firefighters are between the ages of 30 and 49 years old. Volunteer departments tend to have a higher proportion of firefighters over the age of 50, and in some rural areas it is not uncommon to find volunteers in their 60s or 70s. About one-third of small-town firefighters are 50 or older. When the rates of volunteer firefighters per 1,000 people protected for mostly volunteer or all-volunteer fire departments are examined, the rates show a downward trend and range from a high of 8.05 in 1987 to a low of 5.66 in 2020 per 1,000 population protected.



This aging population poses a challenge to the volunteer sector in that volunteer departments will find themselves with increasingly limited volunteers as members retire or otherwise find themselves unable to participate in an operational capacity. Younger members are needed to help fill the ranks, not just as entry-level recruits, but also as midlevel firefighters serving in officer and other leadership roles. The recruitment and retention process must be continual to ensure departments don't find themselves with only older, retiring firefighters and younger recruits, without more experienced "midcareer" firefighters to help lead and mentor others.

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Closer look: The aging population has posed a challenge for the East Dubuque (Illinois) Fire Department. "Our community has an aging population that makes it difficult for some of them to volunteer. The other [issue] is the fact that most of the younger people are moving out of the area, which makes it difficult to recruit them."

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## Section 3: Training demands

The delivery of emergency services in the U.S. has become increasingly complex. The fire department has become the go-to agency for almost all non-law enforcement emergencies. This has led to the ill-born concept that the fire department must train all members on firefighting, EMS, hazmat, natural disasters, vehicle and water rescue, high angle and confined space rescue, and drone usage, to name just a few. Unfortunately, this leads to response agencies becoming a jack-of-all-trades but a master of few.

Unlike EMS, there is not currently a national minimum training level requirement for the volunteer fire service. Many states and localities adopt standards based on national consensus training standards developed by the NFPA. Once adopted either in whole or in part, these standards may require a recertification process or continuing education unit (CEU) accrual process. Both the initial training and the recertification/CEU processes pose major time constraints for most volunteer members. When multiple certifications are required by the state or locality, the time constraints on potential volunteer members become even more daunting.

In some instances, training requirements, schedules and class accessibility were developed for the career fire service without adequate consideration given to the unique needs of the volunteer service. While expectations between the career and volunteer models should both include providing trained, professional help in a timely

manner to handle emergencies, training requirements must take into account that volunteers are often balancing full-time jobs while trying to meet these requirements. The time frame, and in some cases the delivery method, in which training needs to be completed must be adjusted to better accommodate the availability of today's busy volunteers, otherwise volunteers will become overwhelmed and frustrated, with attrition following suit.

The training of an emergency services volunteer requires a substantial commitment, starting with 120 hours for Firefighter I and 150 hours for emergency medical technician (EMT). Advanced, specialized and officer training all take a significant amount of additional training hours to complete. In cases where training is not offered locally, recruits must take time off work and away from their homes and families, adding to the many challenges training requirements pose to recruitment and retention.

The table that follows outlines the various courses that may be required, average hours per course, rank or level of firefighter needing the training, and approximate completion time.



**Training requirements**

Note: Departments should reference the unique training requirements in their state. The information below is an aggregate of individual state training requirements.

Training module	Rank	Average class length in hours	Approximate time to complete for volunteers*
<b>Firefighter</b>			
Firefighter I	All firefighters	120 hours	5 months
Firefighter II	All firefighters	100 hours	4 months
Firefighter III	Firefighters aspiring to be officers	60 hours	2 months
Officer I	First-level company officer	40-60 hours	1 month
Officer II	First-level company officer	40-60 hours	1 month
Officer III	Command-level officer	40 hours	1 month
Officer IV	Chief-level officer	40 hours	1 month
<b>EMS licensure levels**</b>			
Emergency Medical Responder	Basic provider (firefighter)	48 hours	
EMT	Basic ambulance provider	150 hours	
Advanced EMT	Enhanced ambulance provider	200 hours beyond EMT	

Training module	Rank	Average class length in hours	Approximate time to complete for volunteers*
Paramedic	Advanced ambulance provider	350-1500 hours (Committee on Accreditation for the EMS Professions standards)	
<b>Hazardous materials</b>			
Awareness	All firefighters	24 hours	2 weeks
Operations	Firefighter III/officers	40 hours	1 month
Technician	Hazmat specialists	40-80 hours	1-2 months
<b>Other courses</b>			
Vehicle operations	All drivers	24 hours	2 weeks
Pumps/hydraulics	All pump operators	40-60 hours	1-2 months
Vehicle extrication	All firefighters and officers	24-60 hours	2 weeks to 2 months
Water rescue	All firefighters and officers as needed	16 hours	2 weeks
Wildland firefighting	All firefighters and officers as needed	24-100 hours	1-4 months
Farm machinery extrication	All firefighters and officers as needed	25 hours	2-3 weeks
Silo rescue	All firefighters and officers as needed	26-30 hours	4-6 weeks
Truck company operations	All firefighters and officers as needed	24-36 hours	4-6 weeks
Aerial operator course	All firefighters and officers as needed	24 hours	1 month
Trench rescue	All firefighters and officers as needed	24-36 hours	4-6 weeks
Technical rescue	All firefighters and officers as needed	24-36 hours	4-6 weeks
Aircraft rescue	All firefighters and officers as needed	50 hours	1-2 months

\*When taken several nights/week. Includes at least 1 (but typically more) weekend day of practical evolutions.

\*\*Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Office of EMS based on 2021 National EMS Education Standards.

**Closer look:** The Secaucus (New Jersey) Volunteer Fire Department notes that training is a barrier for some potential recruits. “The biggest challenge we are facing when it comes to recruiting new members is the time commitment. Besides a commitment to respond to incidents, drills, meetings, etc., new recruits often find it difficult to make time to attend proper training and complete state requirements to become a certified firefighter.”



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## Section 4: Unmet expectations

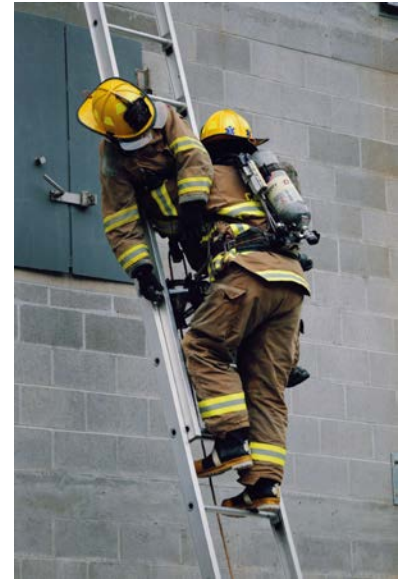
New recruits have a certain set of expectations in their head about being a volunteer firefighter or EMS provider, and once they start the job, they often find that the reality is very different. It is unrealistic to recruit volunteer firefighters with visions of battling flames and heroic actions and expect them to become highly motivated team members after encountering the reality of the job. It is more common to do training, treat a patient for a medical call, decontaminate and restock the ambulance, check tire pressure on apparatus, write up reports, check inventory, and help the community with a host of minor tasks unrelated to fighting fires. If a recruit does not understand that they just signed up for all of this, poor morale will ensue, and the person may end up leaving the department.

In other cases, recruits expect to be welcomed into a close-knit group of supportive peers, and instead they may find themselves facing an outdated (and truly unacceptable) version of hazing. In addition to setting the department up for potential legal and public relations repercussions, this experience makes new recruits feel like outsiders and sets them up to fail as committed, valuable members of the department. In the NVFC's "Volunteer Retention Research Report" (2020), 22% of former volunteers reported that they left their departments because the "department atmosphere was full of cliques and groups that exclude others." 30% of current volunteers reported the same cliques and exclusion as reasons volunteers might leave the department. These behaviors are harmful, counterproductive and drive volunteers away almost as quickly as they come.

Unmet expectations about the job as well as negative treatment of recruits will unquestionably result in the loss of members over the short term. The latter can result in morale (and management) problems within the department even if new members stay on. And both will make recruitment more difficult because those who leave will share their negative experiences, sowing the seeds of discontent with friends, family and other community members, creating a downward spiral in recruitment that the department might not even realize.

## Section 5: Work-life-volunteer balance

Individuals wanting to volunteer their time in their communities are often faced with balancing other responsibilities such as work, religious affiliations, children's activities and other family obligations. Although a desire to give back to the community is a strong motivator for volunteerism, it can be challenging to strike a balance between volunteering and other life obligations. Complicating this is the fact that volunteering in a fire department is one of the most time-consuming volunteer opportunities available today; between extensive training requirements and ongoing emergency calls, it requires a significant commitment from the volunteer.



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The changing demographics of families may also affect one's ability to volunteer. According to Pew Research Center, in 1960, 25% of households with children had 2 working parents. In 2016, that number increased to 66%, and it is expected to keep increasing. Furthermore, Pew Research Center has reported that 12% of parents with children under 18 are also the caregiver of a parent or other adult. This makes it more difficult for a fire department volunteer to participate in department activities such as training, fundraising and responding to emergencies.

Other challenges affecting the work-life-volunteer balance may include employers who are unable or unwilling to accommodate emergency calls during working hours or are unsupportive of employees who may arrive late due to being on an emergency call. In addition, the time commitment faced by volunteers can put a strain on family relationships due to the long hours away from the family as well as missed milestones such as birthdays, holidays or kids' sporting events.

As departments continue to struggle with recruitment and retention, the demand on active members increases. With fewer people to do the same amount of work, members may find themselves overextended in their time commitment to the department. This can lead to frustration and burnout and have a compounding negative impact on the department's ability to recruit and retain volunteers.

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**Closer look:** The Rapid Valley Volunteer Fire Department (Rapid City, South Dakota) finds diminished available time to be a barrier in gaining new recruits. "Work hours and family hours are completely dominating time of members and potential members. When the older members grew up, there was little travel for kids' sports, but with the explosion of kids' sports, families are traveling every weekend and they have games and practices all week. Places of work are demanding more hours from the workers; about half of the available work in this area for people in their 20s and 30s requires 6 days and 50 hours a week. Adding this with a family, members just do not have the time to commit to the department. Our most active members are either single or retired."

The struggle with work-life-volunteer balance has also created staffing challenges for the Royersford (Pennsylvania) Fire Department: "We've struggled at times to staff apparatus during traditional daytime working hours as well as overnight as members have to weigh their work commitments in the morning."

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## Section 6: Mission expansion

The days of a fire department only responding to fires are long gone, and the mission of the traditional volunteer fire department has changed. The modern fire department deals with a much greater range of complexities in the shape of far more emergencies and public assistance calls. This mission expansion has created conflict within department culture, complicated the leadership and financial needs of the department, and put an enormous strain on the time and skills of volunteer, part-time or understaffed administration.

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Data affirms how drastic the change has really been. According to National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) data, in 2019, only 4% of all reported fire department calls were fire related, while almost two-thirds of calls required emergency medical and rescue services. EMS dominates. The rise in EMS and other demands, coupled with the decline in firefighting, clashes with traditional firefighter culture and department traditions. For those who joined with visions of fighting fires, having to become certified for EMS and responding to a majority of EMS and other calls could, if not properly managed, lead to poor morale, frustrated or unmotivated firefighters, resignations, and department leaders overwhelmed with the administrative complexities of today's fire and EMS services.



Departments that are struggling to keep up with everyday call volume, administrative requirements and significant training requirements simply do not have time to put into recruitment and retention. Volunteers who are unable to maintain the harried pace could leave, and prospective volunteers may think twice before joining an organization that barely has time for them.

## Section 7: Leadership

Fire departments have many types of leaders. There are designated leaders, such as chiefs and officers, and there are informal leaders, those members of the department that others look up to, follow and seek guidance from. There may also be a divide in operational leadership and administrative leadership, with nonoperational duties such as recruitment and retention, building maintenance, membership, and fundraising falling to the president or administrative manager.



Problems can arise when there is conflict between leaders, conflict between leadership and membership, leadership that is not prepared/able to perform their expected duties, leadership that is unwilling to grow and evolve the department in positive and productive ways, and leadership that does not support the membership.

Leadership of a volunteer fire department is not about standing in the front yard of a burning house with a portable radio telling people what to do; this is emergency incident management. But all too often, fire department leaders are chosen for their emergency incident management skills, under the mistaken impression that how well a person manages an emergency incident indicates how well they will lead a volunteer or mostly volunteer fire department.

Successful leadership is about much more than emergency incident management. It is about providing a clear and positive vision for the fire department; communicating that vision to the firefighters, community and elected officials; and then working every day to make that vision a reality. There is a great deal of work that must be done in between fires and other emergencies relating to training, recruiting, planning, budgeting, preventing and solving personnel issues, and preparing.

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A calm, clear head under pressure at the scene of any emergency is critical, but the best chiefs and leaders will make sure that they are not the sole person capable of managing an incident. The best leaders design and implement systems that do not rely upon them to handle every situation. Moreover, they know their own limits and rely upon their officers and firefighters to fill in for their weaknesses. In departments that separate operational and administrative functions, the leaders on both sides need to understand they must work together for the good of the department, and that the department depends on both functions to be successful. Good leaders have developed a department where people are valued for their strengths and skills, not beaten down for the weaknesses. Good leaders also know how to utilize informal leaders within the department to facilitate change and garner buy-in. This results in a strong team. If the chief is not strong in one skill or knowledge, someone else is, and they step up to assist.

When leadership fails to set and communicate a clear and positive vision, does not understand or acknowledge their own weaknesses, does not delegate responsibility or authority to others, and allows negative actions such as cliques, bullying and unsafe practices to abound unabated, the department will fail. Members will become frustrated, feel unappreciated and undervalued, and recruitment and retention will become increasingly difficult. Poor leadership is consistently cited as a leading cause of why volunteers quit.

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**Closer look:** The town of Canton (Connecticut) Volunteer Fire and EMS Department understands that leadership can make or break recruitment initiatives: “Challenges to recruitment involve not only selling the dangerous external environmental [and] health and safety realities of the fire and EMS service to a diminishing pool of prospects, but also the necessary and honest assessment of internal culture, communication, and strategic directives that are either conducive to or destructive of the goal to attract new members.”

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## Section 8: Department image and culture

When it comes to recruitment and retention, it is important to consider the image that the department puts out to the public. Nobody wants to be a part of an organization with a poor public image. Is there strong and effective leadership, or does the community see a department with infighting, disgruntled volunteers, poor leadership or morale problems? Often that image is deeply influenced by the organization’s culture. The culture of an organization is defined by the values, beliefs and behaviors of its members. In most organizations, the culture is developed over a long period of time, and sometimes the members aren’t even sure why they do things the way they do.

The department has multiple opportunities to communicate the type of organization it is to the public. These communications can come from simple on-duty interactions between department personnel and the public, as well as off-duty events such as family get-togethers, community events or even attending a kid’s softball game. Other communications may happen through news stories, press releases, posts on social media and information on the department’s website. When the public does an internet search for a department, what they find will impact their desire to join. Results showcasing members in action during incidents and in training, conducting fundraisers,

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interacting with the public in a positive way, and taking pride in wearing their uniform can boost recruitment and retention efforts. On the other hand, a department with a poor reputation in the community, dissatisfied members and negative interactions with the public is not likely to be as successful in recruiting or retaining a volunteer force.

## **Section 9: Consolidations, mergers and regionalization**

It is not uncommon for the topics of consolidations, mergers or regionalization to arise when discussing challenges facing volunteer fire departments, such as staffing shortages, financial needs and deployment problems. These are complex issues that vary greatly by state. State law will govern much of what can and cannot be done, and how it can or cannot be done. A comprehensive legal assessment is essential. State and local politics will also enter into the discussion and should not be underestimated.

When the idea of consolidation, merger or regionalization comes up, it often impacts department morale. Leadership must be prepared to manage the feelings of members. Members may feel that these efforts are being brought against them personally or based on some animosity toward them or the department by outsiders. Be honest and realistic about why these changes may happen, and clearly communicate to members the benefits to the department and their community as well as the positive new regionalized impacts. It is critical to keep members as well-informed as the law allows, and to involve them in the discussions and decisions as much as possible. Otherwise, the department may end up with 2 workforces coming together in an atmosphere of hostility that can drive existing volunteers out and make it exceedingly difficult to recruit replacements. Lawsuits, public outcry and poor service are also typical outcomes from forced, unhappy mergers and can damage the department's public image.

Additionally, when faced with the issue of consolidation, merger or regionalization, it is best to address it and make decisions as soon as possible. Letting the issue drag on will destroy morale, create anxiety and further hurt recruitment efforts because it is difficult to attract volunteers to an organization that is perceived as having no future.

Also, local station of department mergers or regionalization can end up creating combination departments. If career and volunteer work and affiliation issues are not properly planned, this situation can become a cause for poor working relationships between career and volunteer firefighters. Strong, effective leadership is needed to set clear expectations regarding the working relationship, training, command structure, organizational roles and civility among members. Department leadership must quickly deal with all disputes in a manner that isn't perceived as favoring one group or the other. Otherwise, leadership runs the risk of losing control of how people behave and could end up with grievances, dwindling ranks of volunteers, lawsuits and poor service to the community.

When facing regionalization, it is important to note that regionalizing a group of departments over a large geographic area may not result in improved response times. This outcome can be due to the overall geographic distances between responding units. For instance, merging 5 departments and putting a staffed station at the center of the geographic area will be great for those that live in the middle of the area, but as you move farther out from the regional fire station, response times get longer and longer. Creating a system with reasonable response times for all can be difficult. And, politically, the communities and residents at the edges are likely to object to paying

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for a service that is no longer local and is far away. First responders may balk at longer commutes to the station and longer response times, and morale may decline as the department image suffers in the eyes of the community. These types of regionalization work best when the focus is on administrative regionalization, along with other areas such as maintenance, training and purchasing, but leave the local stations intact.

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**Closer look:** While often there is resistance to consolidations or mergers, if done well, it can be a solution to address staffing and funding issues facing local departments. An article from The Reading Eagle on June 1, 2021, reported that over the past 15 years, several large municipalities in Berks County and the Tri-County area in Pennsylvania consolidated independent volunteer fire companies serving the same communities into 1 fire department helmed by a paid chief or commissioner. The new municipal fire departments are able to pool equipment and volunteers to better respond when the community calls. In addition, municipal governments now have more control over how money from fire taxes is spent.

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## Section 10: Tension with local government

How a volunteer fire department is structured varies by department, with some part of the local government and some separate. Funding sources also vary, with some departments fully funded by the local government, some partially funded by local government and some completely on their own. However, just like the community, the local government benefits from the fire department, and the fire department benefits from local government support.

Unfortunately, many departments have weak or even poor relationships with local officials. Local officials and department leaders may find themselves at odds instead of working together to ensure the community has the emergency services it needs. This can create obstacles to the success of the department, including in areas of retention and recruitment. In many instances, the fire department may not even try to approach the local officials for support as they may see it as too difficult a process for too little gain or think they will have to sacrifice too much autonomy if the local government is involved.

One of the greatest contributing factors in a poor relationship between a fire or EMS department and local officials is lack of transparency and insight into response and operational data. However, the government officials need this additional information to justify potential expenditure for the department. Another point of tension is a fundamental lack of understanding exhibited by elected officials about the department. It is not uncommon for those who are in positions of power to simply not understand the information being presented to them, and they are often placed in scenarios of making decisions in a short amount of time.

The local government can and should be a great source of support for the fire department. In addition to financial support, the local government has a plethora of resources at its disposal that can be utilized by fire and EMS departments to help alleviate some of its staffing challenges. These include assistance with administration, human resources and legal support; funding incentives that help with recruitment

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and retention; and raising awareness in the community of the need for fire service volunteers. Open and honest communication, transparency, and a willingness to cooperate are keys to breaking down barriers that exist between the department and the local government.

## Section 11: Other challenges

Volunteer firefighters contribute millions of hours to staffing apparatus, maintaining buildings and equipment, training, fundraising, and a host of other activities related to serving their communities. In doing so, they must often adhere to legislation, standards, codes and best practices. Achieving compliance can challenge even the most progressive and well-equipped volunteer department. Some of these challenges include the following.

### The Fair Labor Standards Act

This federal law defining compensation and overtime is most critical for volunteer leadership to be aware of when considering what constitutes a “volunteer” firefighter and incentives departments can use for recruiting and retaining their members. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) includes caveats as part of the definition of “employee” that allow for volunteers who receive nominal benefits and/or are employed by the employer, but in a different capacity than the one in which they volunteer, to provide services on a volunteer basis.

29 USC 203(e)(4)(A) The term “employee” does not include any individual who volunteers to perform services for a public agency which is a State, a political subdivision of a State, or an interstate governmental agency, if –

- (i) the individual receives no compensation or is paid expenses, reasonable benefits, or a nominal fee to perform the services for which the individual volunteered; and
- (ii) such services are not the same type of services which the individual is employed to perform for such public agency.

Subsection (i) is significant because it establishes that volunteers can receive some benefits without being considered an employee by the DOL. In a 2006 letter to the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), the DOL established that for a fee paid to a volunteer to be considered “nominal,” it cannot exceed 20% of what the public agency employer would otherwise pay to hire a full-time employee for the same services. There are also a number of other stipulations beyond the 20% rule that must be met in order for benefits to be considered “nominal.”

Subsection (ii) allows for someone to volunteer for their employer as long as they are not providing the same services on a volunteer basis that they provide in their role as an employee. In other words, a career firefighter is not allowed to volunteer as a firefighter for the same fire department that they work for, but an employee of the city who works in a different part of the municipal government could still volunteer for the municipal fire department. This can become an issue when a volunteer fire department hires 1 or more of its volunteers to fill a paid staff position.

The IAFC’s “Managing Volunteer Firefighters for FLSA Compliance: A Guide for Fire Chiefs and Community Leaders” is a great resource to help volunteer fire service leaders navigate these and other FLSA-related issues.

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## Medical examinations

Fire departments should take every step possible to minimize the physical and mental risks their members may face. Some volunteer fire departments may require annual or regular medical examinations. Other fire departments may fear losing members if medical examinations are required, so their only requirement is for a member's physician to sign a form stating that the member is fit for duty. This reduces the liability of the fire department but doesn't protect the member from physical risk. To best protect members and reduce fire department liability, it is a recommended best practice for members to have a thorough examination following NFPA 1582, *Standard on Comprehensive Occupational Medical Program for Fire Departments*.

If a fire department is unable to provide an annual physical, it is important that members' primary care providers understand the health risks firefighters face and the most up-to-date research on firefighter health. The IAFC released the "Healthcare Provider's Guide to Firefighter Physicals," which can be downloaded and provided to the primary care provider to help evaluate and treat firefighters. The NVFC Position on Firefighter Medical Assessments provides guidance to volunteer departments on firefighter physical options.

Financial limitations are often cited as the reason why a volunteer fire department doesn't provide medical examinations to members or potential members. Requiring members to pay for their own medical examination may often be a barrier to recruitment and retention. One way to address this is to actively recruit a local doctor to provide physicals for free or at a discounted rate.

## 2 in-2 out

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Regulation 1910.134(g)(4) is a component within the OSHA Respiratory Protection Standard that requires a rescue team of at least 2 properly equipped and trained personnel to be in place prior to 2 other properly equipped and trained firefighters entering an Immediately Dangerous to Life Hazard environment. The requirement is an outgrowth of OSHA requirements for workers entering environments that are oxygen deficient, poisonous or have elevated temperatures. The impact of the ruling has caused strains to volunteer departments as they have had to increase staffing per duty shift, member rolls and/or units assigned to calls. The requirement can be used as a talking point in recruitment efforts.

## State and local challenges

In addition to challenges presented on a federal level, there are also state and local regulations that may impact a fire department's ability to recruit and retain volunteers. These challenges typically include a set number of hours of training required to be certified (or recertified) as a firefighter, fire officer, EMT or paramedic, etc. Additionally, there are minimum age requirements at which a person can fully function as a firefighter, EMT, etc. Costs of initial and annual medical examinations also impact fire departments. Departments can work with their municipal government to identify and address any local challenges that may exist. The state firefighters' association should be able to assist in identifying statewide challenges or pointing departments to the right state agency for assistance.



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## Part II: Collaborating With Local Government

Many states require local government to provide for fire protection. Yet, while local governments pay for many kinds of services for their residents — including police, water and sewer, among others — in many cases, volunteer fire and EMS departments are either left largely on their own to fund their services or are provided a revenue from the local government that does not meet the full costs of operating a department and purchasing necessary equipment. These fire and EMS departments provide essential public safety services in their community, from responding to emergencies of all kinds to preventing them from happening in the first place.



It is the local government's role and responsibility to reach out and develop, support and maintain an open partnership with the volunteer fire and emergency services in order to ensure that their citizens have adequate fire protection. At the same time, fire and emergency service departments need to foster and maintain this relationship with local government to get the support they need to operate effectively.

According to the NFPA, it would cost communities across the country nearly \$47 billion annually to replace volunteer firefighters with career staffing. Many small town and rural communities cannot afford to switch their staffing model to paid firefighters. In addition, community members may pay a high price in property damage or life-threatening situations if there is slow fire department response due to a lack of active volunteers. Residents may also have to pay higher insurance premiums if poor department response times and insufficient training and equipment leads to a worse rating from the Insurance Services Office or American Association of Insurance Services. It is in the best interest of the local government to support the fire department and provide them with the resources and assistance they need to be successful. The costs related to such support are far more manageable than the cost community members would face if the locality switched to an all-paid fire service.

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**Consider this:** The state government in Pennsylvania realized it needed to step up as the numbers of volunteers dwindled in the state. In recognition of the situation, the state legislature passed Senate Resolution 6 in 2017, which included establishing a commission of lawmakers, municipal officials, and fire and emergency service leaders to work on solutions to assist fire and EMS systems. The commission issued a report the following year urging action and warning of a public safety crisis as the number of volunteer firefighters in Pennsylvania dropped from 300,000 in the 1970s to just 38,000 in 2018. The report listed close to 100 recommendations for how the state and local governments can be part of the solution.

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The Delaware General Assembly also created a task force to determine how to improve volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention within the state. A June 16, 2021, article from First State Update reprinted the findings and recommendations of the task force, which included additional training; a website and marketing campaign; vocational training, college credits and tuition reimbursement for students; and a tax deduction.

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The NVFC conducted a survey in 2020 to gain a better understanding of how local governments across the country currently support volunteer fire departments, as well as the types of support volunteer fire departments still need. The majority of the departments that responded to the survey were either nonprofit (45%) or municipal/local government (41%). 80% were located in communities with a population under 25,000.

On the positive side, 74% of respondents described their department's relationship with local government to be good or excellent. In addition, 82% said they receive support from local government. However, the survey found that this support did not always match the needs of the department. For instance, 41% indicated they need local government support with volunteer recruitment, but only 7% said they have this support. 29% need help with awards/recognition, but only 12% have the support. 32% need help with pension/Length of Service Award Program (LOSAP) programs, while 20% have this help.

While just a snapshot of fire departments, the survey does show that when it comes to working with local government, there are many areas that can be improved. From providing more funding, to offering staffing support in the form of human resources and retention benefits, to assisting with marketing to gain new recruits, there are many ways that local governments can support their community's fire and EMS department. Both department leaders and local governments need to take the initiative to build a better partnership to ensure that the department has what it needs to serve the community safely, effectively and efficiently. This includes department leaders educating local leaders on what is needed, why it is needed and the importance of this assistance to the municipality.

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**In action:** According to a spring 2021 article in the Sea Isle Times, the Sea Isle (New Jersey) City Council showed its support for the Sea Isle City Volunteer Fire Company by establishing a duty crew program to ensure the department would have staffing at all hours. Volunteer firefighters who take night duty shifts during the summer and other select times will get a \$160 payment per 12-hour overnight shift. This is in addition to the pay-per-call stipend that was already established. Up to 4 volunteers can participate each night. The council capped the program at \$30,000 per month.

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## Section 1: Department funding

How volunteer fire and EMS departments are funded is wildly variable across the U.S. Some departments are fully funded by local government, others get no local government funding at all, and then there are those that get local government funding that does not support the entire operation.

However, while there is some similarity with how local recreation programs and libraries may be funded through a mix of tax dollars and donations, the volunteer fire service is far and away the public service that is most reliant on fundraising to provide essential public services.



There is no reliable data that reports how much volunteer fire and EMS departments rely on fundraising, but observations indicate it is widespread and a deeply ingrained practice. The “Fifth Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service” published by the NFPA in 2021 found that fire departments in communities under 2,500 averaged 12% share of revenue from fundraising compared with 74% from taxes. However, that statistic does not tell the full picture. There are departments that rely on fundraising for a far greater percentage of their revenue, and there are many departments where the revenue from taxes or other government funding sources only covers basic operational expenses and not enough for new equipment, gear and apparatus. In the world of \$500,000 fire engines, \$300 helmets and \$600 nozzles, most long-held fundraising practices cannot keep up with the costs of running a modern fire department.

Consider: How does a small town of 500 residents raise \$250,000 to purchase a modest fire engine? Selling 16,666 chicken dinners at \$15 a piece is not a realistic goal. The fundraising challenges are compounded if all the neighboring towns are also trying to do the same thing.

Budget concerns also impact recruitment and retention in various ways. For one, the department may not have the time or resources to spend on recruitment or retention initiatives if they have to prioritize fundraising to make ends meet. Also, prospective and new recruits may think twice about joining or staying with the department if much of their time is spent cooking chicken or setting up bingo halls.

Meanwhile, the gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” is growing wider and wider. A group of chronically underfunded volunteer fire departments is developing. These departments are falling behind on equipment, training, new missions and their operational ability to serve their communities. These departments have old trucks, unsafe personal protective equipment (PPE) and substandard stations. On the other side, departments with significant public funding, and/or with adequate public funding supplemented by fundraising, are progressing faster and further. They are keeping up with training needs and generally have better equipment.

Many community members assume that public safety is a necessary public service afforded to residents, but the costs of this public safety often aren’t factored into this assumption. Public safety protection can be highly effective given adequate funding to provide for the necessary equipment and PPE to provide that protection. However,

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in areas where that funding is simply not available, there is likely to be a degradation in service, and yet the link between funding and service isn't often clear to the general community.

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**Closer look:** The need for local government to support volunteer fire and EMS departments cannot be overstated. If volunteer departments fail due to lack of funding or members, the entire community suffers and critical public services may be lost. In some communities, this is no longer a hypothetical. According to an article in the New York Times from April 25, 2021, at least 10 localities in Wyoming were in danger of losing ambulance service due to budget and/or volunteer shortages, which would leave communities without nearby EMS.

A May 12, 2021, story from ABC 12 News in Flint, Michigan, reported that volunteer fire department staffing shortages in mid-Michigan have resulted in cases where there are too few firefighters responding to the scene, with departments relying on mutual-aid deployments that then leave those communities with thin staffing. Adequate volunteer numbers are needed to improve response times and save lives and property.

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## Barriers to local government funding support

There are many barriers to increased local government support of volunteer fire and EMS departments. For starters, there are 50 different state laws regarding how to organize, fund and operate a fire department. This means that the funding issues vary from state to state, and many states have multiple systems. The result is that no one solution is going to address the hundreds of different types of situations that exist.

For example, in Massachusetts, cities, towns and counties are not required to provide fire protection. Whether they do and what level of protection they provide is strictly a local matter. And, while every fire department in Massachusetts is a municipal department, the funding varies dramatically from town to town. According to data from the Massachusetts Call/Volunteer Firefighters Association, the typical small town (under population 2,500) fire department in Massachusetts had an annual budget of \$58,663 in 2015. As a result, many of these departments are supplementing their budgets with fundraising while running 25- and 30-year-old trucks, operating out of old garages, and struggling to keep firefighters in compliant PPE.

Another barrier to local government funding of volunteer fire departments is that some departments, or at least their leadership, do not want government funding. They feel that government funding comes with too many strings attached and may also not want the transparency that comes with public money. They are unwilling to give up the traditional ways, even if it means better funding and being better able to meet their mission through the training, newer trucks and new equipment that tax dollars will bring.

These departments see purchasing and bidding requirements as an impediment to success. They see accounting rules, human resource procedures and having to report response times as burdens that interfere with their operation. They may also have had bad experiences working with local government officials in the past and are reluctant to try again. These perceived obstacles are not cumbersome and can be resolved with frequent updates to the local government with automated reports that are readily

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available through the public safety answering point or the department itself. Elected leaders are in the business of making sure their constituents are properly represented, and their safety is a top priority. The indication that departments encounter burdens is easily resolved if effective lines of communication are established and followed.

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**Closer look:** Some fire departments report that it is difficult to build long-term relationships with government officials when the positions keep revolving. This frustration is felt by the Berwyn (Pennsylvania) Fire Company. “Our townships have supervisors that take years to be brought up to speed on the inadequacies of our operations. Seems like just about the time they ‘get it’ there is a new group of supervisors and we have to start all over. Too much passing the buck down the road.”

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The public officials and community leaders that fire departments are turning to with those requests (when they make them) are also part of the problem. Many are reluctant to fund the fire department. Given the choice between spending public money on replacing a 15-year-old snowplow for \$189,000 or replacing a 30-year-old fire truck for \$300,000, they will pick the snowplow every time. For a fire department that goes to 80 or 100 emergency calls per year, and less than 10 of these calls are actual fires of any kind, the need to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in a response vehicle is a tough sell to town officials.

In addition, when the fire department becomes part of small-town politics and finance, it also falls into competition with other public services that impact citizens daily and have powerful advocates, such as the highway department or schools.

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**Closer look:** The Aberdeen (Maryland) Fire Department Inc. notes that challenges they face in working with local government include developing an understanding with city council of the difference between fire department services and other civic groups, establishing the department as a resource to city government, and being involved with appropriate decisions that affect public safety.

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## Section 2: Making the case for support

The importance of educating governing bodies about the services provided by the fire/EMS department and encouraging a symbiotic relationship cannot be underestimated. Ensuring local government understands the value volunteers bring to the community in clear, specific terms can go a long way in obtaining their buy-in to the mission, goals and needs of the department and can better position the department to be able to recruit and retain much-needed volunteers.



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**Consider this:** Local government officials may benefit from a better understanding of the day-to-day needs of the fire or EMS department through experiencing it firsthand and talking to department members. Consider hosting a training day that local government representatives can attend, invite them for a ride-along or to participate in the department's Citizen's Academy, work with a local training facility to allow them to experience certain aspects of the job, and/or ask them to attend fundraisers and other community activities the department hosts. These events can also be used to educate local officials on all the fire department does for the community besides fighting fires.

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Lines of communication between the department and local government should be ongoing. Department leaders should be transparent about how local support is being used and how the community is benefiting.

There are resources to help departments better engage public officials at all levels of government, including the NVFC's "Guide to Communicating with Elected Officials," and the "Beginner's Guide to Working with Elected Officials" offered by ICMA. See Appendix B: Considerations for Department/Government Support for a list of considerations that departments and local governments should keep in mind to facilitate effective communication.

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**In action:** The West Whiteland Fire Company (Exton, Pennsylvania) stresses that communication and transparency are key in building a strong relationship between the department and local government. "Being transparent has reaped the rewards over the years. We are in almost daily contact with the township management and meet monthly with the Board of Supervisors." Their tip for fire departments working with local government: "Communicate, communicate! Ultimately the governing bodies will have to address the level of service. There should be no surprises."

The Berwyn (Pennsylvania) Fire Company recommends keeping open, honest and direct communication with local officials as frequently as possible. They have monthly reports and bimonthly meetings with the 2 townships they serve and the other area fire departments. In addition, they annually present an "ask" for funding from the 2 townships. "We are an open-book organization with our townships and share all information."

The Gaston (North Carolina) Volunteer Fire Department formed a partnership with local government through one-on-one talks with the county manager and board of commissioners. Their tip for other departments is to: "Have a good working relationship with government leaders and be able to demonstrate how their efforts equate into a better emergency response."

Conversely, a poor working relationship and lack of communication between the local government and the volunteer fire department

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could have dire consequences. News stories in May 2021 reported on a volunteer fire department in Burlington County (New Jersey) that was suspended by the township, leaving protection of its residents up to outside fire services. While the local officials claimed they had made the department aware of its concerns, the department leaders said they had gotten no warnings and were not given any reason as to why the department was suspended. While subsequent talks helped both sides see common ground and work toward a resolution, the situation could have been avoided with better ongoing communication and collaboration.

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In communicating to city and town leaders concerning why they need additional support, volunteer departments should utilize data-driven requests, reports or proposals. More information on data is provided in Part VI: Using Data to Drive Recruitment and Retention Efforts of this guide. The NVFC's Cost Saving Calculators can help fire and EMS departments determine and present the local cost-savings their volunteers provide the community. Similarly, the local government may need support from the department in terms of data, reports or even something as simple as extra staffing at community-sponsored events.

Department leaders need to remember that their request for support requires validity. Far too often, departments present funding requests that are considered unrealistic by local officials without supporting documentation. One suggestion is to offer viable options when requesting the funding or ancillary support. Engage local elected officials and provide them with the information and solutions the department needs to operate.

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**In action:** Mulvane (Kansas) Fire Rescue realizes that in order to maintain government support, they need to show the value of the department. "I use every chance I get to remind my city council and fire board that the money they save utilizing volunteers should be invested in having the best equipment possible so our firefighters go home safe at the end of the call!"

The Carlisle (Massachusetts) Fire Department emphasizes to local officials the better service that a dynamic staffing model allows. They also have become the go-to department for solving the town's logistical problems. They provide manpower and services for things like building temporary buildings or doing COVID-19 testing for all the town's residents during the pandemic.

According to the Royersford (Pennsylvania) Fire Department, "The biggest thing that we have found is that most decisions from the local government are data-driven. Without proper data to reflect your needs, it becomes tough to justify the department needs."

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## Section 3: Working together to meet the community's needs



Government entities can provide support in a variety of ways, and not all of them have to be costly. The following are some examples of how the local government can partner with the fire department to assist with staffing needs such as recruitment, retention and administration. Additional examples are included throughout this guide and in Appendix B.

Many states have laws that prohibit a town from using public funds or resources to benefit private organizations, including nonprofit volunteer fire or EMS departments. In cases where these laws would impede the local government from helping a fire or EMS department, the laws might have to be amended or repealed, or in some cases a contractual agreement could be made that makes support services by the town a part of the agreement for public fire and emergency service protection.

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**Consider this:** Local governments and departments should think outside of the box when it comes to opportunities to collaborate in order to bolster volunteer recruitment and retention. For instance, there is some movement in Carlisle, Massachusetts, to turn unused town buildings into housing for on-call personnel, which could make a major difference in recruiting and retaining community members.

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### Administration

Many chiefs are overwhelmed with paperwork. At the same time, they may lack the specific skill set to best deal with the administrative aspect of the job. Local government can provide a professional administrator to assist department leadership. Depending on the size and activity level of the department, this might be a 1 or 2 days a week, part-time position, or it might be a full-time job. Another option would be for a group of towns to band together to hire a full-time administrator that would help a group of departments.

The administrator would ideally excel at filing, deadlines, responding to document requests, writing reports, gathering data and tracking training. While the department chiefs would have the overall authority in their department, the administrator would have limited authority to complete reports, chase members for compliance with regulations and filling out forms, and handle bill paying, routine purchasing and monthly reports.

To avoid the costs of hiring a full-time administrator, another option is to obtain the services of a consultant to help bridge the gap to complete the tasks that inundate the chief/director. There are companies that provide temporary assistance for administrative tasks at a fraction of the overall cost of a full-time employee.



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**In action:** The Blue Ridge (Virginia) Volunteer Fire Department maintains a good partnership with the career staff of the county fire and EMS department. Through this partnership with the county, they were able to get a full-time recruitment and retention specialist to help with administration and marketing for new recruits. The recruitment and retention committee meets monthly with the specialist. However, keeping the volunteers involved is critical to success. "Continue to stress how important it is for the volunteers to feel a part of the overall system. A suburban/rural mixed county will not have the tax base to support a full-time career staff, so it is important to keep the volunteers involved and part of the process."

Moscow (Idaho) Volunteer Fire and Ambulance relies on their local government for administrative support, which benefits their recruitment and retention efforts. "The City of Moscow supports the volunteer agency with administrative staff to help volunteers through onboarding, training, equipment, and general support. This allows for more consistent follow-through with new volunteers and allows our volunteers who signed up to volunteer as firefighters and EMTs to actually be first responders and not agency administrators."

In Centre County (Pennsylvania), the Centre Region Council of Governments set up a Regional Fire Protection Program to provide the support and assistance necessary to ensure the volunteer Alpha Fire Company can deliver quality services to the community. This includes ensuring the fire company has the facilities, equipment, personnel, and recruitment and retention support it needs. Program administration is handled by a fire director, volunteer fire chief, 2 full-time and 2 volunteer assistant chiefs, a full-time office manager, and other volunteer officers.

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## Accounting

Requesting that the community's accounting office assist in managing the fire or EMS department's books and procurement systems could allow the department to focus resources on emergency response, so long as the government support is focused on ministerial duties and does not try to strip the fire/EMS company of making its own financial decisions. Local government involvement can also add another layer of checks and balances when it comes to ensuring the financial integrity of the department.

## Human resources

The government entity could provide guidance from a human resource professional to ensure the fire/EMS department is following rules and best practices in their recruitment and onboarding processes. This support can alleviate the burden felt by department leadership and provide much-needed expertise the department may not otherwise have access to. In addition, the government's human resources department or other entity that performs background checks for government employees could assist the department by performing the necessary background checks for potential department recruits.

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## Marketing and awareness

The government entity can help communicate the need for volunteers, promote department activities, provide awards and recognition for high-performing department members, and highlight department successes, thereby aiding in recruitment and retention efforts.

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**In action:** Royersford (Pennsylvania) Fire Department relies on local officials to help amplify the department's messages. "Social media and engaging with the community is a game-changer. Royersford Borough is a tremendous community with a phenomenal mayor and Borough Council who routinely share and spread the posts from the department. Don't underestimate the value of those partnerships."

A Jan. 29, 2021, article in the Daily Progress highlighted a new marketing campaign that the Orange County (Virginia) Board of Supervisors and the 5 volunteer departments that make up Orange County's fire service were getting ready to implement. The county planned to hire a marketing firm to create a new recruitment campaign to attract volunteer fire and rescue personnel.

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## Volunteer pool

Local government employees could be a source of prospective fire or EMS department volunteers. Government officials can distribute recruitment information or host informational sessions with the fire/EMS department and local government employees to encourage them to consider volunteering in their off time. Government agencies could consider offering incentives or flexible scheduling to those who volunteer.

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**In action:** The West Whiteland Fire Company (Exton, Pennsylvania) received 4 additional daytime certified firefighters thanks to their partnership with the local government. The Board of Supervisors encourages government employees to participate as volunteers for daytime response and provides an annual stipend for those who do. They also provide an income tax credit up to \$500 for volunteers who live or work in the township and continuously promote the department's need for volunteers in their monthly newsletters.

However, the Carlisle (Massachusetts) Fire Department warns that paid-on-call departments that are part of the local government may meet obstacles when it comes to town employees volunteering. Their town discourages or disallows town employees from joining the fire department because of overtime rules.

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## Health and wellness

There are many ways the local government can support the health and wellness of its community's volunteer firefighters and emergency services personnel. This includes giving volunteer fire and EMS department members access to their Employee Assistance

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Program (EAP), adding volunteers to their health insurance plans, providing annual NFPA 1582 physicals and offering life insurance to volunteers. In addition, if the local government runs any community centers with gym equipment or exercise classes, they can provide complimentary access to emergency services volunteers.

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**Consider this:** One hurdle that may need to be overcome is the local government entity not being on the same timeline as the department is when it comes to onboarding new recruits. The Carlisle (Massachusetts) Fire Department, for instance, notes that it can take months to get a town physical for new recruits, which is an impediment to onboarding. “Full-time employees do not understand the needs of recruiting and getting new personnel involved ASAP after recruitment.” Department leaders may need to educate local officials as to why a specific timeline should be followed, such as needing a quick onboarding process so as not to lose any potential new recruits or because the department is short on members and needs to get new personnel trained quickly to keep up with response demands. Having examples or data to back up the need for a specific timeline will be helpful in communicating the urgency.

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## Retention benefits

The local government can support the retention of volunteers through benefits such as real estate tax exemptions, establishing a LOSAP or setting up a 457 retirement plan for volunteers where the town contributes matching funds.

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**In action:** Having a positive working relationship with the town government has enabled the South Windsor (Connecticut) Fire Department to have a robust retention program for its 120 members.

“We are very blessed with great support from the community leaders — especially through the budget process. When a member joins, there is NOTHING out of pocket. We provide a full NFPA 1582 physical [and] full background and motor vehicle checks. Upon completion of the intake process, they are issued 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. They have full use of department vehicles to travel to/from training.

“Additionally, the town/department provides a Length of Service Awards Program (LOSAP). It’s similar to a retirement program, but not exactly. The average member will receive between \$200-300 monthly after being fully vested.

“We also offer a tax abatement program based on a tiered system of a percentage of \$1,500 annual — after 2 years 25%, after 5 years 50%, after 7 years 75%, and after 10 years 100%.”

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## Section 4: Case studies

While there are a variety of approaches to forming a collaboration between the local government and the volunteer emergency service department, the following case studies spotlight how 3 departments are able to enhance their recruitment and retention initiatives by working with local government.

### Moscow Volunteer Fire and Ambulance

Moscow Volunteer Fire and Ambulance is a rural, mostly volunteer department located in northern Idaho on the border of Washington state. The department has approximately 115 volunteers and has had great success recruiting local college students.

As volunteers found themselves taking on more and more administrative responsibilities, they advocated using funds generated from the ambulance service — which would typically be used to purchase equipment, vehicles, uniforms, etc. — to pay for a specialist that could handle the recruitment, retention and administrative tasks that were difficult for time-constrained volunteer first responders to manage. The city of Moscow stepped in and added this job as a paid city position in 2018.

Pam Rogers, a 10-year volunteer with the department, took the paid administrative position with the city, helping to ease the transition and build initial trust with the department. To keep the relationship strong and continue to build trust with new volunteers she never served with, Rogers continually solicits volunteer feedback about decisions and communicates as much as possible through a variety of methods, such as email, group text and, for a while, a department newsletter. She also makes herself available outside of city business hours to meet the needs of volunteer schedules.

The city also helps the department maintain continuity when volunteers who head a program, conduct trainings or lead a station must leave their post due to life or family circumstances. In these situations, a city staff member will step in to assume the responsibilities until another volunteer can take over. Again, communication has been key to make sure no toes are stepped on.

The city is invested in supporting the volunteer system, and the department relies on the city to handle the significant workload involved in hiring, onboarding, managing and supporting over 100 volunteers. In coordination with the department leadership, a small administrative team employed by the city of Moscow manages the entire application process, including background checks, coordinating interviews and subsequent onboarding for applicants the department accepts. They also contact applicants not chosen by the department to be volunteers.

In Rogers' position with the city, she also helps ensure volunteers are meeting participation requirements. She works with department leadership to identify those not meeting the minimum requirements and contacts them after a month for an initial check-in to make sure the volunteer is OK and let them know the department misses them. Most of the time this is sufficient to resolve the issue. When it's not, she follows up again after 2 months with a reminder that the volunteer needs to meet minimum requirements and that the next step is either probation, leave of absence or resignation. If the department ultimately decides to terminate the volunteer, the city staff handles the meeting and correspondence.

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In addition, Rogers provides the department with information technology (IT) support, updates the website, manages Google accounts and training logins, develops training videos and manages social media. She solicits input and help from any volunteer that wants to assist and offers training to interested volunteers in various areas such as creating graphics or making training videos.

To facilitate collaboration and communication, volunteer EMS leaders from local agencies in Latah County and the local government staff supporting the agencies meet every few months to talk about updates in protocols, training opportunities, communications with each department and volunteer leadership. They have a small budget provided by Latah County that can be used to purchase equipment and conduct trainings. This helps ensure that all of the stakeholders are on the same page and support each other in service to their rural area.

Says Rogers: “There has been a significant increase in call volume with EMS over the last five years, and there are current strains on our national and local health system with COVID. [The city of Moscow] is currently working with the volunteer leadership [at Moscow Volunteer Fire and Ambulance] to identify opportunities in improving participation and response times and to identify any other resources that may be needed. We are all working together to make sure our community continues to get the care they need by our volunteer department, first responders, and city.”

### **Briarcliff Manor Fire Department**

Briarcliff Manor Fire Department is an all-volunteer department with 150 members in a suburban community in New York. The department is part of the local government and works with the mayor’s office, village manager’s office, department of public works, American Legion Post and Rotary Club to enhance recruitment and retention initiatives.

Communication was key in solidifying the partnership with local government, and the department also created partnership opportunities at village events. Challenges they have experienced include personality conflicts, fears of losing staff attention to primary government tasks and tightening budgets.

Among the ways that local government supports the department’s volunteer staffing initiatives are:

- ◆ Supporting administration of LOSAP.
- ◆ Marketing through community-based publications and events.
- ◆ Supporting new membership through recruiting, retention and engagement initiatives.

Thanks to the local government support, the department was able to launch a digital advertising campaign aimed at recruitment in the spring of 2021. In addition, they encourage other departments to dig deep to uncover outreach programs where partnerships may attract fire department prospects, such as high school internship programs, children and family events, and holiday events.

### **Culpeper County Volunteer Fire & Rescue**

Culpeper County Volunteer Fire & Rescue is an all-volunteer department serving a rural community in Virginia with 590 volunteers. The department is separate from the local government but works with the Culpeper County Board of Supervisors, county administrator and county attorney for administrative support, recruitment and retention benefits, and funding for training and resources that support volunteer staffing.

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The county provides the department with an operations budget for recruitment and retention activities and supplies a part-time administrative assistant to assist with recruitment and retention. They also offer incentives to the fire department volunteers, including a property tax waiver on 1 vehicle, workers' compensation insurance and death benefits.

In order to establish a partnership with the local government, the department worked with the county administrator to create the part-time administrative assistant position for the benefit of all 8 volunteer agencies in the county. The position reports directly to the Culpeper County Volunteer Fire and Rescue Association and also works with the department's recruitment and retention committee.

The key in building the partnership is open and ongoing communication, transparency, and a strong dialog between the department and the county government, including the Board of Supervisors, town council and planning commission. They have regular meetings where the department provides updates on successes as well as their needs and areas of improvement. They communicate to local officials the efforts required to provide service in an all-volunteer system, including time, training, fundraising, community involvement, fire prevention, the growing demands the community places on emergency services and feedback on new infrastructure. The department has a solid financial process that provides checks and balances and reports on income efforts in fundraising, as well as training and equipment needs.

The partnership between the department and the local government has opened up avenues for volunteer recruitment. For instance, thanks to the part-time administrative assistant, the department has been able to foster an ongoing relationship with the Chamber of Commerce as well as with local radio and television stations, the library, and other outlets for recruitment. Having an administrative assistant has also enabled the department to post information on social media more regularly. The budget provided by the local government enables the recruitment and retention committee to expand their reach through things such as banners, brochures and paid social media promotion.

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## Part III: Recruitment Strategies

Part III will discuss various strategies to help departments identify and recruit volunteers, from identifying policies that may inhibit recruitment to locating prospective volunteers to onboarding successful applicants. Part III will also discuss how department culture and image can impact recruitment as well as ways to ensure the department makeup reflects the community it serves.

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**Closer look:** It is important to remember there is no one-size-fits-all strategy when it comes to recruiting and retaining volunteers. Instead, consider the options that are the best fit for the specific department and community. The key, however, is to do something. The Woodstock (Virginia) Fire Department offers this tip: “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.”

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### Section 1: Membership requirements

Most departments have rules or criteria that determine who is eligible for volunteer membership. Many of these rules were established years ago, when the community may have looked much different than it does today. One of the most common criteria is a residency requirement such as living within a minimum distance from the firehouse. Such a requirement immediately eliminates a wide swath of prospective volunteers and may no longer be relevant depending on your department structure and service area. When possible, it is recommended that departments eliminate any residency requirement that is not required by local ordinance or benefit eligibility requirement. In some cases, this may mean volunteers having assigned duty shifts and responding from the station rather than home, but eliminating residency requirements can allow for a much broader pool of prospective volunteers.



Another common obstacle to attracting new members is the lack of reciprocity between states and/or regional training programs. This means an already trained firefighter’s certifications may not be recognized in another state or jurisdiction, thus requiring that individual to retake coursework. Oftentimes the most basic courses are not recognized, which, in turn, invalidates the upper-level courses. This can be a significant deterrent for volunteers who move from one state or area to another but do not want to repeat this time-intensive training. It is important to become familiar with the laws and requirements in your state when it comes to accepting training from other jurisdictions, states or the military. In some cases, the local governing body can choose to accept training that does not satisfy the state or region’s certification requirements; however, the governing body would accept any liability for this uncertified member. Finding ways to encourage reciprocity across jurisdictions or advocating to state agencies the importance of establishing training reciprocity may be the better solution to this ongoing challenge.

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To assist with other necessary training requirements, it is recommended that departments sponsor required classes within the local area or form partnerships with adjacent departments for convenience and to reduce travel time for members. Hybrid classes, consisting of both face-to-face training and online instruction, are other possible means in which to make training more accessible. Offering the same class at multiple times and on various dates may better accommodate the busy schedules of volunteer members.

Many departments have minimum requirements in terms of hours, percentage of calls, duty shifts, etc., which volunteers may struggle to meet. Some departments have successfully eliminated minimum weekly hour requirements in lieu of a flexible schedule so long as minimum staffing is maintained. To obtain an active membership, a minimum level of activity can be established which must be met on a monthly or yearly basis, allowing each member to schedule shifts that accommodate the busy and not-so-busy periods in their life and work schedules.

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**Closer look:** In the course of a 3-year research project on volunteer fire service retention, Dr. Candice McDonald found that 70% of volunteer firefighters report a failure to balance volunteer and family commitments. She proposed several solutions that emergency service departments can implement to help their volunteers achieve a better work-life-volunteer balance. One of the top strategies is to move away from the typical 1-night-a-week training schedule and offer training on multiple days, including both a weeknight and a weekend. Another strategy is to switch from requiring a certain percentage of calls to a set number of hours per month so the volunteer can fit service into their busy schedules. For instance, if the department requires 10 hours per month, one firefighter may be able to meet this requirement by spending a full Saturday at the department while another may need to break it up into a couple hours each week depending on their work or child care schedule. Allowing for temporary leaves of absence without ridicule is another way to help ensure that those who need a break from the fire service are welcomed back when they once again have more time to give.

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It is also still common to find membership requirements that only recognize emergency first responders as members. Every organization needs members to fill nonemergency roles such as mechanic, bookkeeper, data entry, recruiter, station attendant and fundraiser, to name just a few. Individuals interested in filling these positions should not be overlooked. Including nonoperational volunteers as members will ensure they feel valued, and, in some cases, it may also allow them to be covered under the department's insurance policies and LOSAP, which are pension-like programs offered by some volunteer emergency service departments.

Policies are inherently intended to enhance the ability of an organization to operate efficiently and effectively, yet over time these policies can become outdated or irrelevant. In any organization, it is a good idea to review policies on a regular, ongoing basis, and membership requirements should be included in this review.



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**In action:** The Rapid Valley Volunteer Fire Department (Rapid City, South Dakota) decided to accept volunteers from outside its coverage area as long as the volunteer agrees to spend time at the station instead of trying to respond from their home for every incident. They have gotten several members through this expansion. The Brighton Fire Department Inc. (Rochester, New York) created a “cafeteria plan” of participation models for their volunteers that includes on-duty at the station, privately owned vehicle (POV) response from home, on-duty flycar response from home, on-duty at the fire house, bunker program for college students and off-duty POV response from home.

The West Barnstable (Massachusetts) Fire Department was struggling to find new members in a village where 30% of residents are over 60. They decided to throw out counterproductive residency requirements, allowing volunteers to come from outside the community. The department now has college students volunteer from as far as 65 miles away who spend one weekend a month at the station to respond to calls. Other volunteers who live 10-20 miles away stay at the station when they are on call. In addition, the department abandoned a membership requirement for volunteers to be both firefighters and EMS providers, which was preventing people from joining. Now people can choose to join as a firefighter or an EMS provider and then learn about other aspects of the job at their own pace.

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## Section 2: Understanding volunteer needs and motivators

To be successful in volunteer recruitment, it is important to understand why people volunteer. Some motivators frequently cited by current volunteers include:

- Giving back to the community.
- Learning or developing new skills.
- Developing pride and a sense of accomplishment.
- Having a family history of volunteerism.
- Finding friendships and camaraderie.

Recruitment messages can be strengthened by focusing on these motivators. Highlight how department members are giving back to their community, learning valuable new skills, and the great camaraderie that is universal and unique to the fire service family. Consider using member quotes about all they have gained by volunteering and accomplishments they are proud of. This serves not only to highlight current volunteers but can speak volumes to someone who is looking for a meaningful way to get involved in their community. Invite family and friends of current members to attend department events. This will strengthen these relationships and also introduce them to the department, perhaps sparking that desire to get involved.



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**In action:** Showcasing how their members give back has proven to be a successful recruitment and community relations strategy for the Gilt Edge (Tennessee) Volunteer Fire Department. “Social media, specifically Facebook, has been our bread and butter in direct and indirect recruiting. We have used the department’s social media page as a tool to tell our department’s story and to show the public what their volunteers are doing every day and at all hours. In addition to sharing fire prevention and safety tips, we show our members training, in action on incidents, and serving the public by installing address signs and smoke alarms. While we always accept applications, during certain times of the year we also use the Facebook page to advertise that we are actively recruiting. This social media presence, as well as other positive reputation management tools such as news media, has led to a positive image of our department through word of mouth in the community.”

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The work doesn’t end there, however. Volunteers must continue to feel that their needs are being met throughout their volunteer experience and, in some cases, these needs may change over time. A new recruit may be looking to learn new skills or gain experience, while a seasoned member may find tangible benefits such as pension plans an appealing motivator. In the NVFC’s 2015 “Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention Formative Research Results,” isolation, unmet expectations, frustration with leadership, and lack of support from family or employers were cited by current volunteers as challenges to a sustained commitment to the department. It is important for leadership to keep a finger on the pulse of the membership, identifying areas where needs are not being met or where needs have changed. This can be accomplished by surveying new and existing members to determine current needs and wants as well as any possible challenges that may cause them to leave. These are often called “stay surveys” since they have the added benefit of catching issues before the volunteer makes the decision to leave and instead result in them staying. For members that do leave, exit surveys should be conducted to determine why they left so that trends can be identified and adjustments made to ensure that, moving forward, volunteer needs are met to the best of the department’s ability. See Appendix D: Sample Exit Survey and Appendix E: Sample Stay Survey for examples.

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**In action:** The town of Canton (Connecticut) Volunteer Fire and EMS Department understands that the satisfaction of its current members is directly related to its ability to attract new members. “Because recruitment is a daily and ongoing priority, we have found that it is critical to continually assess what new recruits see when they walk in the door — on day one. To that end, we have embarked on a strategic planning process that will inform the work of the department for years to come. Significant time has already been spent on phase 1, developing and assessing town-wide surveys of not only members, but community groups, town officials, and the general public.

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“While strategic planning is a long-view exercise, we are also following best practices by addressing any significant issues that become apparent, in the short term, as a found opportunity. If this strategic directive, ‘We listen to our members and react accordingly,’ is built into the fabric of the department, it becomes a tool for how we promote the department and treat fellow members and others. It is an indisputable truth that the most successful recruitment ‘tools’ are happy, busy, and proud members who feel appreciated and heard.”

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### Section 3: Finding prospective volunteers

Prospective volunteers are all around you — at work, in your neighborhood, in line at the grocery store, at places of worship and maybe even in your own family. The first step in reaching prospective volunteers is to make them aware of the need. According to the 2015 research from the NVFC, 41% of the population doesn’t know if their department is career, combination or volunteer, and 79% don’t know if their department needs volunteers. Make sure these messages are clear in department communications, on social media, in press releases and in other ways in which the department interacts with the community.

It is also important to consider the target audience. While there is an indisputable need to recruit younger members to replace those that age out of or retire from the volunteer emergency services, it is important to also consider the life stage of the recruits you are seeking. Members as young as high school may have fewer outside commitments, but they may also soon leave for college or move out of the area as they launch a career. Conversely, more established residents, such as those in their mid-30s who may be homeowners and more settled in a career and in the community, may become longer-term volunteers, but may also struggle to balance family and other outside commitments. More mature volunteers may bring experience and an ability to mentor others. Finding balance and diversity in your volunteer force is imperative to sustainability.



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**Closer look:** Having an online presence is critical for reaching prospective volunteers in today's world. Keeping the department's website up to date and with a clear call to action for joining are musts as the website is often a community member's first stop to find more information about the department. Sites that haven't been updated in months or even years as well as sites with hard-to-find information on joining will quickly turn away potential recruits.

Social media is also an important and highly effective tool for connecting with the public. It is another way to recognize the great work your volunteers are doing, let the public know what the department does for them, impart important safety information and get out recruitment messages. Posting frequently will help build engagement and interest in your department. Time-constrained departments may find social management tools like Hootsuite and SocialPilot beneficial to manage and preschedule posts across all the department's social media pages.

Make sure that your department has policies in place for members who use social media. Remember that everything a member posts on social media could reflect back on the department. In terms of the department's social media accounts, there should be designated administrators who do the posting and make sure that all content adheres to the department's policies. Refrain from posting anything from incident scenes that violates privacy or Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) laws or disrespects those impacted by the incident or the seriousness of the situation.

The Fire Law Blog provides a framework that departments can use to develop a social media policy. While not specific to emergency service departments, the Society for Human Resources Management has an informative article on "Managing and Leveraging Workplace Use of Social Media." Appendix F: Sample Social Media Policies also provides example social media policies.

To best support recruitment through online outreach, make it easy for people to apply to be a volunteer with your department. Include a link to the application on the department's and municipality's social media pages, and establish a dedicated and easy-to-find page on the department's website focusing on why community members should volunteer, along with a link to the application.

Online campaigns can garner positive results for a department often with little or no monetary cost. The East Dubuque (Illinois) Fire Department noted: "The methods that have proven to be successful for us to recruit new members is our presence on Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms, along with members spreading our information via word of mouth."

According to Foothills Fire & Rescue (Golden, Colorado), to find new volunteers, "We launched a social media campaign, posting pictures and videos of our volunteers on Facebook and Nextdoor to introduce

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our team to the community, a look at the everyday people behind the mask. We have created marketing mailers and a lot of web site content using Canva.”

South Windsor (Connecticut) Fire Department reports: “Our department uses Facebook and Twitter. We are very active in keeping the media and public up to date with all our activities, incidents, training, public relations, etc. With most posts, we not only share fire prevention tips, but messages on joining the department.”

Royersford (Pennsylvania) Fire Department also found success online. “Over the last handful of years, we’ve greatly expanded our social media and online presence, purchasing a new web site and regularly updating the information. We’ve acquired 5,800+ followers via Facebook and approximately 1,500 followers on Instagram. We post pictures and quick-hit stories often and also unveiled a Virtual Tour Series during the COVID-19 outbreak. Our PIO team highlighted our apparatus and then was able to connect with mutual aid and outside agencies to highlight their specialty apparatus.”

The Secaucus (New Jersey) Volunteer Fire Department has built up its digital profile to connect with recruits and enable them to take direct action to apply. “Over the past few years, our presence on social media has grown immensely. In the past two years, we have set up multiple Facebook and Instagram pages that allow us to further connect with our community. Additionally, we have launched a department web site that has an entire section dedicated to joining the department. One key feature on this section is that we have a general information form that potential applicants can complete to let our recruitment team know that an individual is interested in joining.”

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Consider the many ways and places departments can reach prospective volunteers:

### **Personal contacts**

The most common source of new recruits is through referrals by current members or family members. Many departments rely on their members to recruit. Giving current members something tangible to provide to prospective volunteers is useful. Fire Corps® teams, auxiliary programs and other nonoperational volunteers that are already engaged with the department may also be interested in taking that next step to become an operational member.

### **Door-to-door**

Some departments go door-to-door to recruit or link their recruitment efforts with home fire safety inspections or fundraising. Consider other methods to reach homes as well. For example, if your department offers a property tax benefit to its volunteers, ask local government to include a small flyer about volunteering in the annual property tax bill.

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## New community members

Volunteer departments should make a special effort to reach new people in the community to explain the function of the department and its membership options. The fire department can include this information in literature disseminated by welcome wagons, the chamber of commerce, local realtors and others.

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**In action:** Foothills Fire & Rescue (Golden, Colorado) combines a door-to-door approach with reaching new residents. “One of our biggest annual recruitment efforts is to do walk-arounds, knocking on the doors of homes that recently sold within our district to introduce ourselves, provide fire mitigation information, and ask if they are interested in volunteering.” The Carlisle (Massachusetts) Fire Department has a plan to work with the town clerk to include an explanation of the fire department and invitation to join in the information packet sent to new residents.

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## Schools

Recruitment materials can be sent to parents and teachers and disseminated on career days in grade schools and high schools. However, it is even better to work directly on educating guidance and/or career counselors on the benefits of being a volunteer and to participate in career fairs. Departments can also tie recruitment efforts to their visits to schools to conduct fire education and safety programs. High visibility helps the department make contacts at the school, sparks the students’ interest, and can go toward building long-term relationships with the community. Departments with a junior firefighter program can talk to the school about making this an eligible activity for any volunteer service requirements the school has for its students.

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**In action:** The Westminster (Maryland) Volunteer Fire Department works with school officials to showcase to students the benefits of volunteering. “By gaining access to the administrators and career counselors in the local schools, we’ve been able to pitch the free training and benefits of being a volunteer firefighter. We are also pursuing middle schools, both public and private, to promote our junior program. The junior program has been very beneficial to bringing in volunteers that stay.”

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Some high schools have emergency services programs that train students to a certain certification level (such as Firefighter I or EMT). This provides a great pool of potential recruits for local volunteer fire and EMS departments, as the students are trained, ready to respond and likely looking for some real-life experience in a department.

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**In action:** Departments can work with the local school system to set up a vocational program that offers fire and EMS classes if one doesn’t already exist, which worked for the Lewisville (North Carolina) Fire Department. “Lewisville Fire partnered with the school system and NC Department of Public Instruction to bring a vocational fire academy to our local high school. This program certifies students to be firefighters and EMTs as a part of their curriculum. This provides the local volunteer departments in the area with fully qualified fire/EMS responders right

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out of high school. An added benefit to the student: they are capable of entering the professional fire/EMS workforce immediately.”

According to an article in the Williamsport Sun-Gazette, the Williamsport (Pennsylvania) Area School Board voted in July 2021 to allow high school students to take an EMT course at the Pennsylvania College of Technology. The course will act as an elective for high school students, and the cost will be paid by the students’ families.

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Departments that are in or near college towns can recruit students to serve as firefighters during their college stay. Some departments offer a live-in program where the participants are given free room and kitchen privileges in return for volunteering. Live-ins may be required to serve weekend duty and a specified number of incidents and drills. While the students eventually graduate and may leave the area, the pool of student members is constantly refreshed by the new students. These students may go on to volunteer elsewhere or serve the emergency services in some other capacity.

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**In action:** The Rapid Valley Volunteer Fire Department (Rapid City, South Dakota) implemented a student resident program to reach college students. “We provide a dormitory-type residence, kitchen, living area, rooms for schoolwork, and high-speed internet for four students per school year. The students live in the station and respond to incidents over night when incidents are hardest to staff. The students receive a monthly stipend and a small scholarship. We provide all their training and certifications to be a full-trained member.”

The Daggett (California) Fire Department partners with local colleges to attract EMT students. “We consistently collaborate with local community colleges by offering students who are enrolled in an EMT course the opportunity to apply for our 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 by our state certified fire instructors.”

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## Explorer, junior firefighter and cadet programs

Explorer, junior firefighter and cadet programs are an organized way to encourage young peoples’ interest in the fire department as well as gain assistance with nonoperational tasks. Some fire departments run programs that accept youth as young as age 13. They train the juniors like recruits. When the juniors turn 18, they can join the department as full members. Most departments require the parents of recruits to sign an approval form and liability waiver.

Because the minors are still in school, departments involved in these programs usually stress that education is very important and that their volunteering should not be done at the cost of their schoolwork. Some departments require that their juniors maintain an 80% grade



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average to participate. Each state has rules that govern child labor practices and set age limits. These must be reviewed before implementing a junior program. For additional information on state labor laws, visit [www.osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov). The NVFC's National Junior Firefighter Program provides information and resources to help departments implement a youth program.

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**In action:** Many departments find that junior firefighter programs engage participants so that they want to join as full members when they turn the appropriate age. The South Windsor (Connecticut) Fire Department considers its junior firefighter program to be its best source for gaining new firefighters. "We have the oldest serving Fire Explorer Post in CT. Like most things, the numbers fluctuate, but we average 15-25 young adults, male and female between the ages of 14-18. We generally see about 75 percent continue on to join the department as regular firefighters."

The Secaucus (New Jersey) Volunteer Fire Department launched a junior firefighter program in 2014 for residents between the ages of 16 and 18. "This allows us to build the future of the fire department while also instilling core mindsets and lessons in younger individuals that reside in our community."

The Sardis (Ohio) Volunteer Fire Department found that once they started a cadet program, it led to new young adult members as well. "Once we got a few cadets, word spread and we started getting interest from younger residents between the ages of 18 and 25. We have added 12 members in the last two years!"

According to an April 21, 2021, article in the Kokomo Tribune, the Cicero Township (Indiana) Volunteer Fire Department's junior firefighter program is open to any high school student who wants training to prepare for a future in the fire service. The deputy chief of the department estimated that about 75% of the juniors end up working either in a volunteer or career department. The department's view is that even if the juniors go on to a different department, they are still helping to fill needed volunteer positions.

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## Retirement communities

Retirement communities are a rich source of people who could serve in a nonemergency capacity. Retirees often look for ways they can stay active and give back to their communities. Fire departments should approach the retirement community's activity coordinator to set up a meeting to educate residents about volunteer opportunities. The meeting can also provide life safety information important for mature adults while creating yet another connection with the community served.

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**In action:** The Secaucus (New Jersey) Volunteer Fire Department finds that community engagement benefits recruitment. "Our department visits local public schools, senior citizen centers, and businesses to keep everyone up to date on the latest in fire prevention. This also allows us an outlet to recruit and inform the public about the benefits of joining the department."

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## Civic organizations and churches

In many areas, clubs and civic organizations such as the Elks, Veterans of Foreign Wars and Knights of Columbus are very prominent. These groups have civic-minded citizens who volunteer for many activities. Some may be interested in volunteering in the fire service. Parent-Teacher Association meetings and places of worship are other good sources for potential volunteers.

## Department of parks and recreation

Many communities have a government-run parks and recreation department. Consider working with this department to reach people who are physically active, such as those who like to hike, kayak or swim in the parks, or who participate in sports or fitness classes. Fire and EMS departments could set up a recruitment table at local recreational hot spots or work with the department to distribute information on volunteering to their customers.

## Previous or current firefighters

Individuals who have served in other departments, either career or volunteer, may be interested in volunteering and can often make an easy and seamless transition to a new department. When recruiting a volunteer from another department, it is still important to follow your application process, including any background checks, to maintain consistency and fairness among all recruits. It is also important to follow the FLSA, which prohibits career firefighters from volunteering in the same capacity in a fire department in the same jurisdiction in which they work as a paid firefighter.

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**In action:** The Kiowa (Colorado) Fire Protection District found an out-of-the-box method for reaching potential volunteers. “A lot of our firefighters are looking to go career; we support them in their efforts but ask them to wear our FD’s t-shirt when they go test. You’d be surprised how well this works!” The East Dubuque (Illinois) Fire Department has had success recruiting volunteers from a neighboring city that has a career department. “We are not taking people away from their recruitment; it has actually helped these members obtain jobs in the fire and EMS career field.”

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## County fairs/events

County fairs are often good sites for recruitment efforts. Fire and EMS units are usually present for display and should have volunteer applications and information on-hand. Other community events such as Fourth of July festivals, job fairs, garden festivals, parades or community get-togethers can also prove to be an effective way to get out in the community and invite people to experience all your department can offer.

## Resorts

During the in-season, population swells enormously in resort areas. Demand for services, especially EMS, also rises sharply. Resorts are good places to advertise for volunteers for the entire region, as well as for the department that protects the resort. Resort areas attract many healthy, able-bodied men and women who are oriented toward physical activities.

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Fire and EMS departments can recruit volunteers to serve only during the tourist season to help handle the surge in calls. Sometimes they can be recruited from the visitor population itself, or from volunteer firefighters and EMS providers from other areas who take jobs in the resort area during tourist season. Some departments in resort towns allow a few out-of-town volunteers who have relocated for the resort season to sleep at the station. This is a major incentive for recruiting volunteers in resort areas.

### **Local businesses**

Recruiting from nearby local businesses, with their permission, is another option. This may appeal to business owners whose employees would learn critical leadership and life-saving skills. Creating this relationship with business owners may also go a long way toward securing buy-in for flexible schedules, allowing volunteers to respond during daytime hours when many volunteer departments have difficulty getting adequate turnout.

### **Publicly staged events**

Fire departments can use Fire Prevention Week as a chance to show off apparatus and attract new recruits. Other events that are good for recruiting include parades, demonstrations for fire and life safety education, gatherings for elected officials, training events, department open houses, and local festivals and events.

### **Fitness events or challenges**

Physical fitness can be an important attribute of the job, and the volunteer emergency services may be attractive to individuals seeking a mental or physical challenge. Departments may consider setting up a recruitment table at a local fitness event or challenge, such as a Tough Mudder or Spartan Race, or reaching out to local gyms to distribute or display flyers about volunteer opportunities.

### **Utility companies and county and local government employees**

Law enforcement officials, gas and electrical utility workers, public works employees, recreation employees, and other local workers make good volunteers and can provide special assistance in their areas of knowledge. County workers employed in road and park maintenance and utilities may also be well-positioned during the day to respond to calls.

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**In action:** The Royersford (Pennsylvania) Fire Department demonstrated to the local government through personnel response numbers during daytime hours the need for the borough to assist with getting more volunteers on board. They now partner with the borough's public works department to encourage employees to volunteer. The borough allows the public works employees to respond to calls, and when they hire, they look for personnel who are already state-certified firefighters.

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### **Military bases and veterans groups**

Military personnel are accustomed to discipline, may be physically fit, have a history of service and often have acquired relevant skills. Current and retired military personnel may find solace in the similar leadership structure of the fire service, and the camaraderie they find may help outgoing military members transition back to civilian life. Consider reaching out to a local veteran affairs office or other veteran groups to reach former military personnel.

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**Closer look:** The Pennsylvania Fire & Emergency Services Institute provides the following advice for recruiting veterans:

“Each year over 200,000 individuals leave military service and return to the community, most from where they were born and raised. These are very talented individuals who have worked within an organized structure to achieve objectives in sometimes difficult and life-threatening situations.

“Those in the military make good fire and EMS personnel, many times coming with the skills and knowledge already needed to fight fires, rescue people, and perform medical services. This is a very talented pool of job seekers looking for a military-like or military-friendly organization to become a part of for a career or to volunteer. Veterans can play a big part in your organization. Recruit them, engage them, make them welcome and they will help make your organization successful.

“So, the question becomes — how do I attract them? Here are some steps:

1. Develop a recruitment strategy for veterans. Find out who is returning home, when they are returning home, etc. If there are local groups such as the VFW or American Legion, work with them to recruit.
2. If you have connections to current members of the armed forces (their parents, relatives, or friends), advise them that the fire company is a way for the returning service member to get engaged with civilians and the community, make new friends, etc.
3. Work with local military recruiters when individuals leave the service to route them to you for engagement. Provide promotional items, if necessary, to pique their interest.
4. If there are existing veteran websites in your area, they may be willing to allow you to advertise your organization.
5. Be able to translate the current military activities, language, and engagement into your organization. Current members with prior military experience can help achieve this.”

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## Other emergency volunteers

Citizens who have volunteered in the time of an emergency are often well suited to be fire and emergency service department volunteers. People offer to help at community disasters ranging from floods to hurricanes. These individuals may already be part of emergency response groups such as Medical Reserve Corps, Red Cross, Community Emergency Response Team or others. They may be interested in more consistent volunteer opportunities that the fire department offers, which can supplement their existing volunteer activities.

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**Consider this:** Potential recruits are all around, but it takes effort to reach them. Recruitment is an ongoing process, and success often comes from a coordinated campaign that targets multiple audiences in various ways. It is not realistic to think that simply attending one community event or putting up one flyer will be enough to have significant results over the long term.

The town of Canton (Connecticut) Volunteer Fire and EMS Department encourages identifying new markets to find volunteers. “Deliberately seek out untraditional markets. Is there a pool of: stay-at-home parents with school-age kids; college/tech school students; small business owners who have flexible schedules and are looking for a different way to enhance their skills?”

Siuslaw Valley Fire and Rescue (Oregon) set up a table at a local department store with positive results. They also have gained recruits from their Reader Board and by recruiting at a gym. According to the Kiowa (Colorado) Fire Protection District, to reach audiences: “You can’t just do one thing; it takes visiting colleges, social media, web sites, and much more.” The East Franklin Fire Department (New Jersey) utilizes this same strategy by going out in the community as much as possible through community events, camp programs with community partners, fire prevention programs in the schools, advertising to local college students and hosting holiday events.

This type of campaign proved to be very successful for the Woodstock (Virginia) Fire Department. “To address the challenges we face with recruitment, we launched a coordinated recruitment campaign that has helped us recruit 11 new members [in about six months]. The most successful thing about it is the fact it is a saturation campaign. We have reached every aspect of our community through as many avenues as possible. The campaign included social media outreach, a dedicated recruitment page on our website, free print advertisements, visits to local schools, visits to a wide array of community events, and has included several recruitment events at the fire station. Basically, we push recruitment and promote our department all the time. This means individuals in the community learn about us and see us in a positive light, become interested, and then are easily able to find how to become a member of the department and start the process.”

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## Section 4: Personal invitations

While social media, newspaper ads and the station marquees are great ways to let the community know volunteers are needed, research shows that most people volunteer because they were personally invited to do so. The NVFC's 2015 study on volunteer recruitment indicated that most current volunteer firefighters were personally invited by a family member or friend to join. A personal invitation can go a long way in communicating trust and faith that that person has what it takes to become a fire and emergency service volunteer and can give them the nudge they may need to overcome self-doubt or simply to take that first step to becoming a volunteer.



A personal invitation doesn't need to be fancy or even time-consuming; it could simply involve verbally inviting a friend, family member, neighbor, coworker or even an acquaintance to come to the department and check it out. For those wanting to take that extra step, the NVFC's Make Me A Firefighter™ campaign portal offers an online materials generator that allows the user to create email invitations and print handouts in a matter of minutes.

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**Consider this:** A personal connection goes a long way. Even if you are able to get people interested through other means, it is a personal connection that often seals their commitment to the department. The Brighton Fire Department Inc. (Rochester, New York) recognizes this need for a connection. "People don't join the fire department based upon a Facebook post or a billboard (and we spend a lot of money on those); they join on because of a personal connection. Remember that the money you spend on advertising is to get more people to make a personal connection with your organization — you need a good team of recruitment people to quickly and personally make that connection with those who express interest."

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## Section 5: Provide sampling opportunities

The NVFC's 2015 recruitment research also showed that many current volunteers reported that they were more likely to join after being given a taste of what it's like to be a volunteer. Having an opportunity to experience various firefighting tasks firsthand allowed them to picture themselves in that role and overcome doubts and fears. Furthermore, interactions with the fire department allowed them to see how they could fit in.

One way to provide these valuable interactions is through sampling events where members of the community can get a small taste of what it's like to volunteer. These sampling events include things like ride-alongs or fun contests at community events where they can practice donning or doffing gear quickly. Explorer programs, citizen fire academies, open houses and other recruitment events can help interested individuals connect with departments and build the confidence and excitement that is needed to truly consider the opportunity.

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**In action:** The Firemen’s Association of the State of New York annually holds a RecruitNY Weekend in April where hundreds of fire departments across the state open their doors to allow the public to get a taste of what it’s like to be a firefighter. Visitors take a station tour, try on gear and see demonstrations of firefighting techniques. While the event had to be canceled in 2020 due to COVID-19, it ramped up again in 2021, with many stations opting to do a virtual open house or participate in other digital outreach. While most states may not have a coordinated open house weekend, departments can tie in events like this to National Volunteer Week in April and Fire Prevention Week in October.

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## Section 6: Effective onboarding

A department’s onboarding process will communicate a lot about the department. Is the department responsive to inquiries? Organized? Clear on what the steps are for any prospective or new recruit? Is the department proactive and does it follow up with new and prospective recruits? Onboarding requires a series of steps from the initial contact with prospective volunteers to training them as recruits and ensuring they become an integral, accepted part of the team.



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**Consider this:** The amount of time required of volunteers may seem daunting to new recruits. The onboarding process can be a critical component of retention to help recruits adjust and learn how to manage their new responsibilities. Moscow (Idaho) Volunteer Fire and Ambulance recommends having “dedicated people to support volunteers through onboarding to consistently check in with volunteers who are not meeting training or call volume expectations and to provide encouragement through the process.” They also recommend that departments value volunteers’ time and “maintain a balance of accountability for meeting call and training requirements with opportunities to thank volunteers and make them feel appreciated and valued.”

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### Application process

The application process should be clear, easy to follow, and resolved quickly with a membership acceptance or decline. What follows is an example of a 6-step approach to the application process to build upon based on a fire department’s needs and resources. Ensure the application process is in line with the FLSA and other best practices in human resources. This is a good opportunity to involve a volunteer human resources professional from local government or a local business. It is also valuable to have a recruitment committee or one person solely responsible for the application process to maintain the confidentiality of the process.

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Most departments have a packet of information they provide to an applicant that includes the written job description of the position, the agency's expectations of volunteers, and the requirements and expectations of a probationary firefighter and a full member.

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**Consider this:** Local government already has a system in place for administration and human resources that fire departments may be able to tap into for support with their onboarding process. This may include help with managing the application process, conducting background checks on applicants, questions to ask during the interview, practices to follow to ensure a fair and equitable evaluation of all applicants, and even guidance on how to decline an applicant if they are not the right fit for the department.

Moscow (Idaho) Volunteer Fire and Ambulance relies on assistance from the city to help with the application and onboarding process. A very small team of city of Moscow administrative staff manage the whole application process, run background checks and coordinate everything for interviews. The department chooses the candidates to bring on, but city staff handle calling the candidates, walking them through the next steps, and communicating training and leadership opportunities, as well as contacting the applicants that are not chosen as volunteers. The city staff also works with the department leadership to coordinate onboarding calendars and timelines, then meets 1-on-1 with newly accepted volunteers to go over dates, expectations and deadlines, equipment, etc. Department leadership is included on all important correspondence, provides input on the schedule, and does a large part of onboarding trainings, but the administrative staff is also there to help coordinate the space and resources needed and follow up with trainees as well as with the department leadership to remind them to check in with their volunteers, if needed.

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## Step 1: Application

Some departments use an electronic application while others use a paper application. Departments need to ensure that whatever process they use is secure and that personally identifiable information is protected. Departments can use the NVFC's Make Me A Firefighter campaign to create a volunteer opportunity landing page that includes a volunteer inquiry form and a tracking system where departments can manage their applications. Online form-making solutions such as JotForms, Google Forms, Wufoo and others provide a quick and easy method of creating, distributing and tracking online applications. See Appendix C: Sample Department Application for a sample department application.

It is important to verify receipt of the application to the applicant, and it is equally important to provide them feedback and information on the next steps in a timely manner so they don't lose interest in volunteering or lose confidence in the department due to lack of response. This is another reason it is beneficial to have a designated person or committee in charge of the application process to ensure no applications fall through the cracks.

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**In action:** Bay County (Florida) Fire Services offers an online application process, or prospective volunteers can get an application from the county's human resources department. They also emphasize that library computers can be used to fill out the application online. As part of the application process, they require prospective volunteers to complete a bloodborne pathogens presentation and quiz.

The West Barnstable (Massachusetts) Fire Department revamped its application process after realizing in 2005 that their application was over 20 years old, asked unlawful and irrelevant questions, and just looked sloppy. They created a new application, attached a current job description to it and made sure it was easily available to community members — including keeping a stack at the front counter of the fire station. They now update the application every 3 to 5 years to keep it relevant and lawful and 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.

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## Step 2: Background checks

It is important to verify the laws governing your state for background checks for volunteers, especially for operational firefighters, EMS personnel, and department members who work with children such as in public education efforts or with junior firefighter programs. Background checks are highly recommended and can protect departments from liability risks. The local government or police department may be able to provide background checks for fire and EMS volunteer applicants. Develop a written policy regarding background screenings and ensure these are implemented equally for all applicants.

Background checks may include the following:

- ❖ Driving and criminal background.
- ❖ Social Security number/address history.
- ❖ Education and employment verification.
- ❖ Drug tests.
- ❖ Credit history.
- ❖ Sexual crimes database.

## Step 3: Interview

The interview is an opportunity for the department to determine if the individual is a good fit for the department and for the individual to determine if they are a good fit for the department. It is recommended to divide the interview into 3 phases. The first phase would allow the individual to learn more about the organization. These are some sample topics to be discussed with the individual:

- ❖ Provide an overview of the organization and both the tangible and intangible benefits of volunteering.
- ❖ List different types of operational and nonoperational volunteer opportunities.
- ❖ Give a realistic overview of the types and frequency of calls the department typically receives.
- ❖ Discuss the requirements and expectations (training, fundraising, administrative duties, hours per month).



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- ❖ Discuss what the department provides in terms of paid training, PPE, firefighter physicals, etc.
  - ❖ Give a tour of the station.
  - ❖ Answer their questions.

The second phase of the interview should provide more detailed information about the applicant. Aside from asking questions based on their application (where they have volunteered before, past firefighting experience, etc.), other general questions could include:

- ❖ Why are you interested in volunteering with this organization?
- ❖ What types of roles are you interested in serving in at the department (firefighting, EMS, driver, support, etc.)?
- ❖ What do you hope to gain from this volunteer experience?
- ❖ Do you prefer to work alone or in a team?
- ❖ Do you have any questions about the interview, membership process or the organization?

If it is determined that the applicant may be considered for department membership, the third phase of the interview should provide more details for the applicant such as training requirements, schedules and expectations during the probationary period.

#### **Step 4: Application decision**

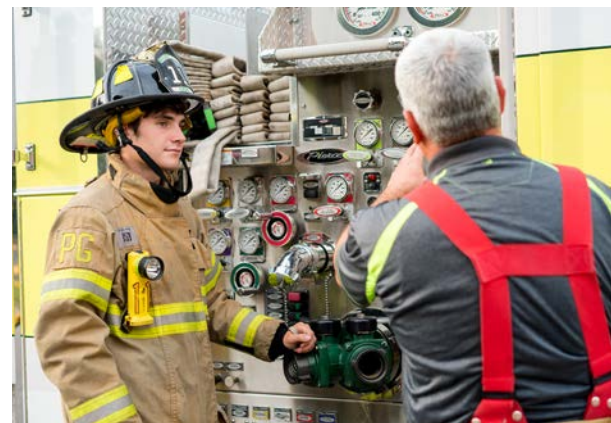
The recruitment committee or department leadership should determine if the applicant will be offered a volunteer position. It is best to have a small cadre of committed people make this determination to ensure the process is managed in a fair and balanced manner and with department needs in mind.

#### **Step 5: Notification to applicant**

Applicants should be notified in a timely manner if they have or have not been accepted. Ensure they understand the next steps such as their schedule and what is expected of them in terms of duty shifts, training and other participation requirements. Provide a primary contact for them to reach out to with questions along the way.

#### **Step 6: Welcoming new recruits**

Onboarding doesn't end with notifying the new recruit of their acceptance. It is important to pay special attention to a new volunteer to ensure they feel included and well-informed. Provide a tour of the station, introduce them to their fellow volunteers, and provide ample time for them to ask questions and learn about the department and their peers. It is recommended to assign them a mentor to help them assimilate to the department environment and to cheer them along as they take on challenging new tasks and responsibilities (see



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Part IV, Section 9: Mentor Programs for more information). Check in with them often, and ask for feedback on their recruit experience, using this feedback to improve the process for others.

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**Consider this:** Some departments have found success in a cohort style to onboard and train recruits. Moscow (Idaho) Volunteer Fire and Ambulance recently adopted this strategy for their ambulance company. “We now onboard new volunteers in groups 2-3 times a year, instead of every other month. The new volunteers have a group (5-12 volunteers) of people to train with; all get the same message, initial training, and timeline/deadlines for trainee task book completion. We’ve seen a significant increase in retention rates, and more camaraderie and communication with new trainees and trainers/crew coordinators. It’s also been more efficient for our administrative, leadership, and EMS training teams.”

The Richmond (Maine) Fire Department also found success with the cohort method:

“A recruitment campaign was established in the fall of 2019 using social media as well as flyers in the community and word of mouth by our staff. A recruitment information session was held in November of 2019 with six people attending, in addition to others filing applications. In January 2020 we took on seven new department members, and they attended a full-day orientation session. This orientation session served as the first class of the Maine Basic Fire School Program, [which is] a 75-hour training academy. The training program meets the minimum Maine Bureau of Labor firefighter training requirements. It was run as an academy over three months and included live fire trainings. While in training, members also attended department meetings and began running calls.

“This process modeled the process that full-time departments do when hiring and seemed to be a successful approach that will hopefully be repeated in the future. Possibly an every-other-year process.

“The method of taking on a group/cohort worked best as we were able to train them equally and recognize them as a graduating class just the same as full-time departments do when they hire a batch of recruits. It made it seem more professional, and a graduation ceremony was held as part of a first annual awards ceremony when they completed the in-house academy. The group became close and had camaraderie together; however, given the small size of our department [they still] blended well with existing staff.”

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## Section 7: Maintaining a positive image and culture

It is important to understand that recruitment is marketing. Consider what retail stores do to attract your business. The ones that are most successful have attractive displays in the store, are well stocked and kept clean, and offer good customer service. Employees are happy and invested in the outcome of customer transactions. Fire and EMS departments should build a public image in the same manner that these retailers attract business. Apparatus and tools should be kept clean and ready for use. Staffing levels should be adequate to handle each response and the members trained to perform the necessary tasks. And above all, members must be invested in the customer service experience.



When members of the community see the department, do they see a high-achieving organization with camaraderie among its staff and leadership? Can community members see themselves becoming part of the current department makeup — for example, are there women, minorities and various generations reflected in current department outreach materials? If a community member does an online search for the department, will they see dedicated members working to serve the community?

Fortunately, the department has a great deal of control over the image the community sees. Highlighting department or member accomplishments on social media, through news stories and press releases, and on the department’s website, are a few options for bringing attention to the many positive ways a department contributes to the community. Increasing exposure in the community through fire prevention and educational activities, communicating with the community through a newsletter, and training in visible locations can demonstrate the important role the department plays in keeping the community and its citizens safe.

Many departments use web-based platforms and social media to disseminate information about the department to the public and communicate its need for volunteers as well as financial support. Truth in advertising can go a long way in ensuring the department is seeking and accepting the right individuals for the job and attracting donors and other community supporters. Information that is posted on public media must reflect the culture of the organization and communicate that everyone is welcome and needed. Showing instances of camaraderie and skill-building on social media can demonstrate what prospective volunteers stand to gain from joining the department ranks.

Department image must go deeper than a public perception and reflect the underlying culture and values of the department. Strong, effective leadership will result in happy volunteers who will speak positively about their experience to others. Maintaining a department culture that supports its members, is inclusive and prohibits harmful practices such as hazing, harassment or cliques will reflect a positive image of a welcoming place that people want to be part of.

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But perhaps the single most important influence on a positive department image is fostering a team of fulfilled, happy members who have quality interactions with the public. Members must remember that they represent the department when they are responding to a call as well as when they have their department T-shirt on in public, are driving their vehicle with firefighter tags or a department sticker in their rear window, or even when they are talking about their volunteer experience with a neighbor, friend or coworker. Every member is a direct representative of the department, from the chief to the newest recruit.

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**Consider this:** Prospective volunteers want to feel like they will belong at the fire department. Many departments find success using messaging that makes the department relatable and open to new recruits. An article from Hudson Valley 360 on Sept. 3, 2020, highlighted the Chatham (New York) Fire Department for its award-winning recruitment campaign that featured photos of their members with the theme that these volunteers are your friends, neighbors and family. The ads were displayed at the local movie theater, outdoor billboards and in local businesses. Thanks to the campaign, the department saw a 20% increase in membership over 2 years.

The Ulster County (New York) Volunteer Firemen's Association sponsored a web series featuring local fire departments and giving the public a behind-the-scenes look into the firehouse and the equipment and tools firefighters use as well as a chance to meet the firefighters themselves. The series is called "Ride With Us" to emphasize camaraderie and friendship, and the running theme is that there is a job for everyone at their local volunteer fire department. In addition to distribution on social media, episodes have been played at community events, department open houses and during previews at a local movie theater.

A Sept. 2, 2020, article in The Times Herald announced that the Harmonville Fire Company (Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania) used a Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant to launch a new website and recruitment campaign centered around the slogan "Honor. Family. Community." The campaign highlights the department's strengths and vision and promotes all the different volunteer opportunities available through the department.

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Consider the following policies and resources that can help ensure a positive image within your community and a positive culture within the organization:

### **Reputation management**

The Cumberland Valley Volunteer Firemen's Association has a "Reputation Management White Paper" that outlines actions taken by individuals that have a negative effect on the public image of the emergency services and individual departments. Topics covered include misuse of department facilities, theft, substance abuse, harassment and discrimination, and misuse of social media. The white paper recommends that every department establish a code of conduct or code of ethics that clearly defines expected behaviors of its members.

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## Code of ethics

A code of conduct or code of ethics spells out the expected behaviors of a department's members. It is important for departments to establish and maintain a code of ethics, and to get buy-in from all stakeholders. There are numerous tools departments can use to set guidelines and serve as a compass for behavior at the station, on scene at an incident and in public. Building on the "Reputation Management White Paper," the National Society of Executive Fire Officers created a Code of Ethics to serve as a model for departments. Fire and EMS departments may also consult with the human resources department of local government for samples of this and other policies.

## Social and traditional media policies

A social media policy is another critical tool that outlines appropriate and inappropriate use of social media by department members. A negative or inappropriate social media post can cause irreparable harm to the department's reputation, open the door for possible litigation or liability, and make recruitment and retention more challenging. Similarly, posting images of training events, camaraderie around the station, or accomplishments of members or the department can entice others to want to join while elevating those whose accomplishments and successes are celebrated by the department. The IAFC offers a Social Media Toolkit to help departments use and manage social media. Also see Appendix F for sample social media policies.

Departments should have a traditional media policy as well for public information officers (PIOs) and others who will be talking with local media. How department members represent themselves and the department in the media is critical to public perception. For instance, a department member who is interviewed by the local news station can damage the department's reputation by speaking callously of the incident, disrespecting the victim or saying something that makes the department look incompetent or uncompassionate. A mishandled interview could even have legal repercussions if the person interviewed discloses confidential or privileged information or says something slanderous or derogatory. On the other hand, a media-trained member who knows how to handle the interview, is compassionate and speaks competently, and uses the opportunity to respectfully provide fire prevention and life safety advice to the audience can enhance the reputation of the department. See Appendix G: Sample Media Policy for a sample media policy.

## Anti-harassment, bullying and discrimination statement

Harassment, bullying and discrimination must never be tolerated within an emergency services department. As representatives of the emergency services profession, fire and EMS members pledge to protect the public against all hazards. Likewise, department leaders must take action to protect their members from the hazards generated by a threatening workplace.

The NVFC, International Association of Black Professional Firefighters, IAFC, IAFC-VCOS, International Association of Women in the Fire & Emergency Services, National Association of Fire Training Directors, and National Association of Hispanic Firefighters released a Joint Anti-Harassment, Bullying, and Discrimination Statement. This statement asserts that all members of fire, EMS and rescue services should be treated and treat others with respect and dignity, and makes it clear that harassment, bullying and discrimination of any kind will not be tolerated. The statement issues a call to action that all fire and emergency service organizations implement an anti-harassment, bullying

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and discrimination policy that is actively communicated to personnel and actively and consistently enforced. See Appendix H: Sample Nondiscrimination Statements for sample nondiscrimination statements.

## Diversity and inclusivity

Diversity in the workplace is defined as an organization that includes a membership that is reflective of the community that it serves. Inclusivity is defined as an environment where all individuals are treated fairly and equally, have equal access to opportunities and resources, and can contribute to the organization's success. Every fire and EMS department must value the participation of each member and develop a culture where diversity and inclusivity are part of the organization. Concepts that strengthen diversity and inclusion should be incorporated into the department's policies and procedures. All department members should receive training to include anti-harassment policies and why diversity and inclusivity are important to the department's success so that each member understands their responsibility for creating an all-inclusive culture. This topic is further discussed in Section 8: Embracing Diversity and Inclusion.

## Equality and equity

Equality in a workplace means that all members are treated in a systematic, impartial and evenhanded manner regarding access to all department activities and opportunities. Equity means different people are offered necessary accommodations to do the same job or validate a skill, including people with disabilities. This allows for individual variables like reach or ability to lift so long as the job is completed following all safety procedures and functions. Another example is providing women PPE that fits them rather than issuing one-size-fits-all gear designed for men.

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**Consider this:** In addition to harming the image of the department in the community and lowering rates of recruitment and retention of volunteers, harmful actions such as harassment, bullying, discrimination, and inappropriate social media usage can open the department up to lawsuits and liability. The Fire Law Blog founded by Curt Varone delves into legal issues that confront the fire service as well as offers templates and training to help departments establish policies that can strengthen the department and lessen liability.

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## Crisis management plan

Despite all best efforts, sometimes a crisis does befall a department that has the potential to damage its reputation, decrease morale and hurt its ability to recruit and retain volunteers. It is important to have a crisis management plan in place for when/if such a disaster hits, whether it is a poor customer service experience, a mishandled incident, a member who commits a crime or any event that can negatively impact the department. This plan should lay the groundwork for both an internal and external response that is clear, immediate and focused. The plan should include communication to department members who may be seeking leadership and guidance, as well as guidelines on who is authorized to speak on behalf of the department to ensure consistent, informed messaging. A department that consistently does its due diligence through things like background checks, proper training, having anti-harassment and bullying policies in place, not tolerating a toxic culture, etc., not only decreases the chance of many types of potential crises, but also may lessen its legal liability and mitigate the damage to its public reputation should a crisis arise.

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## Positive department culture

Just as important as policies and guidelines is the department culture. A positive culture that encourages idea-sharing and innovation and values the contributions of its members will result in happy members. Happy members are the department's single best recruitment tool as they share their positive experiences with others. The NVFC's "Volunteer Fire Service Culture: Essential Strategies For Success" discusses fire and emergency department culture in depth, as well as strategies to improve it.

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**In action:** The Lewisville (North Carolina) Fire Department recognizes the impact that department culture has on recruiting and retaining volunteers. "We have focused on changing our environment more than any other single factor. With a previous large recruitment and retention grant we attempted paid-for-call response and other financial incentive ideas. Money is a short-term motivator. Stipend expenditures are still an option to offset out-of-pocket costs for volunteers. At the end of the day, we have found that much like new recruits, we must make current members 'want' to be here. 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. If a complaint remains, bring one or more ideas on how we can improve in the area to the conversation also. This subtle change has provided an attitude shift. Even our complaints come with a way in which we may improve our service. If you're not planted firm and at risk for failure, dig in, and don't back-slide. Once you've restored a strong foundation, move forward!"

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## Section 8: Embracing diversity and inclusion

Fostering a diverse and inclusive membership and department culture has many benefits, including increasing recruitment and retention, strengthening an organization, and providing robust skills, experience and backgrounds that can allow departments to achieve their mission more easily. To fully embrace these concepts, it is important to understand what these terms really mean.

### Diversity

Diversity refers to people of different ages, experience, educational backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, abilities, genders, religions, personalities, sexual orientation, skill sets and more. Diversity is an attribute or attributes of an individual.

While many departments may have a volunteer force that is diverse in many ways such as age, experience, personalities and more, the fire service is significantly less diverse when it comes to gender, race and ethnicity. According to U.S. Census Bureau data analyzed by DataUSA (2020), an estimated 77.3% of the nation's firefighters are white,



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1.96% are Hispanic/Latino, 6.9% are Black, and 1.3% are Asian. While women make up half of the population, the NFPA's "U.S. Fire Department Profile 2020" estimates that only 89,600 firefighters are female, with a higher ratio of women on the volunteer side (11%) than the career side (5%).

The fact that the fire service is historically made up primarily of white males means there are significant areas of opportunity for today's departments looking to recruit new members. The NVFC's 2015 research on recruitment indicates that there is considerable interest in volunteering as first responders among minority groups (36% were either definitely or possibly interested) while women were just as interested as men in volunteering as first responders. Those in the 18-34 age group showed a 44% interest in volunteering. These numbers point to largely untapped markets of potential recruits.

Departments should consider if their staffing mirrors their community makeup. Encouraging diversity can be as simple as communicating that everyone is welcome, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, age, etc. Ensure department recruitment messages are welcoming and reflect the diversity of the community through images and words. Individuals recruiting on behalf of the department should also reflect diversity. If the department is seeking more female recruits or younger members, consider asking existing female firefighters and younger members to help with outreach in the community or at recruitment events.

## Inclusion

Inclusion is an environment where people are treated fairly and respectfully, have equal access to opportunities and resources, and contribute fully to the department's success. Creating an inclusive environment is a conscious effort that requires the buy-in and commitment of department leadership.

Below are some characteristics of an inclusive environment:

- ❖ **Empowerment.** Encourage team members to learn new skills, bring ideas to the table and solve problems. Provide opportunities for growth.
- ❖ **Equality.** The consistent and systematic fair, just and impartial treatment of all individuals.
- ❖ **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, equity may mean making adjustments for differences such as height or strength or shape.
- ❖ **Acceptance.** Make room for everyone in the department. Each individual brings skills, knowledge and experience that can benefit the team.
- ❖ **Camaraderie.** Lift each other up instead of tearing each other down. Everyone in the department is on the same team. Help each other out.
- ❖ **Respect.** Treat others as you want them to treat you. Learn from different points of view and seek to understand others. Handle disagreements in a constructive and professional manner.
- ❖ **Accountability.** Take personal responsibility for your decisions and performance. Have pride in your successes, learn from mistakes and be open to criticism in areas where you can improve.



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- ◆ **Courage.** Stand up for what you think is right, even when it means taking a risk. Try to find support from others.

Diversity is a fact, while inclusion is an act. Diversity comes when you invite and welcome people with varying attributes to join your department, while inclusion is a conscious effort to ensure those individuals are treated as an integral part of your organization. A department that is both diverse and inclusive will be attractive to a much broader audience of potential recruits and will be more successful in retaining those recruits over time. The IAFC's "Guide for Creating a Diverse and Inclusive Department" is one tool to help departments plan, implement and preserve a diverse and inclusive environment.



Photo courtesy of iStock.

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## Part IV: Retention Strategies

Retaining volunteers requires a multi-pronged approach that showcases the department's support of and commitment to its volunteers and considers what the volunteers want. Conducting an internal retention assessment each year will help department leaders remain current on what is important to their volunteers, what changes should be considered, or benefits added, and if there are any issues that may be causing members to consider leaving.

Part IV will talk about the many factors that affect volunteer retention. Topics include effective leadership, setting realistic expectations upfront, health and safety considerations, building camaraderie, meeting training requirements, volunteer benefits and recognition, utilizing nonoperational volunteers, mentor programs, family support, and what to do when volunteers leave, retire or just aren't a good fit for the department.



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**Closer look:** Successful departments are in tune with what their members want and employ multiple strategies to keep their volunteers engaged, connected and part of the department. For instance, at the East Dubuque (Illinois) Fire Department: “We provide a stipend for responding to calls, pay for training for both fire and EMS, and encourage our members to bring their families to the station on a regular basis. This along with being cognizant of an individual’s time and the willingness to listen to their concerns has helped us keep people on the department.”

The Westminster (Maryland) Volunteer Fire Department has a robust retention program that includes a LOSAP benefit, state income tax credit, free training, all turnout gear and equipment provided, on-duty insurance coverage and workers’ compensation, college/technical school tuition reimbursement program, and a live-in program tailored to local college students.

The solutions that the East Franklin Fire Department (Somerset, New Jersey) implement include:

- A culture that operates under the premise that they are one family and does not allow multiple cliques within the fire station.
- A duty crew program consisting of daytime and nightly shifts 6 days a week excluding Saturdays, as well as bonus credit programs for attending overnight duty shifts.
- Providing almost unlimited training, both classroom-based and hands-on, free of charge.
- Several hangout rooms within the firehouse, including quiet study rooms for students.

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- Free Wi-Fi internet access for everyone, as well as multiple printing stations for their college and high school students to complete their required coursework.
  - Paid-per-call response for showing up for fire calls.
  - LOSAP, which can be taken after 5 years of continuous service in good standing.
  - T-shirts, hats, stickers and other various fire department merchandise free of charge, as well as merchandise that can be purchased by the member to show company pride.
  - Free washer and dryer for use by the membership.
  - Sleeping quarters for any member that wishes to stay overnight and does not reside close to the fire station.
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## Section 1: Developing effective leadership

Strong fire and emergency service department leaders understand and accept that their job is about serving the community and serving their members, thereby fulfilling the organization's mission. As a firefighter or EMS provider rises up through the ranks and takes on a greater leadership role, they take on more responsibility for the success of the department and the safety of the citizens. Strong leaders make sure their staff has all the tools and knowledge needed to accomplish the mission. Chiefs work for their members, not the other way around.



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**In action:** The Gilt Edge (Tennessee) Volunteer Fire Department understands the critical role of leadership in retaining volunteers and creating a positive department culture. "ALL levels of leadership must care about their people as both people and firefighters. Our department follows the Fully Involved Leadership philosophy of the 'Big 4': Do your job. Treat people right. Give all-out effort. Have an all-in attitude. Those are the four things that we ask from people on day one of joining."

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Of all the resources that a volunteer emergency services department needs, volunteers themselves — human resources — are the most important. While the station, apparatus and the budget need attention, they are secondary to the needs of the people that make up the department.

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There are 9 key characteristics of successful volunteer fire and EMS department leadership:

1. **Accountability.** Chief officers must hold themselves accountable to the same standards and procedures they set for the members of the department, otherwise they lose respect and authority. If firefighters or EMS providers are required to pass an annual skills test or physical exam, the chief better be first in line and pass the test.
2. **Forward-thinking mindset.** Great department leaders cannot afford to become emotionally attached to the past, including old apparatus, favored vendors, outdated standards and tactics, the old guard members, and the big fires of yesteryear. Nostalgia that hinders progress is the enemy and will prevent leaders from seeing and leading into the future. There is always a place for tradition and honoring the past, but these are best left to the pictures and plaques on the department's walls or website, and through reminiscing at social events.
3. **Empowering.** Delegating is a crucial skill that department leaders must have and practice. It is how a leader demonstrates trust in others and empowers them to take action. Good leaders also understand that even when they delegate, they are still ultimately responsible for the outcome of the project. Leaders do not blame their staff for failures. They take responsibility, find a solution and coach their staff for the future.
4. **Respect.** Department leaders should make sure that everyone on the department feels respected. A great leader understands that everyone brings important skills and knowledge to the department. If favoritism is shown, others will likely take sides and morale problems will ensue. This is especially true in combination departments, where both career and volunteer members are critical to departmental success. The failure of many combination departments can be traced to leadership that takes sides or plays one group against the other.

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**Consider this:** The Gilt Edge (Tennessee) Fire Department advises departments looking to improve their retention to respect their volunteers. "Treat your people with respect! You are asking folks to give up their free time, time with their families, etc., to do a job that can get them killed for a small stipend or no pay at all. They keep showing up because they want to be there, not because they have to be there. Don't forget that. You can enforce high standards and still keep people motivated to show up. Create a family-friendly atmosphere in the firehouse. Let people know that their work and sacrifice is valued and appreciated."

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5. **Humility.** Leaders must be prepared to accept criticism from staff when it comes. If members feel that leadership isn't listening, then leadership isn't listening. If they don't feel supported, then leadership isn't supporting them. What matters is how members perceive the words and actions of leadership, as this will affect their performance, loyalty and desire to volunteer. A great leader is willing to hear difficult feedback and take steps toward continual improvement.

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**Closer look:** There is oftentimes a disconnect between what leaders perceive as a problem and what members perceive as a problem. This disconnect creates a barrier to finding practical solutions that work to address the real issues affecting retention.

In 2020, the NVFC conducted a national survey of current and former volunteer firefighters to find out why volunteers leave. 20% of fire department leaders said that inflexible training was a reason people left their departments, yet only 7% of former volunteers agreed. 41% of department leaders said volunteers left because they could not juggle their department commitments with their jobs and family life, but only 8% of former volunteers agreed. Here is a case of leadership not listening to their volunteers.

On the flip side, when asked why they stopped volunteering, the biggest reason former members cited (22%) was that the department atmosphere was full of cliques and groups that exclude others. 30% of current nonleadership volunteers agreed with them. This illustrates that far too often department leadership does not see the problem or see their role in the problem. Poor leadership that allows cliques to dominate the firehouse is the number 1 reason people are quitting the volunteer fire service.

Similarly, in the “2020 EMS Trend Report” produced by EMS1, Fitch & Associates, and the National EMS Management Association, a number of problematic trends in EMS have been tracked over the past 5 years. These trends are industrywide and applicable to the volunteer EMS world. One of the report’s findings is that 70% of EMS medical directors described themselves as being engaged with the field providers they oversee, but only 21% of field providers reported having an EMS director they felt was engaging with them.

Change the title EMS director to fire chief, mayor or town administrator, and the problem is the same. Those at the top can fall into believing that all the work they are doing is engaging with those they lead, and while that work is important, meaningful and sometimes overwhelming, it isn’t necessarily engaging members and addressing their needs. Great leaders must work at not falling into this trap.

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6. **Transparency.** Successful leaders share knowledge and information with everyone in the organization. There may be some confidential information that cannot be shared, but 99% of all that goes on is not protected by privacy laws. Everyone in the organization should know or have access to the budget, how the promotional process works, preplans, policies and procedures, who gets paid what and why, the chief’s schedule, as well as all of the technical information about equipment and apparatus. Sharing information publicly builds trust with members and the community. It pushes leadership to hold themselves accountable.
7. **Integrity.** Department leaders are the face of their department. On duty and off duty, everyone is watching. They need to understand and accept that how they behave is how their first responders will behave. How they are seen by their

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community will determine the reputation of their department. Departments with excellent reputations are able to recruit new volunteers; those with poor reputations won't attract the new members they need. Great leaders actively manage and protect the reputation of their department.

8. **Principled.** Leading by example is how a chief officer or department leader becomes respected, trusted and followed. Leaders must demonstrate knowledge and skills. They must have courage — the courage to speak up against dangerous or unjust practices, to insist all members are equal and treated well, to ask for help when they need it, and to accept feedback from their staff and community. They cannot be complainers or gossip about their members. They must be honest. Attitudes are contagious.
9. **Strategic.** Taking a long-term strategic view and planning for the future is a critical role of a chief officer. They must bring a vision to the department and the community. Maintaining a status quo is not a vision and will not motivate or inspire current members or recruit new volunteers. It is hard to break through all of the day-to-day administrative issues and emergency calls to focus on the big picture and the long-term plan, but this is an essential role of a successful leader.

Some of these elements are easier to adopt than others. Leadership does not always come naturally. It is a myth that the only way to be a great leader is to be born into it. Leadership is something that can be learned. Great organizations and their leaders teach others to be leaders. For instance, the Disney Corporation created the Disney Institute for the sole purpose of teaching leadership, and now it offers its leadership classes to others outside of Disney.

There are thousands of colleges and organizations that successfully teach people to be leaders. There is no need to limit a department's leadership training to emergency services programs. Leadership cuts across industries, job titles and ranks. The skills it takes to manage a nonprofit food bank or a multinational corporation are equally applicable to the emergency services.

Other sources of fire and EMS leadership training include the NVFC Virtual Classroom, the IAFC-VCOS and the NFA.

## Section 2: Setting realistic expectations

When recruiting and onboarding new members, the department must set clear and realistic expectations so that everyone understands what they have signed up for. They must also understand the expectations that recruits have for the department when they join, such as being accepted and respected. The following are tips for setting clear expectations for the volunteer so they understand what is required of them as well as meeting the volunteer's expectations of how they will be treated.

- 🔗 **Hold an orientation session for new applicants before conducting interviews or making hiring decisions.** Tell them what the job truly entails and the number and mix of calls. Tell them how often they should expect to be called upon. Explain all of the non-fire and EMS duties such as apparatus checks,



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report writing, station cleaning and community service projects. Explain the duty and training schedule (if applicable) and time requirements. Departments that do this find that many applicants drop out at this stage, but this is good. Having people drop out early in the process saves the department time and money in training someone who is not interested or cannot commit the time. It prevents morale issues and makes for a smoother-running organization. Those that stay on through the process will be happier and better members of the department because their expectations are being met.

- ❖ **Post written training schedules at either quarterly, semiannual or annual intervals.** Duty calendars and written policies on trading duty shifts or absences for things such as work conflicts, sick children and vacations are critical. These policies and schedules need to be flexible and realistic, taking into account today's hectic schedules and the need for a work-life-volunteer balance.
- ❖ **Influence the department's public image by posting what's real on social media.** Departments can shape their public image on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and in media releases. Don't just show heroic images or repost stock images from other sources. Show actual day-to-day activities, such as firefighters testing hose, cleaning the station and checking out a possible gas leak in knee-deep snow. Use images of staff in the rain at motor vehicle incidents, sitting in a class on stroke protocols and cleaning the ambulance after a call. This approach sets realistic expectations and will attract new members by being authentic and genuine.
- ❖ **Immediately stop any and all hazing and bullying.** New recruits join the department with the expectation that they will be accepted. If a department is going to successfully recruit new people and foster a functional, effective team, it needs to think of hazing and bullying behaviors from the perspective of new recruits. Why would someone want to be part of an organization that treats them negatively and possibly harmfully? Hazing or bullying done under the guise of "good intentions" on the part of long-time members doesn't matter. Nor does their view of what new people should be able to bear in terms of ribbing, teasing or other hazing practices. What matters is how new people perceive these behaviors. The quickest way to drive out new members is to have them feel unwelcomed, harassed, bullied or that their safety is threatened by other members. Put policies in place to address these behaviors and their consequences and consistently enforce them.
- ❖ **Demonstrate that leadership values all members.** Departments need to look at their policies and procedures to make sure they are supporting their new and long-term members equally. They need to consider their customs and ask how they might be perceived by new members joining the department. Will they see any of these customs as department leadership not caring about them? Some behaviors are so habitual the leaders may not even notice that they are detrimental. For example, when a new member comes on board, it is still common to hand them a set of ill-fitting, worn-out PPE and tell them the department will get them new gear once they've earned it or proven themselves. The new recruit will likely perceive this as being told they are not valuable and that protecting them from injury and illness is not important. This might not be the intention, but that is what that action says to the new member.

In order to foster retention, new recruits need to know what they are signing up for — the whole of it. Leadership also needs to adjust department images, policies and customs so that new recruits feel valued from the first moment they become part of



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the department. To both attract and retain members, the influence of bullies, hazers and other negative department members has to be neutralized by overwhelmingly better and more productive behavior from the rest of the department's members, and from the training and example set by other peers and leaders.

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**Case study:** The Woodstock (Virginia) Fire Department finds setting high expectations to be an important component of its retention strategy.

"Primarily we retain volunteers by having high expectations for our members, by treating everyone fairly, and by providing our members with the flexibility they need to volunteer with us. Our department requires each of our members to attend a certain number of activities throughout the year, no matter who you are or what position you hold. These expectations are clearly spelled out and can be met no matter what an individual's level of experience, work schedule, or other commitments.

"While it may not be obvious how this helps with retention, the simple fact is that by requiring our volunteers to be a part of the organization and by making sure everyone is meeting those standards, we encourage involvement, brotherhood, and professionalism. This means members trust each other, want to help each other, want to be part of the department, and will call each other out when they do not meet expectations.

"Our department also works to make our organization fun and family friendly. We have events at the station where members can enjoy themselves outside the typically stressful role they play, including visits to pools, dinners, sporting events, etc. and by making the station an enjoyable place with a nice lounge, welcoming atmosphere, etc."

The department also provides these additional tips for recruitment and retention:

- Be positive about your department all the time; no one wants to join if they think there is something wrong with your department.
- Recruit all the time. You never know when you might spark an interest.
- Communicate with the community through every avenue possible. People aren't going to join if they don't know about you, and they get information in a wide variety of ways.
- Make room for everyone. Hundreds of super athletic, dedicated, brilliant recruits aren't out there. Instead, you have to bring in people to fill each role in your organization.
- Be prepared for people. Have a smooth membership process, mentorship program, train them and be welcoming.
- Address negative attitudes and actions. If someone in your department is not going to accept new members, that needs to be addressed before it scares every potential person away. Likewise if there are demographic issues, internal fighting, etc.

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## Section 3: Health and safety considerations

As with all operational and functional practices, every fire and EMS department should have clear policies and procedures in place when it comes to the health and safety of first responders. Personnel is the most important asset any department has. Building and maintaining a safety culture will enhance the health and safety of members, build loyalty, and ensure members are able to respond for many years to come.

The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation's 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives are recommended for all fire department operations. Initiative #1 states: "Define and advocate the need for a cultural change within the fire service relating to safety; incorporating leadership, management, supervision, accountability and personal responsibility." For safety's sake, it is imperative that fire service leaders incorporate this life safety initiative in order to maintain a safe work environment.

### Physical health and safety

Designing and adhering to standard operating policies and procedures to protect members is critical. Ensure that these policies and procedures are up to date, infiltrate all department trainings, and that they are enforced and reinforced well beyond training. It is all too common to see something taught in training and then negated later by cultural norms that dictate something is done a different (less safe) way. Provide annual physicals for members and encourage them to talk to their own doctors about the hazards they face as a first responder. Ensure members are aware of other risks, such as chemical exposures that can lead to cancer, and provide a mechanism for them to track these exposures as well as tools to wash and decontaminate their gear. Ensure PPE fits properly and isn't too big or too small, posing a hazard to the wearer.



Even small things can communicate concern and care for the health of members, such as negotiating a first responder discount with a local gym or access to a community rec center, starting a friendly fitness competition, or providing healthy snacks at the station.

### Behavioral health

Behavioral health is as important as physical health. The continued number of tragic deaths to suicide in the fire and emergency services is difficult to comprehend. In addition, many firefighters and EMS providers leave the service due to mental health impacts they experience that go untreated. Department leaders must work to identify the impact of behavioral health challenges on the well-being of members. Know how to recognize signs, symptoms, risks and protective factors for behavioral health challenges, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and addiction. According to the National Center for PTSD, roughly 50% of the U.S. population is exposed to traumatic stress, but only 7-8% develop PTSD. In the emergency services, these rates are higher. It is reasonable to assume that 100% of emergency responders are exposed to traumatic stress. In a 2015 study of 1,027 firefighters conducted by Stanley et al., rates of suicidal ideation were 46.8%, suicide planning were 19.2% and suicide attempts were 15.5%.

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Limiting the number of responders exposed to traumatic scenes and keeping junior members away from difficult calls can help reduce the impact. Providing resources, maintaining open communications through stress debriefings, and establishing peer support and chaplain programs will benefit all members. If necessary, bring in professional help or clergy to provide a safe haven for discussion after a traumatic incident. It is the duty of department leadership to support their members by making sure they have the means available to get the help they need.

The NVFC, in partnership with the American Psychological Association and the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance released the “Psychologically Healthy Fire Departments: Implementation Toolkit” to help fire department leaders promote and support well-being among their members. They also compiled the “Directory of Behavioral Health Professionals,” which is a listing of local providers who either have firsthand knowledge of the fire and emergency services or have been trained to help emergency responders and their families. EAPs are another source of support to first responders. Such programs may be available through the department’s insurance carrier or by collaborating with local government to expand an existing EAP to volunteers.

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**In action:** Recognizing that mental health is directly tied to retention and wanting to better support their members, Moscow (Idaho) Volunteer Fire and Ambulance increased their emphasis on peer support and mental health resources. The city of Moscow provides an EAP to the volunteers; volunteers can receive a certain number of counseling visits through the program to address any issues, such as trauma, relationship difficulties, financial challenges, etc. Additional mental health services are provided through the University of Idaho Counseling and Testing Center.

The department also offers free mental health training to their volunteers on topics, including PTSD; resiliency; critical incident stress management; Question, Persuade, Refer; and Mental Health First Aid. “All trainings on mental health and resiliency (and pretty much any other trainings on other topics) are free to volunteers. These trainings have been funded through our department, through Latah County, through our local hospital Gritman Medical Center, the City of Moscow and/or City of Pullman, and University of Idaho. We tap into any resources available and share this with our volunteers and volunteer leadership.”

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## Insurance

Insurance is another important consideration when it comes to the health and safety of first responders. First responders operate in dangerous environments, and many volunteers do so without the protections afforded to their full-time, career counterparts who have robust workers’ compensation, retirement and disability plans. Most states provide some underlying workers’ compensation for volunteer responders, but it typically is not sufficient in the case of a long-term disability due to an injury or illness.

For example, wage calculation for workers’ compensation for a firefighter may be based on a state average for the equivalent salary for their level of firefighting certification, yet the firefighter could be earning significantly more than this in their career. Some

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states make workers' compensation for volunteer firefighters a voluntary (not mandated) purchase, and some states do not provide any workers' compensation coverage to volunteers. Some states may only provide coverage for medical expenses but do not account for lost wages for that firefighter who cannot work due to illness or injury. In many states, a heart attack or cardiovascular event may not be included in workers' compensation coverage.

As a result, volunteer firefighters and EMS providers have unique insurance needs that should be considered by their respective emergency services organizations. Coverage options can include the following:

- ❖ **Accident and health (A&H)/accident and sickness (A&S) coverage:** Typically provides coverage in excess of workers' compensation and includes covered injury/illness lump sum death benefits, short- and long-term disability benefits, and other medical expense benefits that help bridge the gap between what workers' compensation pays and actual lost wages and incurred expenses; in the instances of a workers' compensation denial, the A&H/A&S coverage may be all that a volunteer responder has.
- ❖ **24-hour accidental death and dismemberment coverage:** Provides injury, death and dismemberment coverage both "on-duty" and 24 hours a day when not performing an activity for the department; may include an increased death benefit for line-of-duty deaths. This is an affordable way to provide coverage for volunteer responders that gives them coverage beyond department activities.
- ❖ **Group life coverage:** Guaranteed-issue group life insurance for all department members with no individual medical underwriting; provides life insurance coverage for department activities as well as anything outside of the department.
- ❖ **Critical illness coverage:** Provides coverage for certain covered illnesses and cancers regardless of how they manifested.
- ❖ **Cancer insurance coverage:** Provides cancer coverage for certain covered cancers and may be state-specific based on cancer presumption or cancer insurance laws for volunteer firefighters.
- ❖ **First Responder Assistance Program (or an EAP):** Provides a variety of support services for volunteer firefighters, EMS providers and their families for issues such as mental health, substance abuse, relationship problems and gambling problems; may be purchased as a stand-alone product or through an A&H policy.

Consider working with local government to determine if there are existing policies that can be expanded to cover department volunteers. While insurance policies come with a cost, it is important to note that volunteers save their communities thousands of dollars every year. The cost of insurance is still significantly less than hiring and insuring a paid fire and emergency services department staff.

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**In action:** Mulvane (Kansas) Fire Rescue works with the state government to provide insurance and retirement benefits to support volunteer retention. “Kansas has a statewide Firefighter Relief Benefit Fund sponsored through the Kansas Insurance Department. We receive monies each year from the state to purchase insurance benefits for our firefighters, and we issue a \$10,000 retirement annuity to each member at 10 years of service. They receive the annuity with interest after they retire with a minimum of 20 years of service.”

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## Section 4: Building camaraderie

Camaraderie is mutual trust and friendship among people who spend a lot of time together. It is no surprise that volunteers frequently cite camaraderie and friendships as primary reasons why they join or continue to volunteer with a department. Camaraderie can get first responders through difficult calls, challenging personal times, and the many highs and lows that go hand-in-hand with emergency response.

Building camaraderie and cohesiveness fosters a connection between volunteers that keeps morale high and volunteers motivated to respond, train and engage. There are several ways to do this.



- ❖ **Create a welcoming environment.** Have a defined onboarding process where new members are welcomed from day 1. Introduce the new member to their peers and explain the roles and responsibilities of each position and member. Ensure they understand the goals of the organization and the team and maintain accessibility to leadership.
- ❖ **Value individual differences.** People from different backgrounds and generations bring different skill sets to the department. Learn what their skills and interests are and how they can best fit the team. Perhaps a more senior member loves to share knowledge and would make a great mentor for younger members. Maybe a petite member devised a way to accomplish a challenging fireground task safely and can share that technique with new recruits. Or maybe a multilingual member can help translate department materials for the community.
- ❖ **Discourage toxic behaviors.** Avoid any appearance of favoritism, discourage cliques and address any conflicts as soon as they arise. Avoid gossip and rumors with clear communication and policies that prevent bullying and harassment.
- ❖ **Encourage social events.** In addition to training and responding to calls together, find ways team members can have fun on and off duty. Schedule a time to work out together, ask members to make and share a favorite family dish during station meals, or schedule outside events such as picnics or sporting events where members can bond. Celebrate milestones together such as birthdays, work anniversaries and more.

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The challenge is to maintain that unity and dedication to the mission. Fire and emergency services leaders should work to create and maintain a supportive and inclusive atmosphere. Members that feel they are heard and can be part of the solution will bring unity within the department. Creating that second family — that fire service family — will strengthen the bond between members, improve morale, and set an outward-facing image of teamwork and unity that will only serve to make recruitment and retention easier.

## Section 5. Training requirements



The time commitment of being a volunteer is a consistent concern voiced by both current and prospective first responders. Training alone requires countless hours across multiple evenings and weekends, placing a strain on volunteers who often juggle a full-time job along with family and other commitments. According to the NVFC's 2020 study on volunteer retention, "while the volunteers recognized the importance of training, many spoke to the inflexibility of training and times offered." Some volunteers believe that the requirements are too much, and others believe that the intensive training standards have increased the professionalism and pride of the volunteer fire and emergency services. It seems clear that there is a need to make training more accessible and flexible for members,

while still meeting department needs. Otherwise, the time required to meet training requirements will continue to be a major negative factor in the recruitment and retention of volunteer members.

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**Closer look:** Training doesn't have to be a barrier to retention. Many departments leverage training as an asset for members and a tool to advance retention. The Gilt Edge (Tennessee) Volunteer Fire Department makes training a part of its culture. "We have a high standard of training, which instills pride in the organization. Members are required to obtain Hazardous Materials Awareness/Hazardous Materials Operations, Firefighter I, Firefighter II, and Emergency Medical Responder within 24 months of joining. We were told by some that this was too much and that we would drive people away or discourage new members. Four years later, we are stronger than we have ever been in the department's 33-year history. We train hard on weekly drills, and we regularly send members to outside training opportunities."

Some departments use training as a retention tool by offering state certifications to help their members advance. For instance, at the Daggett (California) Fire Department: "We support the retention of our volunteers by offering continuing training by our state-certified fire instructors. These courses allow the volunteers to gain valuable knowledge while obtaining various state certifications. We also partner with a local nonprofit, Silver Valley Fire Alliance, who provides monetary reimbursement for fees paid to attend fire training courses not offered by the department."

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Foothills Fire and Rescue (Golden, Colorado) also found certifications to be an incentive for its members. “We provide in-house training programs for new recruits to receive state certification at no charge. We also provide weekly training classes throughout the year for continuing education and recertification hours, partnering with neighboring departments including Highlands Rescue, Alpine Rescue, and Evergreen Fire Department for well-rounded training.”

At the Royersford (Pennsylvania) Fire Department, members appreciate the opportunity to expand their training in a convenient location. “We have an EMS Division which operates multiple ALS units in two counties. Many of our members have been cross-trained in EMS, opening opportunities to gain experience in the medical arena as well. We’ve also created a partnership with Harrisburg Area Community College to host Emergency Medical Responder (EMR) & Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) courses in-house. Bringing the training to our members has certainly helped to keep them interested and more versatile.”

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Some ways to accomplish more flexible and accessible training opportunities include the following:

- ❖ Training delivery models for volunteers should be structured in a manner that contains elements of creativity and flexibility.
- ❖ Training schedules and required training should be published at the beginning of the department’s year (either calendar or fiscal) so volunteers can have the longest possible lead time to arrange their schedules in order to attend training.
- ❖ Department training officers should combine mandatory training into the training schedule to accomplish departmental objectives and maximize training opportunities.
- ❖ A training progression plan should be established so all volunteers have a clear understanding of the class sequence necessary to accomplish their training goals.
- ❖ Adopt a training regimen that maximizes the use of the online, modular delivery systems and hybrid programs so volunteers can acquire knowledge in a way that fits their work schedules and busy lifestyles, while ensuring that training objectives are met.

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**In action:** The Florida Bureau of Fire Standards and Training launched a new approach to train the state’s volunteer firefighters. The “Grow as You Go” program provides a modular online training program that allows volunteer firefighters to serve their department at 5 different levels as they complete the modules needed to receive their Volunteer Firefighter Certificate of Completion.

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- ❖ Develop training schedules that offer repeated presentations throughout the year at different times and days of the week. For each training, make sure both weekday evening and weekend offerings are available to accommodate different schedules.
- ❖ Ensure instructors are competent, certified where required, engaging and adhere to the time schedule laid out for the training session.

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- Sponsor out-of-town travel to conferences and other training events so members can acquire training on the latest operational techniques, health and safety, and other current issues that is not available locally.
  - While some training can only be hands on, there is a lot that can be accomplished online. To make it easier for members to complete required training, utilize online resources as appropriate, supplemented with in-person drills.
  - Online courses can be taught through a variety of platforms such as Zoom, WebEx or Microsoft Teams, and many state and national emergency services organizations offer online training, such as the NVFC, IAFC, NFA, Underwriters Laboratories (UL), NFPA, colleges and universities with fire science programs, and some state training academies.

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**Case study:** Innovation and flexibility helped improve basic training rates in the State of Oklahoma. Thanks to a SAFER grant, the Oklahoma State Firefighters Association (OSFA) was able to conduct a study to identify the biggest needs of their local fire departments. The top answer by far was training. Without any state training mandates or any permanent source of funding for the state training agency, Oklahoma fire departments were having trouble getting their members to complete Firefighter I.

Armed with this information and with an understanding of the lifestyles and work/family commitments of their members, OSFA used the SAFER funding to develop a hybrid training model throughout the state. Instead of firefighters having to travel to the state fire academy, OSFA began implementing Firefighter I classes online, supplemented with regional skills days for the hands-on requirements. Firefighters can complete the classroom portion of their coursework online and at their own leisure, with OSFA assigning deadlines for them to get their work done before they can attend the hands-on skills days.

To help students that aren't as confident in their reading and testing abilities, or that lack the time to sit down and read the course material, OSFA partnered with Fire Protection Publications to develop an audiobook that students can listen to while they read along or while they are driving their combines through their farm ground.

The hands-on regional skills days take place every other weekend for about 12 weeks. OSFA has found that the camaraderie and confidence gained by students who participate in this hybrid model match that of students who attend a traditional fire academy format.

To further support the initiative, OSFA also offers new recruits a full NFPA firefighter physical, and once they pass the required International Fire Service Accreditation Congress test at the end of their class, they give them a full set of PPE.

The program has had great success in Oklahoma, enabling firefighters in even the most rural parts of the state to complete their Firefighter I training. Before the program was implemented, about 45 firefighters each year completed their Firefighter I training. Since the program launched, that annual average has increased to 125.

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When determining the training requirements necessary for an individual department, the volunteer fire and emergency services must not lose sight that the most essential training is on those incidents and situations which frequently occur within the primary response area. In addition, it's likely that not every volunteer needs to be trained in every possible skill. Often, the volunteer emergency services attempt to be a "jack-of-all-trades," but this can lead to burnout as it increases the time demand on already busy volunteers. Many times, there are technical response teams that offer specialty classes. Consider if this technical training could be considered optional and not essential, or made available for some, but not required by all.



Ensure that volunteers understand why training is so important and be respectful of time during training sessions. Let participants know their time is valued by starting and ending at the scheduled times, avoid war stories, and stick to the core requirements of the course or training session. Finding ways to accomplish training objectives and goals while minimizing the extraordinary time burden placed on volunteers will benefit the department and staff alike.

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**Consider this:** The amount of training it takes for a volunteer to be able to respond to all needs is an immovable barrier to some prospective volunteers and may result in current volunteers leaving the department. One solution involves an adjustment to the traditional way of thinking that requires every volunteer to do everything. Instead, departments can consider allowing volunteers to just focus on specific areas of response, keeping in mind minimum state training requirements and also the minimum training requirements the department needs to ensure adequate response.

The Lewisville (North Carolina) Fire Department found that allowing volunteers to focus on just the roles they want to play in the department has positively impacted their membership.

"Citizens working full-time jobs don't have the time available to commit to hundreds of hours of training to become certified responders. EMT is 190 hours minimum, Firefighter training is 340-hour minimum, and Technical Rescuer is 120 hours minimum. These three base certifications total 650 hours, just to learn the basics! We have lowered mandatory requirements for new members. Every volunteer no longer has to meet certified firefighter training requirements.

They can serve as firefighters only, EMS only, technical rescuers only, or support team members only.

"For many years, the volunteer fire service has responded to the increasing demand for training by mandating more and more time from its volunteers. In Lewisville, we have shifted our focus from making volunteers be present to making them 'want' to be present. We have shortened pre-training business meetings to significant event awareness only. This way we dive head-first into active training. Train like you want to perform... get in, get the work done, go home."

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## Section 6: Volunteer benefits and incentives



Incentives, benefits and awards are used in the volunteer emergency services as a retention tool. Successful incentive programs are diverse and appeal to members of all ages, experiences and ranks. There is not a one-size- fits-all incentive program that works in every fire department; however, it should be equitable within the fire department. It is recommended that a menu list of options, based on budget and resource restrictions, be provided to the membership on an annual or regular basis to get feedback on what members want to receive.

Although benefits are not typically the reason why individuals volunteer, it is important to have a strategy informed by member input on how to structure incentives to maximize their member-retention value. For some departments, an annual awards dinner with family members may be sufficient. For other departments, T-shirts may be the key. It cannot be stressed enough that the ideas in this section are not intended to be a comprehensive list of incentives, benefits and awards. Rather, it is a starting place to begin to think creatively about what can be offered in a fire department depending on the membership needs and wants.

Departments must also consider local, state, tribal or territorial laws and regulations when implementing a retention program to ensure all applicable laws are being followed. For instance, there may be tax implications, charitable or labor regulations, or other factors to consider.

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**Consider this:** The Carlisle (Massachusetts) Fire Department warns that volunteer benefits should be tied to actual service. “Be VERY CAREFUL about blanket benefits that are not tied to engagement. We know the number of hours a week/month that a member is available for calls and can tie benefits to that. Benefits that are blanket can cause friction for someone who comes to every call versus those who seldom respond, etc.”

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### Department-inclusion incentives

Broadly speaking, incentives can serve 2 purposes: compensation for a volunteer’s time, effort and personal expense related to volunteering, and recognition of the value of the service being provided by a volunteer, which helps them to feel included in the department. Uniform and department paraphernalia (T-shirts, caps, pins, etc., with the department logo) are relatively low-cost ways of signaling to volunteers that they are valued members of the department.

### Direct monetary incentives

The key reason why someone volunteers or continues to volunteer shouldn’t be a monetary incentive. However, it can often be an incentive to continue to volunteer even when feeling overextended with other responsibilities. Monetary incentives may include direct payment for calls, retirement plans, tax credits, access to insurance (health, dental and life), and tuition and housing assistance.

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## Direct payments for calls

Some departments are able to offer a monetary incentive for responding to calls and/or training hours. Volunteer stipends vary considerably among departments, states and regions. Sometimes pay is linked to the number of calls or the number of hours spent on calls and training or a comprehensive points system. Other departments budget a specific dollar amount that is then distributed at the end of the year.

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**In action:** According to an article in the Observer-Reporter on Sept. 2, 2020, the North Franklin Township (Pennsylvania) supervisors voted to support volunteer firefighter retention by providing funding to the fire department for a pay-per-call option. The township will provide a lump sum to the department on a quarterly basis, and the department can then distribute a \$20 per call stipend to volunteer firefighters who meet the eligibility requirements. The funding comes from the township's general fund. The department hopes it will provide an incentive for existing members to come to calls, as well as attract new members. In addition, the local government had also recently implemented a 20% tax reduction for volunteer firefighters.

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It is recommended that the department seek legal counsel with someone who specializes in employment law to assist with formulating a compensation plan. A qualified expert can provide the language needed to create a policy that conforms to labor laws and help the department avoid potential issues with withholding taxes and other payroll-related concerns.

## Retirement plans

Retirement plans, pension plans and LOSAPs can be used as powerful retention motivators. They are complex to manage because of state and federal tax codes, so it is important to do research and seek clarity on what is available in your state. For example, most pension plans exclude LOSAP from being a Deferred Compensation Plan as long as 2 criteria are met: The individual must be a bona fide volunteer, and the annual contribution for any person in the plan cannot exceed \$6,000 (as of 2020), though this cap is expected to increase over time with inflation. LOSAPs may provide a lifetime monthly income payment once a volunteer reaches a certain entitlement age or a specified amount of service. Other LOSAPs may provide a lump sum award based on the number of years of service and the individual's age.

It is important to note that retirement plans appeal mostly to long-term volunteers. According to the NFPA, 41% of volunteer firefighters have served for more than 10 years, so this is an important group. 10% have served for less than 1 year, and 27% have served for 1-5 years. Based on anecdotal evidence, there tends to be significant turnover among this under-5-years cohort, and a LOSAP probably will not appeal to them as much as a regular stipend would. As such, it is important to know what your members want when it comes to incentives and benefits.

Many communities have a difficult time offering these types of incentives because of a lack of money to contribute to these plans. It may be useful to actively and regularly engage local government entities to determine what is available for volunteers and if there is room for increasing the availability of a retirement plan. In addition, the SAFER grant offered through FEMA can be used to fund these incentives.

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## Tax credits

Personal property tax exemptions and credits for volunteers contributing a set number of qualifications can be a motivator for some members to maintain their membership. Tax credits can be a powerful incentive to younger or shorter-term volunteers who are not thinking about retirement benefits as a motivating factor. Partnering with local government to discuss this possibility can often have positive outcomes. It is another example of an opportunity to work with local government agencies to afford them the opportunity to view volunteers as a cost-saving entity in their community who should be rewarded for their service.

Property tax credits are particularly useful in high-cost-of-living areas. Property tax credits make it less expensive for volunteers to live in the community, thus making it less likely that they will move and leave the department.

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**In action:** Local government can be a great ally to enable the fire department to offer an array of incentives to their volunteers. The Holiday Park Volunteer Fire Department (Plum Borough, Pennsylvania) partners with several local government agencies to help provide retention incentives. The borough of Plum provides tax exemptions and insurance while Allegheny County offers free community college as well as free ski lift, wave pool and park pavilion rentals in the county parks.

According to a June 1, 2021, article in The Reading Eagle, Exeter Township in Pennsylvania adopted a tax forgiveness ordinance for residents who are active volunteers, in complement to a 2016 state legislature decision to offer property and earned-income tax breaks to volunteer firefighters who meet certain criteria, as long as the municipality adopts an enabling ordinance. The article reported that the Exeter supervisors updated the enabling ordinance to increase the municipal property tax credit from 15% to 50%. Firefighters that reside in the township can also receive an earned income tax rebate of up to \$500 per year.

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## Insurance

Health, dental or life insurance can be a strong motivator for retaining membership, especially if they do not have insurance through their employers. It may be cost-effective for a municipality to include volunteers in their group health insurance. The local municipality can purchase health insurance from a health care provider and add the volunteers on to their policy. The department may need to establish a limit to which it will contribute to the policy, and members may be required to pay any additional costs.

## Tuition and housing assistance

A very popular recruitment tool has been providing tuition and housing assistance for volunteers who have been active for a set number of years. Some states provide tuition-free scholarships for volunteers in state schools. Some fire and EMS departments provide education stipends or scholarships for volunteers who have met certain milestones, sometimes even extending these opportunities to the volunteers' children. Housing assistance can be provided in many different aspects, such as residency programs. Some departments in rural communities have purchased a home near the

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fire station where volunteers can live in exchange for being available on specific days or for a certain number of hours per month. Some states offer low-interest housing loans to volunteer emergency responders.

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**In action:** An article from Oct. 22, 2020, in The Morning Call reported the Fogelsville Volunteer Fire Co. (Upper Macungie Township, Pennsylvania) allows firefighters to live rent free at the firehouse in exchange for 40 hours of volunteer fire service. Those in the live-in program are able to get to calls significantly faster than volunteers responding from home. The live-in program is utilized by younger members who are now responding to overnight calls as well, whereas before the average age of those responding to calls after midnight was about 60.

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### Indirect monetary incentives

Indirect monetary incentives are useful for communities that do not have the financial resources to offer monetary incentives. Some examples of indirect monetary incentives include discounts to local family-friendly attractions, gym memberships, medical examinations, training or education benefits at local schools, and take-home vehicles that can be used for personal business as needed. A good place to start is to ask local businesses and local government if they would be interested in offering discounts to active members. Even something as cost-efficient as a movie theater offering a free movie night once a month, or local government providing access to a community center, can go a long way in having a member feel appreciated. This can also help promote local businesses.

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**Consider this:** The federal Volunteer Responder Incentive Protection Act of 2019 exempts property tax benefits and up to \$600 per year of other non-LOSAP incentives that volunteer emergency responders receive as retention benefits from being subject to federal income tax, withholding and reporting requirements. This exemption was made permanent in December 2020.

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## Section 7. Recognizing volunteers

Volunteers want to feel appreciated within their department and within their community. Even volunteers who receive their satisfaction from serving their community and the camaraderie within the department want to know that their contributions matter. According to NVFC's "Psychologically Healthy Fire Departments: Implementation Toolkit," recognition of efforts can increase member satisfaction, morale and self-esteem. This may also lead to better engagement, performance, lower turnover and the ability to attract and retain high-quality members.

Appreciation can come in many forms. Something as simple as a handwritten thank you note from a community member, fire chief or a government official can be very meaningful. If the department has a PIO or someone



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who acts in that role, a press release to local media can be used to spotlight the accomplishments of volunteers who have completed a training course or achieved a professional or personal accomplishment. Department and community newsletters and social media can also be a good tool to highlight milestones and achievements. Consider asking the mayor or other local government official to issue a proclamation during National Volunteer Week to recognize the contributions of department volunteers.

Awards banquets allow members a chance to enjoy some downtime together while celebrating accomplishments. Consider establishing awards for lengths of service, rookie of the year, firefighter of the year or for other topics of importance to the organization such as a health and safety award or recruiter of the year for the individual who recruits the most volunteers for the department. Invite the mayor, city/town manager or county superintendent to help present these awards and meet the extraordinary volunteers who earned them.

There are many ways to let volunteers know they are appreciated, and not all of them require a substantial budget or big fanfare. Sometimes a simple acknowledgment at a department meeting or even in day-to-day activities can go a long way in communicating appreciation.

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**Consider this:** Recognition is a low-cost but effective way to let volunteers know they are valued and appreciated. In the NVFC's retention study conducted in 2020, 44% of former volunteers and 58% of current volunteers cited giving out awards or honors annually and when members reach service milestones as something they think would have a positive impact on volunteer retention. As the Richmond (Maine) Fire Department notes: "Staff recognition is important. [Our volunteers] are constantly being recognized on social media, monthly newsletters, and town reports." At Foothills Fire & Rescue (Golden, Colorado), "We host annual events to recognize our volunteers and show our appreciation, including family bowling nights, annual awards banquet, firefighter Olympics, BBQs, and other fun gatherings."

The Rapid Valley Volunteer Fire Department (Rapid City, South Dakota) recognizes volunteers with awards as well as utilizes community involvement to help volunteers feel connected, appreciated and part of something bigger. "The department has recognition packages for every five years of commitment. We have [also] added several public education and public involvement opportunities. These opportunities allow the members to participate in a light-hearted time, interacting with the public without there being an emergency incident involved. These events include open houses (recruitment), pancake suppers (fundraisers), participating in the community holiday parade of lights (social), and our newest — truck-or-treat (community event). This has given the longer serving members some new interest and it shows the new members the essence of family and community involvement that the volunteer fire service is all about."

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## Section 8: Nonoperational volunteers

Fire and EMS departments are faced with a variety of tasks to keep the doors open and the department functioning, and not all of these include fighting fires and responding to emergency calls. Consider seeking nonoperational volunteers to assist with these tasks, removing this burden from your operational volunteers and providing the community with other, meaningful ways to engage with your department.

### Volunteers with specific skill sets

Departments often need specific skills to help them function efficiently and effectively. From providing physicals to members to assisting with training, accounting functions or even providing legal advice, there are members of the community that may be eager to help in these less conventional roles:

- ❖ **Accountants:** From managing day-to-day finances to conducting audits and setting up sound financial policies, departments can benefit from accounting expertise to guide or help with their work.
- ❖ **Boat operators/scuba divers:** In response areas with bodies of water, boat operators and scuba divers can spearhead water rescue teams.
- ❖ **Construction workers:** Individuals in the construction industry are familiar with building codes and building construction and can assist with training.
- ❖ **Fire protection engineers, sprinkler and fire alarm system contractors and inspectors:** People in supporting roles of fire prevention and community risk reduction often already have much knowledge about fire science and can offer training to fire department members and the community at large.
- ❖ **Grant writers:** Grant writing can be time-intensive and requires a specific skill set. A local grant writer can help the department secure funds for their recruitment and retention efforts, new gear and equipment, and more.
- ❖ **Human resources professionals:** From recruiting new volunteers and designing or managing the onboarding process, to tracking ongoing training and certifications, human resources professionals have many skills that would benefit a volunteer emergency services department. Whether they volunteer on a regular basis or simply serve as an advisor to the department, their skill set is unique and beneficial.
- ❖ **Lawyers:** Some volunteer departments recruit lawyers to volunteer or to offer pro bono services. Since most volunteer fire and EMS departments are corporations, these individuals can provide necessary and free guidance to the board of directors or trustees. Lawyers are often willing to consult with their fellow department members about issues of liability and possibly even more personal matters for members — for example, wills, trusts and other legal issues.
- ❖ **Marketing professionals:** Individuals with experience in communications and fundraising can serve as PIOs or help inform the community that volunteers are needed. A social media expert or website developer can help departments build a solid online presence.



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- ❖ **Physicians and nurses:** They are easily trained to the paramedic level. Some states allow doctors and nurses to directly challenge EMT tests without taking the full class. Doctors, physician assistants and nurse practitioners can also be recruited to give physicals to members.
  - ❖ **Restaurateurs:** Chefs are often knowledgeable and helpful for department fundraisers, such as breakfasts and barbecues.
  - ❖ **Teachers:** Teachers provide a myriad of skills and may have extended periods of time off from the classroom. They can also provide guidance on public education efforts.
  - ❖ **Trade professionals:** Electricians; plumbers; and heating, ventilating and air conditioning specialists can offer experience that is valuable to emergency services departments.
  - ❖ **Truck drivers:** Truck drivers are familiar with driving large apparatus and may be able to assist with training drivers and offering highway safety training.

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**In action:** The Lewisville (North Carolina) Fire Department found that delving into new areas and creating opportunities for all has expanded its services and helped its membership thrive. “Lewisville Fire Department has tried to be forward-thinking regarding emerging technologies. We recently added a new UAV (drone) program to our arsenal of abilities. We have experienced more interest in this program than any service delivery addition in over two decades. Through new programming such as UAV, an increased social media presence across multiple platforms, and the new ‘there is something for everyone at Lewisville Fire Department’ mentality, we have experienced a surge in membership from new and returning former members alike.”

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**Consider this:** In addition to finding individual volunteers with special skill sets, departments can consider approaching other organizations or companies for assistance with specialized areas. For instance, the local hospital may be able to provide human resources assistance to the department, tap into their network as a source for volunteer recruitment and/or provide annual medical evaluations to department personnel. A local business may have resources to assist with things like marketing, accounting or even legal advice.

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## Fire Corps and auxiliary programs

Departments have used auxiliary programs for decades as a way to incorporate nonoperational volunteers into daily operations. Auxiliaries have served many roles, from operating a department canteen to conducting fundraisers or assisting with the department open house.

Historically, departments frequently called these programs Ladies’ Auxiliaries; however, with the growing diversity of the fire and emergency services, this is outdated, and the name alone could deter perfectly capable and enthusiastic volunteers.



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Since 2004, the NVFC has operated the national Fire Corps program to help departments create and maintain teams of skilled volunteers to assist with any number of nonoperational duties, from rehab services, to public education, to community risk reduction activities and so much more. Whatever the name, nonoperational volunteers provide an excellent way of engaging community members in meaningful ways while reducing the burden placed on firefighters and EMS providers to keep the department operating smoothly. As an added bonus, these programs have proven to be an effective recruitment tool, with many members making the leap from a nonoperational to operational role once they get a chance to see and experience the emergency services lifestyle.

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**In action:** Nonoperational volunteers can be a big asset to an emergency services department. Mulvane (Kansas) Fire Rescue has a resource team that assists the department in various ways. “The resource team are citizens with an interest in helping us, but do not want to run into burning buildings. One of our resource members is a photographer; he goes with us to capture some incredible images of us at work to share in our station and on social media. Another member of this team is a county dispatcher/EMT who comes in and helps staff our EOC when needed. We have also had a mechanic and a secretary/treasurer on our resource team. Many times, these people are friends or relatives of department members.”

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## Section 9: Mentor programs

According to the NVFC’s 2020 retention research, former volunteers cited the following as the top reasons for leaving their department:

- ❖ Cliques and groups that exclude others.
- ❖ Department leadership that doesn’t understand or support the needs of members.
- ❖ A department atmosphere where members of different generations don’t get along.
- ❖ A lack of camaraderie or sense of community among everyone.

In this same study, current volunteers listed mentor programs as most likely to have a positive impact on retention. A successful mentoring program which pairs new volunteers with more experienced members may assist in helping recruits feel less isolated, help address any generational tension by forming bonds between younger and senior members, provide a link between senior/leadership and newer recruits, and help to establish a better sense of community and camaraderie.

In addition, mentor programs can positively affect the culture of the organization, allow for leadership development and facilitate camaraderie between the mentors and mentees. The purpose of a mentoring program is to share knowledge, help synthesize and articulate experiences and actions, facilitate problem-solving, and provide an encouraging environment. Mentoring is also highly effective in passing along soft skills such as leadership, team building, communications, and department history and culture.



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There are several resources that can assist departments in developing mentor programs. One such resource is the IAFC/Volunteer Workforce Solutions' online, self-paced courses on mentoring: "Mentoring I: Re-energizing Your Department Culture Through Positive Influence" and "Mentoring II: Developing and Retaining Firefighters Through Relationships." These courses describe how to set program goals and objectives, establish performance measures, demonstrate communications skills, build trust, and identify strategies for developing the mentee's behavior and performance.

## Section 10: Family support



Volunteering as a first responder affects more than just the individual volunteer. The training schedule, duty shifts and/or answering calls from home, along with the risks associated with the job, affect the entire family. The schedule may mean long hours away from home, unexpected absences, missed family events and sometimes even emotional impacts that can carry over from the station to the home. Having an emergency services volunteer in the family can also be exciting, rewarding and a great source of pride for family members. Helping families understand and adapt to the unique attributes of the volunteer lifestyle can make all the difference in volunteer retention.

In the NVFC's 2015 survey on volunteer recruitment, current and prospective volunteers cited strong family support as a driving factor in becoming and remaining a volunteer. Taking steps to facilitate that strong family support will benefit the department as well as the individual volunteer. Being open and transparent with family members, helping them to understand the change in family dynamics that volunteering can bring, and making them feel like part of the extended emergency services family can go a long way. Consider the following ways departments can foster these strong family relationships:

- ❖ Provide information to families of new members on what they can expect as a family and the importance of the work the volunteer will be doing, such as the NVFC's "What to Expect: A Guide for Family Members of Volunteer Firefighters."
- ❖ Host a family information session to help family members understand and prepare for this new lifestyle. Possible topics can include training and response schedules, community response statistics demonstrating the need for volunteers, health and safety measures in place to keep their loved ones safe, and any benefits and incentives available for volunteers and their families.
- ❖ Including family in department events such as award ceremonies, off-duty get-togethers or inviting them to help out at various community events are other great ways to bring them into the fold and make them feel like part of the team.

In addition to playing a critical role in the ability of the volunteer to stay on with the department, family members have also proven to be an excellent recruitment source, with most volunteer firefighters indicating they joined the department because they were invited by a family member or friend.

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**In action:** The South Windsor (Connecticut) Fire Department makes sure to include families in department activities to keep them involved. “Our social side of the department provides numerous events throughout the year with a clambake, family picnic, holiday party, spouse appreciation, and numerous company level events — most at no or very little cost to the member/family.”

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## Section 11: When it's time to say goodbye

At some point, every volunteer term will come to an end. Whether it is because the volunteer is moving, needs to step back for personal reasons or they have reached retirement age, the time to say goodbye will come. In some cases, a volunteer may just not be a good fit, and rather than choosing to leave, the department must make the difficult choice to let them go. How the department handles these situations says a lot about the organization and may communicate volumes to current volunteers who are faced daily with the decision to stay or leave.

### Moving

Whether volunteers are switching jobs, looking to be closer to family or just want to change up their surroundings, occasionally they move out of the area. While this means your department is losing a valuable teammate, it could mean their new community stands to gain one. Leadership may consider reaching out to the department in the member's new community to introduce them to a prospective volunteer or provide a reference. Or perhaps the member would be willing to invite a local friend or relative to join the department or write a positive review of their experience with the department that could be used in recruitment materials.

### Taking a career firefighter position

A growing trend, particularly in the Northeast and West Coast, is for volunteer fire departments to become feeder organizations or farm teams for nearby career fire departments. Volunteers get their certifications, training and field experience and then have highly sought-after skills that land them at the top of the hiring list for career departments. This creates a high turnover rate at the volunteer fire department. Managing this turnover can be expensive for the volunteer fire department, from both a financial and time investment standpoint. In many cases, career firefighters cannot or will not continue volunteering because of the rules or peer pressure at their new department.

However, some departments have been able to embrace this role as a “feeder” for career departments and make it work for them. They recognize they have a high turnover rate but get several years of service from these firefighters before they move on to their career positions. This pattern has been compared to running a college basketball team: You train them as freshmen/first years, you get great play from them as sophomores and juniors, and then they are off to the big leagues as seniors. Anything beyond their senior year is a bonus. Succeeding under these conditions requires a well-oiled recruitment, on-boarding and training system to maintain the flow of firefighters you need to meet the mission.

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## Retirement

As volunteers get older and look toward retirement, this may include the fire or EMS department as well. However, sending a volunteer off into retirement doesn't have to be a permanent goodbye. Often retirees are looking for ways to stay active in their community, and many of them found much of their identity within the department. Perhaps the department has nonoperational roles that retirees can help with, such as staffing rehab units, serving on the board, mentoring newer members or delivering mail or gear between stations. At a minimum, the department can take steps to ensure retirees are not forgotten and include them in activities such as an annual awards banquet or perhaps a regular retiree luncheon where they can catch up and maintain that sense of family. The department may also consider providing additional services such as counseling or transition planning to those facing retirement.

## Other reasons for leaving

There are many other reasons members may have for leaving the department. Perhaps a member took on a more demanding job or family issues have occurred, such as having a new child, a recent marriage or needing to step up to care for a family member who has fallen ill. Maybe they are not feeling valued or appreciated by department leadership. Unless the department knows why its members are leaving, there is little that can be done to try to retain them.

The NVFC's 2020 retention research indicates former volunteers believe a simple exit survey would have a positive impact on retention. Second in line to an exit interview is a stay interview of current volunteers who have lapsed attendance and may be considering leaving the department. These types of surveys help a department understand why a volunteer left or is considering leaving, providing the opportunity to make changes that may help keep the volunteer or assist with retention moving forward. The lack of such interviews may reinforce the perception that leadership is not concerned with member needs. See Appendices D and E for example exit and stay surveys.

By understanding why members are leaving (or considering leaving), the department can put measures in place to try to retain valued volunteers. Whether it is offering a leave of absence to get through a difficult time, putting together a more flexible schedule to allow for a better work-life-volunteer balance, or finding ways to make sure volunteers feel appreciated, knowledge is power (even when that knowledge may involve something that is difficult to hear) and may be the deciding factor between retention and attrition.

## Terminating volunteers

While your department may be desperately in need of volunteers, not every volunteer is a great fit, and sometimes the wrong fit can do more harm than good. A negative personality can drag others down and degrade the morale of the department. Someone who taunts, harasses or bullies others may drive good volunteers away and can open the department to lawsuits and other liabilities. While it is never an easy task, the act of letting that volunteer go can preserve a positive department culture and sets the tone for what will or will not be tolerated at the station and on the fireground.

As there could potentially be legal ramifications for terminating a volunteer, it is best to consult with legal counsel first to make sure everything is done properly and mitigate any unforeseen consequences. This should be done in conjunction with the

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local government's human resources and legal offices if the department falls under their umbrella. Departments that are separate from the local government may still be able to tap into the municipality's human resources and legal departments for their expertise. Departments that do not have legal counsel may be able to find a lawyer who can assist with the department's legal needs, including terminations, on a pro bono basis.

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**In action:** The Kiowa (Colorado) Fire Protection District understands that those who create a toxic environment can do more harm than good for the department. "After having the responsibility of recruiting for two different fire departments, I have found that culture and good morale are imperative. Culture can be changed quicker than you think. Morale is easy, but there cannot be any cancerous people on the department. Those people should be heard and helped or go away if needed... Just over a year ago we had around eight people TOTAL on our fire department, and now we have 25 volunteers in addition to the three full-time staff. It took trimming the toxic people, having fun, and sharing what we do. Value your people and it will all fall into place."

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Photo courtesy of iStock.

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## Part V: Marketing for the Fire Service

Most fire and EMS departments work hard to disseminate fire prevention and life safety messages, raise funds and promote volunteerism. However, like most nonprofits, many emergency services departments lack the knowledge to leverage content marketing to maximize recruitment efforts. This is because most do not fully understand the fundamentals of marketing; they fail to take a strategic approach and develop a plan, and when they do post really great content, they fail to provide a call to action.

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**Closer look:** Awareness is a significant obstacle to gaining volunteers. A national omnibus survey by the NVFC in 2014 found that 41% of respondents did not know if their local department was career, volunteer or combination, while 80% did not know if their local department was looking for volunteers. This is an issue that resonates with the South Windsor (Connecticut) Fire Department. “Many of the residents do not know that we are a volunteer fire department. We pride ourselves on being an extremely well-trained, professional department, [and] many assume we are career.”

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Marketing in the volunteer emergency services is the strategic use of tactics to amplify the organization’s cause, recruit volunteers, solicit donations and attract supporters. Marketing is a persuasion tool used to change behavior. Marketing strategies can include a wide variety of elements and tactics, such as traditional print advertising, events, social media campaigns, words, images, experiences, compelling stories, relationships, humor, etc. Effective marketing strategies can spark action and alter how individuals will respond to a call to action.



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For the volunteer fire and emergency services, one of the main goals for marketing is to move someone from being a potential volunteer to a committed volunteer. To this end, the role of marketing has 3 goals: identify, satisfy and retain.

1. **Identify.** To create an opportunity of value to a potential volunteer, a fire or EMS department must first identify a want or need the organization can address for the potential volunteer.
2. **Satisfy.** To satisfy potential volunteers, a department must work to deliver an opportunity that addresses the needs of the volunteers. The key to volunteer satisfaction is to make sure both the volunteer and the organization benefit from the exchange. This leaves the volunteer happy with the value they receive for their time and the organization satisfied with what the volunteer is giving in return.
3. **Retain.** Effective marketing in the department does not stop at identify and satisfy. Successful marketing involves retaining volunteers by creating new opportunities to foster loyalty and continued service. This prevents the costly cycle of volunteer turnover.

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**Consider this:** The message a department conveys to potential and current volunteers is important. The Gilt Edge (Tennessee) Volunteer Fire Department advises keeping the messages inspirational and focused on the positive. “Stop the ‘sinking ship’ recruitment messages such as ‘Volunteers desperately needed’ or ‘What if no one answers the call.’ Nobody wants to join a sinking ship! Your recruitment message should inspire people to want to serve or accept a challenge.”

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When taking stock in what needs or wants the fire/EMS department can address for a potential volunteer, brainstorming the following questions can be useful:

- What roles do we as an organization need filled?
- How can our roles help others meet their personal goals?
- What success stories can we use as content to show how we can meet an identified need of a potential volunteer?

Using these answers, make a list of each role that needs to be filled (firefighter, EMS, webmaster, fundraiser, educator, etc.). Next, brainstorm all the benefits gained from serving in each specific role. Then, identify stories of how volunteering with the department has helped current or past members with personal success in meeting such goals.



Brainstorming example:

Fire department volunteer needs	What we can offer that provides value to a potential member filling our need	Marketing content ideas
EMTs to staff the ambulance	<p>Learn lifesaving skills that you can use outside of the fire/EMS department.</p> <p>A job skill: hospitals hire EMTs as medical technicians.</p> <p>A job skill for a career in EMS.</p> <p>A job skill: an introduction to the medical field for those considering going into the health care profession (nursing, medicine).</p> <p>Tuition reimbursement for hours volunteered.</p>	<p>Highlight a current member story of how they used their EMS skills to help someone while “off duty,” such as performing CPR, dressing an injury, tending to someone who was choking.</p> <p>Highlight a member who used their department-provided training to get a job at a hospital.</p> <p>Highlight a member who used their department training to obtain a career in EMS.</p> <p>Highlight a member who used their department tuition benefit to obtain a degree.</p>

**Case study:** The town of Canton (Connecticut) Volunteer Fire and EMS Department looked for target markets that had been trending versus diminishing. They used their findings to tap into a new audience with targeted messaging on how the department could fulfill a need:

“National trending and surveying (2018 Bureau of Labor Statistics) indicates that a key to business success is offering employees the flexibility to work from home, in an effort to enhance work/life balance. Apparently, over 40 percent of employees with advanced degrees were working remotely, at least part-time. Couple this trend with our state’s highly educated workforce, and we have a formula for rethinking the role of volunteerism as an enhancement to balancing lifestyle and career.

“There are very few other volunteer opportunities that offer the diverse skills training, unique leadership experiences, flexible hours, and networking opportunities that are both transferable and valuable in any work environment than the fire and emergency medical service. And there’s the opportunity.

“We’ve found that many of our members, after a tough day on their jobs — as educators, executives, construction workers, medical professionals, business owners, parents — actually look forward to volunteering on the ambulance, participating in a skills drill, or responding with their crew. They get so focused on the important work to be done, they can’t think about anything else.

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“Inspired by this information, our department’s executive officer penned a letter to the editor titled ‘Build Your Career Tomorrow by Volunteering Today: Rethinking the Role of Volunteering in the Age of Flexible Hours, Home-based Businesses, & the Gig Economy.’

“Our pitch: Think of it. So, you’re working from home when a 911 call is dispatched. Whether you perform CPR, climb a ladder to vent a roof, or participate in a river rescue, these experiences will act as a mental escape from your workplace stress. This type of separation is critical to getting clarity, to innovate, and be more creative at work. You learn to avoid tunnel vision and instead to focus on the range of other possibilities for successful outcomes. And that’s good for business and for life.

“The letter was posted in our area-wide paper, and we intend to leverage the message with additional initiatives to attract this untapped demographic that may just be waiting to be asked.”

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## Identifying and understanding potential volunteers: Segmentation and targeting

Once the roles needed and benefits provided have been identified, explore who these roles and benefits are intended for. To be successful with marketing efforts, it is key for departments to take the necessary steps to know as much as possible about potential volunteers and design efforts around that information. Emergency services leaders can use targeting and segmentation to reach a greater number of potential volunteers that have a need the department can meet.

Segmentation is the starting point for understanding who the department is trying to reach as potential volunteers. Through segmentation, potential volunteers are divided into groups to better understand them. This will help drive marketing efforts to those potential volunteer segments that are most promising. There are different methods that can be used to segment the audience into groups that have similar wants or needs.

Using the EMT need example, a large pool of potential volunteers can be segmented into smaller sections. Specific segments for the EMT need might include the following:

- ❖ Young parents who want to learn lifesaving skills to benefit their family.
- ❖ Recent graduates who are looking for a new skill set to find employment.
- ❖ People who are interested in health care as a career or who want to gain experience prior to applying for a competitive health care education program.
- ❖ Current college students who want experience in health care to prepare them for future careers.
- ❖ Students who are trying to find ways to pay for college.

Next, create profiles of the potential volunteer segments to better visualize each group and determine which groups to invest in. To do this, describe these potential volunteers in full detail by asking the following questions:

- ❖ Who will actually volunteer?
- ❖ What do you know about this group?

- Where are they located geographically?
- Where do they shop?
- Where do they go for entertainment?
- What type of community groups are they engaged in?
- What languages do they speak?
- What types of websites and social media platforms do they use?
- What are their demographics?

Targeting can then be used to help customize resources to specific groups that will see the greatest value from the opportunity and are most likely to be recruited. Targeting is a method to determine which segments have the highest probability of becoming volunteers and then directing the marketing efforts to satisfy the need. For example, take the segment from the EMS need:

<b>Segment:</b>	<b>Current students who want experience in health care to prepare them for future careers</b>
Profile/Research Question #3: Where are these students located geographically compared to our need?	<p>ABC Community College is in our jurisdiction and offers health care programs. The college advisor indicated that 65% of the students in the health care program are from our county.</p> <p>ABC University is in our jurisdiction and offers health care programs. The advisor indicated that the majority of the students are from out of state and attend online.</p> <p>Anytown High School offers a medical assistant vocational program. 100% of the students in the program are from our jurisdiction.</p>

The answers from the profile questions will help determine if the potential volunteer base should be considered for additional research and market opportunity. In the example, looking at the answers to the profile question on geographic location, ABC University would be excluded as a target segment due to the students not residing in the jurisdiction. With students not living in the jurisdiction, marketing efforts to the target segment would most likely result in little value for the department. The focus of targeting efforts would then shift to ABC Community College and Anytown High School.

**Closer look:** In a March 9, 2020, article for FireRescue1, Jason Caughey wrote that in order to successfully recruit in the present, departments need to abandon the old ways of thinking that no longer work while retaining the values and traits that define the fire service. He highlighted the following keys to approaching recruitment, which were derived from the 1999 book by Marcus Buckingham, "First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently."

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- **Select for talent:** Instead of casting a too-broad net in search of volunteers, specifically seek out talent. Look at where the department's best members were found, ask new members why they joined, and enlist these new members in identifying the organizations, locations and events to recruit new members. Utilize junior firefighter programs to reach the next generation.
  - **Define the right outcomes:** Take a broad, 30,000-foot look at your organization and the community's needs and use that to define the right outcomes for the department that will help guide the recruitment process.
  - **Focus on strengths:** Departments must learn to identify and promote their strengths. Highlight members' stories, and connect with the community through fundraiser, charity and other public events.
  - **Find the right fit:** Each community and department are different. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Departments must work constructively to identify what the best course of action is for their department and community, understanding that plans may need to adjust or evolve over time.
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## Developing a marketing plan and tactics

Once a department has identified target segments to pursue, the next step is to develop a marketing plan using the information to craft messaging that appeals to what a potential volunteer wants/needs, informs the potential volunteer of what it will cost them to be a volunteer, and offers a convenient way for the potential volunteer to transition into a volunteer opportunity.

Outreach activities and methods for promotion will look different based on the target group. To be effective with marketing efforts, it is key that the messaging type and delivery is customized for each segment. To reduce time and resources, it is important for departments to identify marketing tactics (print, email, social media, flyers, community events, videos, stories, etc.) that will be attractive to the target segment they are trying to reach.

To ease the burden on volunteer fire and EMS departments, the NVFC created the Make Me A Firefighter recruitment resource portal. Resources found in the portal include tools to create and customize outreach materials based on different target segments and messaging delivery methods. This tool allows department recruiters to quickly create custom marketing materials using some of the most common methods of message delivery. These include emails, flyers, postcards, event invitations, public service announcements and social media posts. Every activity should include a call to action to take potential volunteers to the next step.

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**Consider this:** Local government and media can help amplify the department’s recruitment message in the community. The Royersford (Pennsylvania) Fire Department notes that “The local government is involved with our social media page and daily will share stories and incidents, increasing our readership.” The Secaucus (New Jersey) Volunteer Fire Department recommends to “Get your department in the news and in the spotlight as much as possible. Furthermore, when in said opportunities, make sure you mention how to join the department, the benefits of doing so, and perhaps even why it is vital to recruit new volunteers.”

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## Moving past the call to action

Marketing efforts do not end with the dissemination of campaign messaging. Offering a clear path to connect with volunteers and tracking the response to the call to action is key. Tracking results should include both responses and nonresponses. A lack of response from a target segment might be an indication that the marketing tactic selected was ineffective and should be avoided in the future. For example, if a department disseminates recruitment flyers to a local high school health care program and yields zero results, they may want to consider how the target segment receives information. Instead of flyers, a social media campaign or a live demo in the classroom might be more effective for catching the attention of potential volunteers in that segment.

Once a connection is made, fostering the relationship with the potential volunteer is important. Having a follow-up conversation with a potential volunteer can be the persuading factor in moving an interested individual to an actual recruit status. Potential volunteer connections can be tracked through a spreadsheet, or the Make Me A Firefighter portal offers a free tool to track where a potential volunteer is in the recruitment process.

The NVFC describes the volunteer courting relationship as a 5-step process, known as the Marketing Funnel.

### Step 1: Interest

Use marketing tactics to draw interest by educating the public and raising awareness of the opportunities available at the department.

### Step 2: Invite

Make a personal invitation to a potential volunteer to get involved or learn more information.

### Step 3: Sample

Provide the potential volunteer the opportunity to sample what the department has to offer. Sampling activities include ride-alongs, junior firefighter/Explorer programs, open houses and other recruitment events.



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### **Step 4: Commit**

Commit to the potential volunteer and ask them to commit to the department. At this stage in the marketing funnel, a potential volunteer will decide if they are ready for the commitment. Follow-up with the individual is key at this stage. Don't let interested individuals fall through the cracks due to a lack of follow-through.

### **Step 5: Train**

Training new recruits is time intensive and can be overwhelming. Offer flexibility whenever possible. It is also a good idea to assign mentors to help new recruits acclimate and learn. Recruits that feel a personal connection to the department through a mentor program and/or bonding with other recruits through shared training experiences are more likely to want to remain.

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## Part VI: Using Data To Drive Recruitment and Retention Efforts

In a desperate need for bodies, the volunteer fire service has a long history of recruiting quantity over quality. This leads to a poor investment in time, PPE and training for individuals who fail to provide a beneficial return. Data collected and used properly by emergency services departments can be a gold mine of useful information to ensure recruitment and retention investments are profitable. Having a solid set of metrics allows an organization to visualize the impact of their efforts and determine interventions for a better approach. Having concrete data to back up your requests is also beneficial when trying to get support from local government, businesses or grant sources.

### Using data to determine department staffing needs

Data is a critical piece in calculating volunteer needs. Determining the needed level of staffing, even in the volunteer world, is a key part of human resource planning. Determining the level of volunteers goes beyond counting individuals. Human resource planning focuses on having available the right number of volunteers with the required skill level to effectively carry out the mission of the department. It is key for fire and emergency services leadership to staff their department with enough skilled volunteers to meet the current need and future goals. This is known as workforce planning.

Workforce planning involves using a needs analysis to determine the number of open volunteer positions that need to be filled due to turnover and operational growth. In addition to predicting future volunteer needs, workforce planning is also critical for planning staff training needs and succession planning. Workforce planning should take place before a recruitment and retention plan is implemented. Data collected from a needs analysis should be a driving factor in strategic planning.

### Conducting a trend analysis

One step in the needs analysis process is to identify key trends, such as the level of volunteer staffing needed to manage the workload, organizational structure and volunteer satisfaction. A trend analysis will also provide data on the retention rate and the average number of years a volunteer gives to a fire or EMS department.

In order to conduct a trend analysis, the department needs a method of data documentation. Departments will need statistical data on the number of volunteers, their length of service (to include dates of resignation) and volunteer turnover rates. Demographic information on each volunteer should also be collected as it becomes available. This includes age group, education level, prior work and/or volunteer experience, current work situation (geographical location, type of job and shift requirements), and family situation. Volunteer home addresses can be geocoded and presented on a map to obtain a picture of where volunteers are coming from in the community. This in turn could inform recruiting efforts from underrepresented areas as well as operational planning. Collecting and using this same type of data for the current time frame and for the previous 2 years will allow an organization to compare current volunteer staffing with former to establish trends. Using the collected data will allow the department to conduct comparisons by highlighting common trends across groups. The data will then allow an organization to understand the commonalities of those volunteers who continued to serve and those who left.

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Looking at common themes among volunteers who leave or simply stop showing up allows for intervention among future volunteers with commonalities. For example, if the data showed that a common theme among 30% of the volunteers who stopped serving was working at a job past 6 p.m., then the data could be revealing that a weekly training requirement of Monday at 6:30 p.m. is conflicting with the volunteers' work-life-volunteer balance. An intervention could be to offer daytime trainings on the weekend to allow the volunteers working past 6 p.m. to meet department training requirements. Data tells an organization what it can do differently to meet the needs of stakeholders.

## Using predictive analysis for recruitment and retention

The turnover of high performing and loyal volunteers can have a significant financial and psychological impact on a fire or EMS department. Predictive analytics provide a way to make predictions about future or unknown events based on historical data. Predictive analytics can be used to help find the hidden connections between key contributing factors and volunteer turnover. To reduce turnover, it is important for organizations to look at historical data to predict how new recruits will adjust to or change the department culture. Predictive data informs fire and emergency services leaders about the steps they need to take to get new recruits to their fullest potential, how onboarding should be conducted and how training should be delivered. In addition to predicting what will happen, data will also indicate the steps leaders should take in the future to influence behaviors.

Collecting engagement data will help determine how volunteers will respond and their level of commitment. Lining up demographic and engagement data will lead to a visual of motivation trends to predict recruitment efforts and which nonwage benefits should be implemented. Identifying patterns in volunteer data allows leaders to design retention strategies with the best outcome and eliminate assumption-based strategy making. For example, many fire and emergency services organizations make the assumption that adding a financial incentive will increase volunteer retention of younger generations. According to a 2016 study by Dr. Candice McDonald, "Retention of Internal Stakeholders in the Volunteer Fire Service," just the opposite is true — money and financial gain is not the main motivator for millennial engagement.

Removing assumptions is key to developing strategies to meet volunteer needs. Poor decisions are made when perceptions are compromised by assumption-based information. Using data analytics removes human emotions and allows strategies to be designed based on accurate, factual information. Volunteer turnover should not be predicted based on the volunteer's emotions, but instead on satisfaction with consistent factors across your organization such as nonwage benefits, volunteer development, attendance records and engagement opportunities.

Data sets should tell a story and should be factual. This is true of the earlier example of the data set that showed a common theme among 30% of the volunteers who stopped serving: they were all working at a job past 6 p.m. General feelings or complaints that volunteers are dissatisfied with training nights do not tell the story. Identifying that a volunteer's work schedule conflicts with the time of the training night is a factual data set and not an opinion. This information allows leaders to see the full story of why a volunteer has disengaged **and** provides them an opportunity to intervene.



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Collecting fact-based data on volunteer insight is key for predicting retention. Leveraging annual volunteer surveys as a way to collect data is one method for determining if the fire department is meeting volunteer needs to prevent turnover. Fire departments that predict high-risk volunteer demographics can design strategies to address the problem to lessen turnover rates.

## **Leveraging resources for data collection and analysis**

While we know that effective data collection and management are key for fire and emergency services organizations, the idea can seem overwhelming. The phrases “data collection” and “data management” can be intimidating for some emergency service leaders. Many do not know where to start.

The first step is determining what type of data the department wants to collect and outlining a clear process of how that desired data will be collected. Next, determine how data entry will be conducted and what platform will be used to store data. Departments can use a spreadsheet to store data or purchase volunteer management software. Identify who will be responsible for data entry and ensure that they are trained to correctly look at and input data.

Fire departments that participate in the NFIRS can access all their data stored on the national database immediately using the e-NFIRS portal. In addition, through the FEMA/USFA Enterprise Data Warehouse (EDW), within 24 hours of uploading their data to the national database, departments can access standard reports as well as incident data, not only for their own fire department but from all participating fire departments. For access to the NFIRS EDW, contact your NFIRS state program manager.

Once data has been collected, an analysis will need to take place. Data is useless without being able to provide meaningful outcomes. Data analysis is the process of moving data into actionable insights that leaders can use for decision-making. The visualization of data helps tell a story without being overwhelmed by the raw data. Data visualization highlights useful information tied to trends and outliers that can be easily understood.

There are many tools for moving data into visualizations. This includes simple, free tools and more complex software that must be purchased. Common types of data visualization include leveraging tools such as Excel to create a chart, graph or pivot table, and more creative methods such as infographics and dashboards.

Partnering with local universities and community colleges is one way to leverage external resources. Most statistics and mathematics-based programs require students to conduct a data analysis project or a formal internship. Many data analytics students are actively seeking a research project for their final year thesis. Most programs require students to conduct a focused project that requires them to demonstrate their grasp on fundamental data analysis. Seeking assistance from local government agencies that have experience in data gathering and analytics is another option.



CY DRIVE  
RT PARKWAY

**FIRE**  
DISTRICT NO. 2

**FIRE**  
DISTRICT NO. 2

FIRE  
DEPT

Photo courtesy of iStock.

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## Part VII: Funding Recruitment and Retention Efforts

While many recruitment and retention efforts can be low- and even no-cost — such as word-of-mouth advertising, personal invitations and ensuring the department culture is one that volunteers want to be a part of — there are aspects of recruitment and retention that cost money. These include but are not limited to advertising the need for volunteers, equipping and training new recruits, and LOSAP and other benefits programs. In these cases, things such as local support, in-kind donations and grant programs can help fill the gap between what the department needs and what it has.

### Utilizing existing resources

Volunteer emergency services departments often operate on tight budgets with limited funds for marketing activities. However, there are existing resources departments can tap into to eliminate or reduce the costs. The NVFC's Make Me A Firefighter campaign's department portal includes a free materials generator that removes the cost of hiring a graphic artist to design campaign materials. The portal also allows departments to create a webpage with details of their volunteer opportunities and a direct contact form, along with other tools and resources for recruitment and retention. Departments can also consider partnering with other departments or associations in the region to collaborate on a campaign, reducing the cost burden for each department. In addition, departments can check with regional and state fire associations to see if they have recruitment materials and resources that the department can utilize in their campaign.

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**Closer look:** Many state fire associations or organizations have recruitment and retention initiatives to help departments in their state recruit new volunteers, including ready-to-use outreach and marketing materials. For instance, the Oregon Fire Recruitment Network is a state-wide group of recruiters who joined together to provide resources and tools to help fire departments in Oregon and beyond recruit and retain firefighters. RecruitNY is an initiative of the Firemen's Association of the State of New York that provides materials departments throughout the state can use year-round or in conjunction with an open house or community event. The Firemen's Association of the State of Pennsylvania offers a recruitment and retention website with resources and tips for local fire departments. The IAFC used a SAFER grant to partner with state associations in Connecticut, Indiana, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia for the Volunteer Workforce Solutions state recruitment campaigns to offer departments turnkey solutions for their recruitment and retention efforts.

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Fire and EMS departments not wishing to pay to print materials can also partner with local businesses or other sources to ask if they would include the department's advertisement on existing materials they send out via print or email. Partnering with external sources also expands the department's reach. Examples of groups that might be willing to include the campaign in their existing newsletter or mailings could include a university, local government agencies, hospital, local high school, church, community service club or recreation center.

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## Content marketing

Content marketing via social media is also highly effective and can be free. Social media is a way for departments to connect with their stakeholders and engage with them daily. The use of high-quality visuals is key for successful online marketing. The fire and emergency services are fortunate to have a library of images the general public is attracted to. Visuals, such as videos and photographs, can tell a story of the many aspects of the department. Images speak to various demographics of potential recruits (gender, age, race), highlight the work being done by the department and show who benefits from the organization's mission.

Social media platforms allow existing stakeholders to help spread messaging through the sharing of posted imagery and messaging. According to Nonprofit Source, 84% of Facebook users share messaging of causes they support. 55% of people who engage with nonprofits on Twitter end up answering a call to action. 75% of Instagram users report taking action by either visiting a website or making a purchase from an advertisement.

A department-sponsored newsletter sent via email, posted on the department website, and available at local libraries, community centers and other places prospective volunteers may be is another way to connect with supporters while marketing department needs. Monthly department newsletters should include upcoming events, blog posts, eye-catching images, news about current volunteers, a sense of urgency for donations and needs, and a call to action for potential volunteer engagement.

## Local support

There are many types of local support a department may seek, from government funding to donations from businesses to direct community fundraising. A more in-depth look at local government funding is provided in Part II.

Volunteer fire and emergency services departments are no strangers to holding pancake breakfasts, spaghetti dinners, raffles and boot drives to raise money. These are all valid fundraising efforts with the added benefit of engaging the community and potentially attracting new recruits along the way. Local businesses or local government might offer community grant programs that can fund small projects or department needs, or departments can ask a business to sponsor an event or a certain item such as a piece of equipment, recruitment signage or T-shirts for department members. While these efforts can keep a department afloat, they typically don't bring in enough money to fund large-ticket items such as gear, training equipment or apparatus. In addition, these efforts require the time and attention of already very busy and possibly overworked volunteers. When seeking local support, departments may be well-served by identifying a nonoperational volunteer who is experienced in grant writing and fundraising for assistance.

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**In action:** Departments can be creative to formulate fundraisers that work in their communities. An article in *The Gazette-Virginian* from Sept. 16, 2020, highlighted the Cluster Springs Volunteer Fire Department's (Alton, Virginia) annual trail ride fundraiser. While the department does get an operational budget from the county, it is not enough to cover all of the department's expenses. The trail ride typically raises over \$10,000 for the department each year. Participants can enjoy the trail ride, entertainment and a fundraiser dinner for \$25 (\$15 for children) or just attend the dinner with entertainment for \$15.

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## In-kind donations

Often the department needs items a business in the community can provide. This could include department T-shirts for their members, a table or canopy for recruitment events, signage for an event or to promote recruitment, food or beverages for department open houses or rehab units, or printing of recruitment materials. At the same time, many local businesses are seeking ways to support their community. Many local businesses will donate, or at least discount, the items needed. Put a request on social media, contact a well-connected local leader or reach out to local businesses directly to see if they will help support the department with in-kind donations.

## Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Grants

The SAFER Grants Program, available through FEMA, was created to provide funding directly to fire departments and volunteer firefighter interest organizations to help them increase or maintain the number of trained, frontline firefighters available in their communities. Departments of all sizes can apply for grants to help with recruitment and retention needs. Grant funds can be used to hire a recruitment and retention coordinator, fund incentives for volunteers such as tuition reimbursement programs or LOSAPs, develop recruitment outreach materials, conduct advertising to attract members to the department, and more. Departments wishing to apply for SAFER funding are encouraged to review the grant guidance documents on FEMA's website beforehand, participate in SAFER workshops offered by FEMA, and collect data about the community and the recruitment/retention need in their local area as they prepare to make the case for their funding needs.

In the SAFER Grant application, applicants are typically asked to describe their current marketing plan or the marketing plan that will be implemented upon funding. Fire departments can leverage their own knowledge, propose to hire a marketing firm or recruitment specialist, or use the free Make Me A Firefighter recruitment campaign resources and tools as a method to market and track efforts.

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**In action:** The Ringing Hill Fire Company (Pottstown, Pennsylvania) received a 4-year SAFER Grant in 2019, and just over a year later they had already brought on 27 new volunteers. The campaign launched with a new website at [JoinRingingHill.org](http://JoinRingingHill.org) which focuses on why residents should join the department and all the volunteer opportunities that are available. In addition, the campaign utilized a variety of awareness methods including media coverage, videos, social media, a recruitment brochure, lawn signs and an event booth display. On the retention side, the grant enabled the department to implement a volunteer shift program, which resulted in better response times for emergency calls.

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Photo courtesy of iStock.

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# Appendix A: Resources

An updated list of these and additional downloadable resources are available at [www.nvfc.org](http://www.nvfc.org).

## Grants and funding

### Assistance to Firefighters Grants

FEMA

Assistance to Firefighters Grants helps fire and EMS departments obtain critically needed equipment, protective gear, emergency vehicles, training and other resources necessary for protecting the public and emergency personnel from fire and related hazards.

### Grants and Funding

NVFC

The compendium of resources includes tips and best practices for applying for grants as well as sources for grant opportunities. Also included are guides for securing sponsorships for junior firefighter programs and health and wellness programs, which can serve as inspiration for securing sponsorships for other initiatives as well.

### Grant Writing Guide

NVFC

This guide is designed to help departments navigate the complexities of applying for federal grants. It includes a brief list of expectations and requirements associated with grant applications as well as a quick overview of select grants.

### Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response grants

FEMA

This grant program provides funding directly to fire departments and volunteer firefighter interest organizations for recruitment and retention efforts to help them increase or maintain the number of trained, front-line firefighters available in their communities.

## Guides and tools

### The Beginners Guide to Working with Elected Officials

ICMA

This blog post covers key tips for developing effective working relationships with elected officials.

### Climate Survey Toolkit

IAFC's Volunteer Workforce Solutions

This toolkit helps departments take the internal temperature of their members and identify areas for strengthening diversity, inclusion, teamwork and leadership to create a more inclusive organization.

### Cost Savings Calculators

NVFC

The NVFC Foundation and VFIS developed the Fire and EMS Cost Savings Calculators for both volunteer fire and EMS departments. These tools allow departments to calculate out how much money they save the community and provide resources for presenting data to the municipalities that fund the department in order to increase community and governmental support.

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## **Directory of Behavioral Health Professionals**

NVFC

Updated with new providers monthly, this directory lists local behavioral health professionals who are ready and equipped to help firefighters, EMS providers, rescue workers, dispatchers and their families.

## **Fire Law Blog**

Curt Varone

This blog looks at legal issues fire departments need to consider and offers tools and templates to help departments establish policies to better protect them from negative impacts and reduce liability.

## **Guide for Creating a Diverse and Inclusive Department**

IAFC-VCOS

This guide offers ways that departments can increase the levels of diversity, inclusiveness and equity in 8 specific areas.

## **Guide to Communicating with Elected Officials**

NVFC

Designed to help members of the fire and emergency service with grassroots advocacy, the guide includes tools on drafting letters and emails, using social media to interact with elected officials, how to set and conduct meetings with elected officials and their staff, and how to develop a public relations strategy.

## **Lavender Ribbon Report**

IAFC-VCOS/NVFC

This guide details the 11 actions firefighters and departments should take to reduce exposure risks and protect personnel from occupationally caused cancer.

## **Managing Volunteer Firefighters for FLSA Compliance: A Guide for Fire Chiefs and Community Leaders**

IAFC

The IAFC published this document in 2006 as a guide for fire chiefs and community leaders to better manage volunteer firefighters for FLSA compliance.

## **National Safety Culture Change Initiative**

IAFC/USFA

This study identifies both positive and negative elements of fire service culture and recommends changes to enhance safety and health in the fire and emergency service.

## **NFPA 1582: *Standard on Comprehensive Occupational Medical Program for Fire Departments***

NFPA

This standard outlines an occupational medical program that will reduce risks and provide for the health, safety and effectiveness of firefighters.

## **Preserving the Tradition of Neighbors Helping Neighbors: Steps Toward Success**

IAFC's Volunteer Workforce Solutions

This white paper highlights ideas, resources and tools intended to provide emergency service organizations with proven retention and recruitment methods to promote a more diverse and inclusive workforce.



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### **Psychologically Healthy Fire Departments: Implementation Toolkit**

NVFC

Having a healthy and engaged workforce creates successful, high-performing departments. This toolkit covers 6 key categories to promote and foster wellbeing among department members along with specific actions that can be taken, special issues to consider, case studies from successful departments and additional resources.

### **Social Media Toolkit**

IAFC

This handbook provides guidance to departments on how to use and navigate social media.

### **Volunteer Fire Service Culture: Essential Strategies for Success**

NVFC

This textbook is designed to train department personnel and leaders about key issues relating to fire service health and safety and how to embrace safe and healthy practices in all areas of fire department operations and culture.

### **What to Expect: A Guide for Family Members of Volunteer Firefighters**

NVFC

This guide helps family members of volunteer firefighters navigate the realities of the volunteer fire service life and provides guidance for keeping family relationships strong.

## **Organizations and programs**

### **Fire Corps**

NVFC

Fire Corps is a national grassroots effort to help fire/EMS departments engage with community members to assist with nonemergency tasks.

### **Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives**

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

The 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives serve as the foundation for fire and EMS departments who have a desire to ensure that their firefighters and EMS providers return home safely after every shift.

### **Make Me a Firefighter Program**

NVFC

Make Me a Firefighter is the first and only national volunteer firefighter and EMS recruitment campaign to help departments reach new members. The campaign features a department portal with resources and tools for implementing a local recruitment campaign as well as a public website to enable potential volunteers to find local opportunities.

### **National Junior Firefighter Program**

NVFC

The National Junior Firefighter Program supports fire and emergency service departments by fostering relationships and engaging youth in learning about and ultimately becoming members of the emergency services.

### **Serve Strong**

NVFC

This program provides firefighters and EMS providers with proven health and safety tools and resources to help reduce exposure risks, reduce heart attack risk, cope with behavioral health issues and engage in safe practices on and off the fireground.

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### **Share the Load Program**

NVFC

This program provides responders with tools, resources and training to proactively address behavioral health issues as well as establish or expand a department behavioral health program.

### **Volunteer Workforce Solutions**

IAFC

This program offers volunteer and combination fire departments turnkey materials to help with recruitment and retention efforts.

## **Policies and procedures**

### **Firefighter Code of Ethics**

National Society of Executive Fire Officers

To preserve the public's trust, this Code of Ethics was developed by a group of fire service leaders and calls on individual firefighters to pledge their support for maintaining the highest level of professionalism and behavior.

### **Joint Anti-Harassment, Bullying, and Discrimination Statement**

Signed by 7 national organizations representing the fire and emergency services, this statement issues a call to action that all fire and emergency service organizations implement an anti-harassment, bullying and discrimination policy that is actively communicated to personnel and actively and consistently enforced. Departments should also adopt a code of conduct or code of ethics that clearly defines expected behaviors among personnel.

### **Managing and Leveraging Workplace Use of Social Media**

Society for Human Resources Management

This article outlines common considerations for the use of social media by employers and their employees.

### **NVFC Position on Firefighter Medical Assessments**

NVFC

This position supports annual medical assessments for all firefighters and identifies options that volunteer departments can consider in developing a firefighter medical assessment program.

### **Reputation Management White Paper**

Cumberland Valley Volunteer Firemen's Association

This white paper looks at key issues that have a negative effect on the public image of the fire service and individual departments and recommends that every department establish a code of conduct or code of ethics that clearly defines expected behaviors of its members.

## **Research**

### **2020 Department Survey on Local Government Support**

NVFC

This report explores the ways in which local government currently supports volunteer fire departments, as well as the types of support volunteer fire departments are seeking from local government.

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### **Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention Formative Research Report**

NVFC

This 2015 report details the results from research conducted as part of the formation of the NVFC's Make Me A Firefighter recruitment campaign.

### **Retention of Internal Stakeholders in the U.S. Volunteer Fire Service**

Dr. Candice McDonald

This 2016 doctoral study/dissertation explores the strategies fire service leaders have used to retain firefighters in the United States.

### **Volunteer Retention Research Report**

NVFC

This 2020 report details the results from research conducted by the NVFC to gain a better understanding of the institutional drivers of why volunteers leave the fire service and what factors may improve retention in a fire department.

## **Training**

### **International Association of Fire Chiefs — Volunteer & Combination Officers Section**

IAFC-VCOS offers a variety of online and in-person training on topics including recruitment, mentoring, leadership and transitioning to a combination department.

### **National Fire Academy**

The NFA provides free training on a vast array of fire and EMS topics delivered at their campus in Emmitsburg (Maryland), online and throughout the nation.

### **National Volunteer Fire Council**

The NVFC Virtual Classroom is home to a wide range of online, on-demand training including volunteer recruitment, retention, leadership, grants/funding, health and safety issues, and other topics that affect recruitment and retention efforts.

### **New York University — School of Fire Engineering**

Find on-demand training on a variety of fire service operational topics.

### **North American Fire Training Directors**

Use the North American Fire Training Directors website to find your state training organization.

### **UL Fire Safety Research Institute Fire Safety Academy**

The UL Fire Safety Research Institute Fire Safety Academy offers free science-based courses for fire service personnel. Topics include fire dynamics, firefighting tactics and firefighter health.



Photo courtesy of iStock.

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# Appendix B: Considerations for Department/Government Support

Information in this appendix courtesy of the Center for Public Safety Management of the ICMA.

## Formation

One of the major challenges faced by many volunteer and combination departments is their underlying authority.

- ❖ Is the department LEGALLY recognized by the city, town, county, or other government?
- ❖ Is the department created by an ordinance? \_\_\_\_\_ (ordinance number)
- ❖ Is the department created or recognized in the city's charter? \_\_\_\_\_ (section)
- ❖ Does the department comply with the ordinance or charter requirements and specifications?
- ❖ How is command selected? How is it replaced or ended (i.e., chief selection)? Can the local government help in establishing job descriptions and advertising for candidates?
- ❖ How does the volunteer agency interact with the municipal government(s) it protects? (Examples: provide staffing to the governmentally recognized agency; contract for full services to the government agency; a department of the government agency)
- ❖ Are buildings and equipment appropriately titled and who holds those titles?
- ❖ Are buildings and equipment properly insured? Can the department be included in the municipality's coverage?
- ❖ To whom do employees belong? Is it documented? If a wrong occurs, who is liable?

## Reporting

Most municipal departments are required to provide annual reports; be subject to audit processes; create mission, vision, values and strategic plans; and present those plans along with achievements.

- ❖ Does the department provide regular reports to the municipal government?
- ❖ Is your volunteer department audited yearly and is that report public? Shared with the municipality? Accepted at a council or board meeting?
- ❖ Are minutes kept for all volunteer meetings and business?
- ❖ Does the department report monthly activity, outcomes, and other information to the governing jurisdiction?
- ❖ Does the department have a strategic plan? Could it be included in the municipality's strategic plan? Or master plan?

- 
- ❖ Can the local government assist the department in creating a master plan? Strategic plan? Reporting template?
  - ❖ Can the municipal government include the department's documents with their reports for consistency, clarity and opportunity to engage with the public?

## Staffing/human resources

One challenge for most volunteer and combination departments is in the area of human resources. Failure to withhold necessary payments or dollars for employees can be catastrophic for departments that violate state and federal laws.

- ❖ Does the municipality have a human resources department?
- ❖ Can the local government assist the volunteer or combination department with human resources?
  - ▶ Background checks.
  - ▶ Withholdings for taxes and other purposes.
  - ▶ Physicals (before hired and annual).
  - ▶ Drug and alcohol screening.
  - ▶ Employee assistance programs.
  - ▶ Workers' compensation issues.
  - ▶ Keeping the employee records (which are required to be kept forever).
  - ▶ Health and life insurance.
  - ▶ Pensions, 401K, etc.
  - ▶ HSAs for medical purposes.
  - ▶ Filing the necessary W-2 statements, withholding and payments to the IRS and state.
  - ▶ Assisting when volunteers or POC must be terminated to ensure legal requirements are met.
  - ▶ Exit interviews.
  - ▶ Annual reviews.
  - ▶ Ensuring training requirements are being met and recording all training taken.

## Legal

When things go right, there usually are not questions. When things go wrong, that's when it is critical to have clarified, documented, and followed standards that are established for good operations.

- ❖ If staff are paid by the volunteer organization and used to fill necessary openings in the department, who carries the workers' compensation? Can the department receive coverage through the municipality?
- ❖ Is there a clear contractual recognition of employees paid on call or paid members?
- ❖ Is there workers' compensation, death and disability, and other insurance for members? Can the municipality assist with getting quotations, bids or coverage?
- ❖ If a municipal employee works for the volunteer fire company, who provides coverage in the event that person is injured? Killed? Disabled? Is that recorded and could the municipality help with ensuring those areas are covered?

- 
- ❖ Who owns the equipment and station?
  - ❖ What happens if the volunteer fire company disbands or becomes insolvent? Is there a documented process for handling disposal of assets?
  - ❖ Is there titular interest in fixed locations and rolling stock by the municipality? What happens if there is an accident; who is liable?

## Operations

Policies, procedures, operating guidelines, rules, and regulations are designed to protect the organization from violations that cause harm as well as set a standard for expectations by the department and its customers — often the local government.

- ❖ Are the department's rules and regulations current? Could the municipality be involved with review or assist with legal review?
- ❖ Does the agency use a provider for policies and procedures such as Lexipol or other national firm? Does it create its own policies and procedures? Are those reviewed by legal? Are those shared with the local government? Is there an opportunity for comment or correction?
- ❖ Does the department regularly review these documents for changes required or conditions that have changed? Is the local government or its attorney involved in the process?
- ❖ If violations occur, who enforces? Is there a step process for discipline (e.g., verbal warning, written notice, time off, termination)? Could the municipality or its human resources department assist to ensure compliance steps are followed?
- ❖ Are violations tracked and reported?
- ❖ Is there a process if command does not enforce these documents and subjects the organization or municipality to legal consequences?

## Maintenance

Stations, rolling stock and PPE are expensive to purchase and require regular inspection and maintenance to ensure they work when required.

- ❖ Could the local government assist with inspections of fixed assets (buildings)? Could it ensure proper insurance coverage exists?
- ❖ Could local government assist with regular maintenance such as lawn mowing, painting, lighting, etc.?
- ❖ Could the local government assist with oil changes and maintenance tracking on rolling stock? Hand tools (chainsaws, etc.)?
- ❖ Are regular inspections made of all assets? Are these recorded? Does the local government have a tracking mechanism or software?
- ❖ Are regular and recommended inspections made of hose? Nozzles? Pump tests? Ladders? Could the local government perform these or train staff to assist?

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## Planning

One of the challenges for smaller agencies is planning for the future. Large rolling stock can cost anywhere from \$650,000 for an engine to \$1.5 million for a ladder.

- ❖ Can the local government assist with developing 1-5-10-20-year strategic equipment replacement plans?
- ❖ Could these items be included in the municipal capital improvement plan that is approved by the council or board with the funding identified?
- ❖ Can the municipality assist with writing grants for the department? Tracking grant expenses and purchases? Assist with filing necessary reports? Keeping the grant records for the required time period (normally 7 years but some programs have longer retention)?
- ❖ Is the department incorporated into the municipality's emergency plans? Are roles identified? Exercised?
- ❖ Is mutual aid automatic or requested? Is it memorialized in a document? Should the local government also be a signatory? Should the board or council approve of the action?
- ❖ Is the municipality part of Emergency Management Assistance Compact? Is the department included? Who ensures compliance, reimbursement and requests?

## Social media

Newspapers, radio and, for some, television, are becoming less significant media to communicate with on a regular basis.

- ❖ Does the department have a social media policy? Is it enforced?
- ❖ Could the local government assist by creating Facebook, Twitter, and other social media pages for the department and regularly ensuring updates?
- ❖ If violations occur (posting victim pictures or releasing prohibited health information), who is responsible? Could the local government assist in prescreening posts?
- ❖ If questions or comments appear, who is responsible for a response? For deletion?

## Training

Volunteer and combination departments often struggle to meet training requirements of ISO and other standard-setting bodies.

- ❖ Can the local government provide a training area?
- ❖ Can the local government's public works, police, electrical, water, and sewer departments coordinate training with the fire department? Can they provide props such as manholes, pipes, trenches, tanks, etc.?
- ❖ Does the local government work with the department to plan, create, and exercise?
- ❖ Are resources shared when needed (e.g., backhoes or front-end loaders that a department of public works might have)?
- ❖ Can the local government help with signage, barricades and other resources when the fire department is engaged on scenes? Do they train together and know what each has to contribute?



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## Communications

Many volunteer and combination departments lack sufficient resources for modern communication equipment.

- ❖ Can the local government provide a computer(s) for use by the department?
- ❖ Can the local government provide IT support?
- ❖ Can the local government apply for grants for radios (portable and mobile)?
- ❖ Does the local government have the ability to tax for radio equipment and upgrades?  
Can they be interoperable with police and other municipal agencies?
- ❖ Does the local government have server capacity to store records for the department?
- ❖ Can the local government provide fiber-optic capacity for rapid transfer of information?
- ❖ Can the local government provide classes and training for the department on software, hardware, and new technology as well as skill building (Excel, Word, etc.)?



Photo courtesy of iStock.

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# Appendix C: Sample Department Application

Information in this appendix courtesy of Chelan County (Washington) Fire District #1.

## Volunteer Application Packet



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## Fire Department Code of Conduct

Thank you for expressing interest in our fire department. Before completing the attached application, carefully review the Code of Conduct. The district operates and manages the department as a customer service business. As a volunteer, resident, or paid staff, you will be expected to conduct yourself in a manner that recognizes that we provide members of this community with excellent emergency service. It is paramount that as a member of this organization, you will deliver this service in a professional, honest, courteous, and timely manner. Failure to meet these standards will result in being asked to resign.

- ❖ **Honesty and integrity.** It is understood that honesty and integrity begin with full disclosure of personal information on the application. This includes full disclosure of work-related experience, past supervisors, and qualifying training. If a background check proves that false information has been provided, you will be informed not to apply or pursue membership with the Fire Department now or in the future.
- ❖ **Respecting community members.** Volunteering with the department by its very nature means providing a service to our citizens within the district. In most cases, services are provided on private property, and as a result, it must be ensured that our personnel are honest, respectful, and professional and interact well with community members.
- ❖ **Working in teams.** Most of the services provided are performed in teams. It is critical that team members work harmoniously under the direction of an officer. It is believed that team results are greater than individual achievement.
- ❖ **Ability to follow command.** Emergency incidents can be stressful and traumatic. The public expects its emergency service workers to remain calm, deliver a professional service, and provide comfort to those who require it. You may not agree with directions being given or you might do the task differently, but you will be expected to follow orders in a timely and safe manner without delay, unless it threatens your life directly.
- ❖ **Chain of command (as practical).** Within the organization, there is a chain of command process followed. The chain of command process starts by reporting to the station Captain as the first step to resolving problems or conflicts. If the station Captain is unable to resolve the issue in a timely manner, then the next step in resolving problems or conflicts is reporting to the Battalion Chief, who will expect you to provide specific details including that the initial report was discussed with the station Captain. If the Battalion Chief cannot resolve the problem or conflict, the issue will be reported to the Deputy Chief. If the issue is reported to the Deputy Chief, the Deputy Chief or Fire Chief shall require all involved parties to provide written statements of fact, including statements by witnesses. The Fire Chief will be the final authority.
- ❖ **Rumors, hearsay.** These two critical issues can damage an organization's image and/or morale. A member who starts, carries, or promotes rumors or hearsay will be asked to resign if facts prove the member is responsible for initiating the rumors or hearsay.

- 
- ⦿ **Morale, esprit de corps.** You have obviously chosen our fire department for a reason. We hope it is because you have witnessed our pride and commitment towards our organization. We do not try to duplicate what other departments do, yet we strive to adopt industry standards while maintaining our uniqueness. If you can't support our organization and its mission, we ask that you do not apply.
  - ⦿ **Discrimination policy.** Compliance is required with Discrimination Policies that are on file.
  - ⦿ **Probationary period.** Once your application and background check have been verified and cleared, you will start a one-year probationary period. During this period, you will be evaluated on your conduct, participation in all aspects of our organization, and how well you successfully work in a team setting. If these standards are not met, you will be asked to resign.

I \_\_\_\_\_ (signature) have read, fully understand, and support the Code of Conduct. I further acknowledge that I may be asked to resign if I do not meet the Organization's Policies, Procedures, Mission, or Code of Conduct.

Witness \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**YOU WILL ALSO NEED TO PROVIDE:** Three-year Driver's Abstract from the Washington State Department of Licensing (there is a \$13.00 fee). No appointment is necessary. The office is located at 325 N. Chelan Avenue, Wenatchee (phone: 509-662-5451). Or, you can also go online for the abstract at: <http://www.dol.wa.gov/driverslicense/requestyourrecord.html>

Contact Deputy Chief Rick McBride with any questions or to submit an application.  
Deputy Chief Rick McBride, Volunteer and Resident Coordinator  
731 N. Wenatchee Avenue, P.O. Box 2106, Wenatchee, WA 98801  
Phone: 509-662-4734  
Email: [rmcbride@chelancountyfire.com](mailto:rmcbride@chelancountyfire.com)

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## Fire Department Volunteer Application

Application Date \_\_\_\_\_

What Volunteer opportunity is of interest to you?

Combat Firefighter  Resident Firefighter  Support  EMS

Name	
Address	
Phone Number	
Date of Birth	
Email	

1. How long have you resided at the above address? Years/Months \_\_\_\_\_.
2. How long have you lived in Washington State? Years/Months \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Is there any additional information about a change in your name, or use of an assumed name or nickname necessary to enable a check on your eligibility for membership?  
Yes  If yes, please provide details on the additional information page.  
No
4. Do you have a physical condition which might limit the fire service tasks you perform?  
Yes  If yes, please explain \_\_\_\_\_.  
No
5. Have you ever been convicted of or found guilty of a felony, misdemeanor, insurance fraud, arson, alcohol-related vehicle or traffic offense, or pleaded guilty to a reduction of one of these offenses?  
Yes  If yes, please provide details on the additional information page.  
No
6. Do you have a valid Washington State Driver's License?  
Yes  Driver's License Number \_\_\_\_\_ Expiration Date \_\_\_\_\_.  
No
7. Have you ever been a member of the US Armed Forces?  
Yes   
No   
If yes, did you receive an honorable discharge? Yes  No   
If No, please give a brief description.  
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. Do you have previous emergency services experience?

Yes  If yes, please list below. Note: Please indicate Fire, Rescue, EMS, or HazMat experience and your reason for leaving. Use additional information page if needed.

No

Dates	Department

9. Do you have a valid first aid card, first responder or EMT certification?

Yes  If yes, please list below.

No

Type	Expiration Date

10. Washington State regulations require that you pass a physical examination to be a member of this department. The department's designated physician will provide you with a free medical examination. Will you be willing to undergo a free medical examination?

Yes

No

**Employment:** List your employment for the last five years. We will conduct a background check on your past employment history. Please list, starting with your current employer, immediate supervisor, and contact number.

Years	Business / Department	Job Title	Supervisor	Contact Phone

**References:** List the names of three persons other than former employers and relatives who have knowledge of your character, experience, or ability.

Name	Address	Relationship	Phone and Email

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### Emergency Contact Information

<b>Name</b>	
<b>Relationship</b>	
<b>Address</b>	
<b>Phone Number</b>	



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# Appendix D: Sample Exit Survey

Information in this appendix courtesy of NVFC.

Departments may use or modify any of the suggested questions below to capture information on why volunteers are leaving. There are numerous no-cost or low-cost survey platforms available such as Survey Monkey, Type Form, Google forms, Wufoo, and others.

## Introduction:

The [DEPARTMENT NAME] is committed to our many volunteers. This Exit Survey provides us with valuable information to identify ways in which the volunteer experience and environment can be improved.

This survey is confidential, and the results will be presented in a manner which protects anonymity and confidentiality. We appreciate your service, and we are thankful for your willingness to complete this survey to enhance our department's operations.

### 1. Age

- 16-19
- 20-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60 and over

### 2. Gender

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please specify)

### 3. Race/Ethnicity

- Caucasian
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Other
- Prefer not to say

### 4. In what capacity were you a volunteer?

- Fire suppression only
- Emergency medical only
- Support/administrative only
- Fire and emergency medical
- Other (please specify)

- 
5. How long did you volunteer?
- ⓧ Less than 1 year
  - ⓧ 1-3 years
  - ⓧ 4-6 years
  - ⓧ 7-10 years
  - ⓧ 11-15 years
  - ⓧ 16-20 years
  - ⓧ 21-29 years
  - ⓧ 30-39 years
  - ⓧ 40-49 years
  - ⓧ 50+ years
6. How long did you consider leaving the department?
- ⓧ Less than 2 months
  - ⓧ 2-6 months
  - ⓧ 7-12 months
  - ⓧ More than 1 year
7. Why did you initially decide to volunteer? Please check all that apply.
- ⓧ Help my community
  - ⓧ Friend/family connection
  - ⓧ Learn new skills
  - ⓧ Career development
  - ⓧ Meet new people
  - ⓧ Incentives associated with volunteering (tax relief, affordable housing programs, tuition reimbursement, etc.)
  - ⓧ Other (please describe)
8. What factors influenced your decision to leave? Please check all that apply.
- ⓧ Relocation/moved out of area
  - ⓧ Poor leadership
  - ⓧ Career or job demands
  - ⓧ Commute
  - ⓧ Training requirements too stringent
  - ⓧ Attitude of existing personnel to newcomers
  - ⓧ Lack of support from existing members/leadership
  - ⓧ Issues with other members
  - ⓧ Too many cliques
  - ⓧ Uncomfortable atmosphere/environment
  - ⓧ Concerns about health/safety risks
  - ⓧ Lack of call volume/excitement
  - ⓧ Family circumstances
  - ⓧ Accepted career fire/EMS position
  - ⓧ Retirement
  - ⓧ It was not my decision to leave (i.e., termination or forced resignation)
  - ⓧ Other (please specify)

---

9. The training opportunities offered by my department/organization:  
**Choice Selection: Never, seldom, sometimes, most of the time, always, N/A**

- Were well organized
- Were relevant to my job/volunteer functions
- Met my expectations
- Were appropriate for volunteer time constraints
- Followed an acceptable standard
- Were complemented by station training/drills
- Comments:

10. On incident scenes, emergency operations:  
**Choice Selection: Never, seldom, sometimes, most of the time, always, N/A**

- Were safe
- Were competently managed
- Followed our training
- Followed standards (IMS, ICS, etc.)
- Followed operating guidelines and policies
- Had sufficient personnel to function safely and effectively
- Were reviewed post-incident to identify areas of improvement
- Comments:

11. Leadership:  
**Choice Selection: Never, seldom, sometimes, most of the time, always, N/A**

- Made safety a top priority
- Communicated policies, guidelines, and practices effectively
- Followed operating guidelines and policies
- Made me feel part of the organization
- Respected my personal obligations and time
- Provided recognition for a job well done
- Resolved complaints and problems promptly and efficiently
- Valued feedback and input from the team
- Comments:

12. Overall, leadership was:

- Poor
- Fair
- Good
- Excellent

13. What did you enjoy most about your volunteer experience? (open-ended)

14. What did you enjoy least about your volunteer experience? (open-ended)

---

15. What factors would have encouraged you to stay? Please check all that apply.

- A personal invitation/request to stay by leadership
- Improved leadership
- Tuition reimbursement
- Retirement benefit
- Flexible training options (option for online training, flexible training schedule, etc.)
- Flexible duty shifts
- Tax relief
- Affordable housing program
- More support from family
- A more positive and inclusive department culture
- Other (please specify)

16. Do you plan to volunteer with a fire, rescue or EMS organization again in the future?

- Yes
- No
- Undecided

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# Appendix E: Sample Stay Survey

Information in this appendix courtesy of the NVFC.

Departments may use or modify any of the suggested questions below to capture information on what is working well in the department, as well as areas of frustration. It is recommended that this survey be conducted annually. There are numerous no-cost or low-cost survey platforms available such as Survey Monkey, Type Form, Google forms, Wufoo, and others.

## Introduction:

The [DEPARTMENT NAME] is committed to our many volunteers. This Stay Survey provides us with valuable information to identify ways in which we can better support our staff and crews.

This survey is confidential and results will be presented in a manner which protects confidentiality. We appreciate your service, and we are thankful for your willingness to complete this survey to enhance our department's operations.

1. Why did you initially decide to volunteer? Please check all that apply.
  - ☑ Help my community
  - ☑ Friend/family connection
  - ☑ Learn new skills
  - ☑ Career development
  - ☑ Meet new people
  - ☑ Incentives associated with volunteering (tax relief, affordable housing programs, tuition reimbursement, etc.)
  - ☑ Other (please describe)
  
2. Why do you volunteer today? Please check all that apply.
  - ☑ Help my community
  - ☑ Friend/family connection
  - ☑ Learn new skills
  - ☑ Career development
  - ☑ Meet new people
  - ☑ Incentives associated with volunteering (tax relief, affordable housing programs, tuition reimbursement, etc.)
  - ☑ Other (please describe)
  
3. The training opportunities offered by my department/organization:  
**Choice Selection: Never, seldom, sometimes, most of the time, always, N/A**
  - ☑ Are well organized
  - ☑ Are relevant to my job/volunteer functions
  - ☑ Meet my expectations
  - ☑ Are appropriate for volunteer time constraints
  - ☑ Follow an acceptable standard
  - ☑ Comments:

- 
4. Describe your thoughts regarding the tangible benefits offered by the department/organization (PSOB, awards, tax relief, childcare, etc.):
    - ⓧ I volunteer primarily because of the benefits I receive.
    - ⓧ I appreciate them, but they are not the primary reason I volunteer.
    - ⓧ They are unnecessary.
    - ⓧ I'm not familiar with the benefits I receive as a volunteer.
  5. Are there additional benefits you would like to see department/organization offer? Please describe:
  6. On incident scenes, emergency operations:  
**Choice Selection: Never, seldom, sometimes, most of the time, always, N/A**
    - ⓧ Are safe
    - ⓧ Are competently managed
    - ⓧ Follow our training
    - ⓧ Follow standards (IMS, ICS, etc.)
    - ⓧ Follow operating guidelines and policies
    - ⓧ Have sufficient personnel to function safely and effectively
    - ⓧ Are reviewed post-incident to identify areas of improvement
    - ⓧ Comments:
  7. Leadership:  
**Choice Selection: Never, seldom, sometimes, most of the time, always, N/A**
    - ⓧ Makes safety a top priority
    - ⓧ Communicates policies, guidelines, and practices effectively
    - ⓧ Follows operating guidelines and policies
    - ⓧ Makes me feel part of the organization
    - ⓧ Respects my personal obligations and time
    - ⓧ Provides recognition for a job well done
    - ⓧ Resolves complaints and problems promptly and efficiently
    - ⓧ Values feedback and input from the team
    - ⓧ Comments:
  8. Think of the best officer you ever worked with. What is an attribute of that person that motivated others? (open-ended)
  9. What makes you proud about being a member of this department? (open-ended)
  10. What do you like least about volunteering with this department? (open-ended)
  11. What might tempt you to leave? Please check all that apply.
    - ⓧ Possible relocation/moving out of area
    - ⓧ Poor leadership
    - ⓧ Career or job demands
    - ⓧ Commute
    - ⓧ Training requirements too stringent
    - ⓧ Attitude of existing personnel to newcomers
    - ⓧ Lack of support from existing members/leadership
    - ⓧ Issues with other members

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- Too many cliques
  - Uncomfortable atmosphere/environment
  - Concerns about health/safety risks
  - Lack of call volume/excitement
  - Family circumstances
  - Lack of support from family
  - Transition to career fire/EMS position
  - Retirement
  - Other (please specify)

12. What would improve your experience with the department? (open-ended)

13. If you'd like us to follow up with you specifically regarding this survey, please include your contact information here. (optional)

- Name
- Phone
- Email



Google+

1

Facebook

Twitter



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# Appendix F: Sample Social Media Policies

## Sample 1

Information in this sample is courtesy of the West Barnstable (Massachusetts) Fire District (WBFD), based on a template provided by the Fire Law Group. Find the full template at <https://www.firelawblog.com/links/>.

The following policy and procedures shall apply to the use of social media by WBFD members:

1. **Purpose:** The purpose of this policy is to provide guidance to members of the WBFD to clarify the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate use of social media by fire department personnel. Nothing in these rules is intended to restrict a member's right to discuss, as a private citizen, matters of public concern, nor to restrict their right to engage in concerted activity with coworkers.
2. **Social media is:** Social media means the use of the spoken or written word, or the use of images, on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Myspace, blogs, websites, and other similar electronic social gathering/networking places or news sites. For purposes of this policy, traditional print media, television, and radio (newspapers, for example, because of the close link between electronic and print media) are social media. Engaging in social media and social networking is a form of speech.
3. **Avoid being a spokesperson:** WBFD members have an affirmative obligation to avoid being perceived as a spokesperson for the department. Members shall at all times exercise diligence to avoid holding themselves out as spokespeople for the department except when duly authorized. The use of titles, department logos and department images that would give a reasonable person the impression that the member is a spokesperson for the department is prohibited.
4. **Disruption prohibited:** No member, while speaking as a private citizen on a matter of public concern regarding the fire department, shall speak in such a way as to cause actual harm or disruption to the operations of the fire department.
5. **Being a spokesperson:** Members may speak on a matter of public concern as a spokesperson for the department only with permission through the chain of command.
6. **Not of public concern:** Members are prohibited from publicly discussing WBFD matters that are not of public concern, unless doing so is with other members of the department (or their representatives) and is for the purpose of engaging in concerted activities relative to workplace issues.
7. **Lies:** Members shall not engage in speech that is false, deceptive, libelous, slanderous, misleading, or causes harm to others, including speech that constitutes hate speech or harassment.
8. **Confidential matters:** Members shall not discuss protected or confidential matters including matters under investigation, patient/victim information and personnel matters that are protected from disclosure by law.

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9. **Prohibited:** Members may not use department-owned digital images, audio, or video without department approval. Members are prohibited from engaging in sexually explicit or illegal activities, unlawful activities, or conduct that may bring discredit upon the department or other members of the department.
  10. **Social media code of conduct:** When engaging in social networking or social media activities, all personnel will maintain a level of professionalism in both on-duty and off-duty conduct that is consistent with the honorable mission and excellent reputation of our department. The publication of any statement, comment, imagery, or other information through any medium of communication, indicated herein, that is potentially adverse to the operation, morale, or efficiency of the department is prohibited and will be deemed a violation of this policy.
  11. **Social media at the FD:** Members will not participate in social networking or social media while identifiable as a member of the Wbfd (except official spokespersons). For instance, participating in a video chat in uniform (full or partial), with Wbfd apparatus in the background or with the Wbfd logo in the background is prohibited.

## Sample 2

Information in this sample courtesy of NVFC.

As an employee or board member of the NVFC, your online actions and presence is important, even if you don't manage the organization's social media channels. Below are some guidelines to remember to protect the reputation of the NVFC and yourself.

### Using social media in a personal capacity

#### **You are responsible for your actions.**

While the NVFC encourages employees and board members to maintain individual social media accounts if they choose, refrain from posting anything that could ultimately harm the NVFC's reputation. Remember to exercise sound judgment and common sense online.

#### **Be aware when mixing work with your personal life.**

You are free to identify yourself as an NVFC employee or board member in your individual social media profiles and to share NVFC content to your social media pages, but refrain from any language that indicates you are speaking for the NVFC through your personal social media accounts. Only official NVFC social media accounts can speak for the organization.

#### **Remember that as an employee or board member, the content you post can reflect on the organization.**

The NVFC respects the free speech rights of all its employees and board members, but remember that supervisors, colleagues, and the public often have access to the online content you post. Keep this in mind when sharing or posting information or content that can be seen by more than just family or friends, and remember that information or content initially intended for just family and friends can be easily passed on.

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### **Let the designated employees respond to negative content.**

If you come across negative or disparaging posts or comments about the NVFC or any of its employees or representatives, avoid the temptation to react yourself. Pass the post(s) or comment(s) on to the NVFC communications team so they can determine the best course of action.

### **Be a scout for content.**

Keep an eye out for content the NVFC could share or promote on social media. If you hear or watch something on the news or read something online that could be useful and/or interesting to the NVFC's members and followers, please send it to the communications team for possible posting on the NVFC's social media pages.

### **Using social media in an official capacity.**

Only designated staff members can post content coming from the NVFC's official social media accounts. When posting information to the NVFC's social media channels, you are acting as a representative of the organization. There are certain standards and policies that anyone who manages the NVFC's social media presence should follow.

### **Be mindful that you represent the organization.**

When interacting with the public through social media, be respectful and accepting of all individuals, races, religions, and cultures. How you conduct yourself in these situations reflects on the entire NVFC.

### **Make sure content remains respectful and follows all privacy laws.**

Don't post any content that is or would appear disrespectful to the subject or that violates any privacy or HIPAA laws. For instance, if posting an item from an emergency scene, focus on the work of the firefighters and do not show any identifying photo or video of the victim or any images that would seemingly disrespect the severity of the situation.

### **Do not tolerate spam or offensive content.**

The NVFC does not tolerate content posted to our social media channels that we deem offensive or divisive in nature or that can be categorized as spam. We reserve the right to delete such posts or comments and ban users from our channels if necessary.

### **Be respectful and helpful when responding to criticism or complaints.**

Unless the post is offensive, divisive, or spam, be respectful of the opinions expressed by others on the NVFC's social media channels and try to be helpful. Your response to criticisms against the organization should be informative and professional. Consider using the following format:

- ❖ Let them know you heard the complaint: "We're sorry to hear..." or "We're sorry that you feel..."
- ❖ Inform: Provide them with as much relevant information as you can to respond to their comment or question.
- ❖ Offer: "If you have any further questions or concerns, please email..." or "If you need further information, check out this link..."

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Sometimes it is better to address the comment in a direct message to the individual who made the complaint rather than in a public-facing area such as the comments section. If you are unsure of how to respond or the best method for response, consult with the Chief of Communications.

**Know when to disengage.**

If you have responded to someone's complaint or criticism to the best of your abilities yet they continue to leave comments or send messages, do not engage further. It may be appropriate to hide or delete their comments or posts or ban the user from the NVFC's social media channels.

**Best practices for social media**

**Respond to all messages, comments and mentions promptly.**

Make sure you are responding to every message, comment, and mention that needs a response in at most one business day. Although not every comment or mention warrants a response, it may be appropriate to like or share that content to the organization's channels.

**Do not post the same content across all channels.**

Try to refrain from posting the same content at the same time across all the NVFC's channels. Instead, mix it up by changing the wording and date that content is posted (e.g., post to Twitter on Monday and Facebook on Wednesday). Some content might not be relevant for followers on a specific channel and therefore does not need to be posted there. Also make sure the content is worded appropriately for the platform, such as using relevant hashtags for Twitter posts.

**Relax the wording.**

The wording of social media posts does not need to be as formal as you would find in a press release. Keep it professional, but feel free to use a more relaxed tone, utilize conjunctions, and shorten words (especially on Twitter, where this is sometimes a necessity).

**Use images and videos as much as possible.**

Research shows that posts with images or videos generate more engagement than those without, so use them whenever possible. Sometimes a link preview includes an image.

**Research hashtags beforehand.**

This ensures that the NVFC is not left out of conversations occurring on social media. It also prevents embarrassing or controversial misuse of hashtags.

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# Appendix G: Sample Media Policy

Information in this appendix courtesy of the Wbfd.

**Media relations:** The Wbfd is routinely called to incidents that are newsworthy. The Wbfd endeavors to have a favorable relationship with the media and will make reasonable efforts to develop media contacts and a favorable relationship. Staff may be asked by the media to answer questions or give an opinion on a topic or an incident. Wbfd staff should follow the following procedures and guidance when responding to or interacting with the media:

- A. Do not publicize or release any information that may be construed as confidential to any source.
- B. Refrain from saying "No Comment." This could end up as the lead on the evening news and implies a cover-up or wrongdoing.
- C. Do not tell media personnel anything "off the record."
- D. Wbfd staff may provide the following basic information to the media, however, whenever reasonably possible (don't send it to voicemail of someone who's not around) staff should refer the request to the chief, deputy chief, shift commander or incident commander (in the overwhelming number of situations, the highest-ranking person available should handle the request):
  - a. Incident number
  - b. Time of incident
  - c. Location of incident
  - d. Nature of incident. For EMS calls, the nature of the incident is "emergency medical call." The precise nature of the injury or illness cannot be provided without additional authorization. In the event of an MCI, the fact that an MCI was declared and the number of patients may be provided.
  - e. Receiving hospital (and if transport was by ambulance or Medflight)
  - f. Number/type of apparatus and firefighters that responded (other participating fire and police agencies may be listed)
  - g. In the event of fires, hazmat, and other incidents not involving patients, a brief statement of the incident, similar to a 360 size-up, may be provided.
  - h. If additional information is requested, the media should be directed to the chief, deputy chief, shift commander, or incident commander.
  - i. Minimize comments regarding any incident we go to outside of the WB Fire District to the fact that we went to the incident, what units were sent, and the time they were sent (if requested).

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- E. Wbfd staff may not:
    - a. Provide any information regarding a patient, including assessment of injuries and treatment provided;
    - b. Any information prejudicial to law enforcement or investigations;
    - c. Information not based upon facts; or
    - d. Information that might be an invasion of privacy, such as a suicide, AIDS, HIV status, overdose, psychiatric, etc. In the case of death, only the medical examiner may give the cause.
  - F. When an incident or event occurs that the Wbfd feels will generate positive media coverage or provide relevant information to the community, the chief or deputy chief will contact the media, and the information will be placed on the Wbfd Facebook page and/or website.
  - G. Wbfd staff should provide information about community events and meetings as requested.
  - H. Attached as Exhibit B to these policies is a media statement template.
  - I. All staff should review and be familiar with the policies for requesting information (see the forms on the wall outside of the Administrative Office and the fire district website): <http://westbarnstablefiredistrict.com/public-records-request-forms/>.

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# Appendix H: Sample Nondiscrimination Statements

## Sample 1

In principle and in practice, [DEPARTMENT NAME] is committed to cultivating a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

As a premier organization representing a broad and diverse community, we must take positive steps to promote diversity and inclusion by eliminating any vestiges of discrimination or unequal treatment including, but not limited to, on a basis of race, color, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, national origin, age, disability status, citizenship, genetic information, protected veteran status, or any other legally protected characteristic. To allow such discrimination or unequal treatment to persist, whether through active or passive facilitation, weakens our abilities to respond to our varied customer base and to act effectively as an organization.

All members of [DEPARTMENT NAME] have a responsibility to treat others with dignity and respect, participate in respectful communication, cooperate with others, and allow for all groups and member perspectives to be represented. Members are expected to exhibit conduct that reflects this commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion while on-duty, at department functions, at department-sponsored events, or while representing the department in any capacity.

Any member found to have exhibited inappropriate conduct or behavior may be subject to disciplinary actions. Members who believe they have been subject to conduct or behavior that conflicts with the department's diversity, equity, and inclusion policy should seek assistance from an officer, chief, or other designated party.

## Sample 2

Information in this sample courtesy of Wbfd.

**All members are equal:** All members of the Wbfd are equal and have an equal voice in the department. Once a person is appointed to the department, he or she is a full member. No member should feel he or she is prohibited in presenting ideas or participating in policy discussions because of their lack of seniority. All members have an equal opportunity to participate. New members are as equal as veterans. (Except where required by law) PPE, training opportunities, shift coverage, participation in committees or events, response to incidents, and other activities shall not be provided or withheld on the basis of seniority.

The Wbfd will not discriminate against personnel on the basis of pregnancy or a condition related to pregnancy.

**Nondiscrimination:** In accordance with requirements of federal and state anti-discrimination statutes, no person shall discriminate on the grounds of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, age, national origin, ancestry, or disability in any aspect of the provisions of ambulance or EMS first response service or in employment practices.

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**No Retaliation:** Retaliation by members of the department against anyone for the filing of a complaint, for taking actions to prevent unsafe situations, for taking actions to ensure compliance with the law or department policy, or any other lawful or ethical action is unacceptable behavior. Retaliation is a serious breach of fire district policy and may subject individuals to disciplinary action (including termination) and/or criminal prosecution.



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# Acronyms

<b>A&amp;H</b>	Accident & Health
<b>A&amp;S</b>	Accident & Sickness
<b>CEU</b>	continuing education unit
<b>DOL</b>	Department of Labor
<b>EMS</b>	emergency medical services
<b>EMT</b>	emergency medical technician
<b>EAP</b>	Employee Assistance Program
<b>EDW</b>	Enterprise Data Warehouse
<b>FLSA</b>	Fair Labor Standards Act
<b>FEMA</b>	Federal Emergency Management Agency
<b>HIPAA</b>	Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act
<b>IAFC-VCOS</b>	International Association of Fire Chiefs — Volunteer & Combination Officers Section
<b>IAFC</b>	International Association of Fire Chiefs
<b>ICMA</b>	International City/County Management Association
<b>IT</b>	information technology
<b>LOSAP</b>	Length of Service Award Program
<b>NFA</b>	National Fire Academy
<b>NFDC</b>	National Fire Data Center
<b>NFIRS</b>	National Fire Incident Reporting System
<b>NFPA</b>	National Fire Protection Association
<b>NLC</b>	National League of Cities
<b>NVFC</b>	National Volunteer Fire Council
<b>OSHA</b>	Occupational Safety and Health Administration
<b>OSFA</b>	Oklahoma State Firefighters Association
<b>PIO</b>	public information officer
<b>PPE</b>	personal protective equipment
<b>PTSD</b>	post-traumatic stress disorder
<b>POV</b>	privately owned vehicle

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<b>SAFER</b>	Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response
<b>UL</b>	Underwriters Laboratories
<b>USFA</b>	U.S. Fire Administration
<b>WBFD</b>	West Barnstable (Massachusetts) Fire District





U.S. Fire Administration  
Working for a fire-safe America

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