

**RETENTION OF VOLUNTEER FIRE AND RESCUE PERSONNEL FOR THE  
EAGLE RIVER FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT**

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

BY: W. Mikel Kerst  
Eagle River Fire Protection District  
Avon, Colorado

An applied research project submitted to the National Fire Academy  
As part of the Executive Fire Officer Program

September 2001

## ABSTRACT

After more than a decade of aggressive education and action aimed at increasing the strength of the nation's volunteer fire and rescue force, retention of volunteer personnel continues to be an issue of concern for today's volunteer leadership. The problem is that this organization does not know what motivates a volunteer to want to join and remain with the fire department, and needs to identify the pertinent factors involving retention. Purpose of this applied research project is to develop a plan for recruiting and retaining the volunteer firefighter for the Eagle River Fire Protection District, and identify the factors that may motivate a volunteer to quit.

Research method used for this was descriptive. Subjects were 50 volunteer firefighters from Eagle county volunteer fire departments. Technique used for collecting the data was surveyed both verbal and written.

Research questions were:

- What is the benefit of having volunteers in the organization?
- What factors influence volunteer's decisions to join?
- What factors identify retention of volunteers?
- What factors influence volunteers to quit?

Procedure that was used was a survey of firefighters from Eagle county volunteer fire departments. Survey was given during a regular meeting of the fire departments, as well as interviews of volunteers during training time. Results were then put into a program and statistically examined for data pertaining to the research questions. Data collected indicated that the most important factors overall motivating a volunteer to join were, contributing to the community, benefits, excitement, motivating a volunteer to join,

factors motivating a volunteer to quit were, too much time, loss of interest, and personal conflict. Length of service also illustrated patterns for positive and negative factors.

Recommendations were to enhance and build upon the positive factors. The organization also needs to identify pertinent areas for improvement of negative factors.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

ABSTRACT .....	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	5
BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE.....	6
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
PROCEDURES.....	11
RESULTS.....	14
DISCUSSION.....	29
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	32
REFERENCES.....	35
APPENDIX A.....	36
APPENDIX B.....	39

## INTRODUCTION

The problem is that the Eagle River Fire Protection District does not know what motivates a volunteer to want to join and remain a volunteer and needs to identify the pertinent factors involved in retention.

The purpose of the applied research project is to develop a plan for joining and retaining the volunteer firefighter for the Eagle River Fire Protection District and identify the factors that may motivate a volunteer to quit.

The research method that was used for this applied research project was descriptive. The subjects of the research shall be 50 volunteer firefighters from Eagle county volunteer fire departments. This was 82% of the total members of the county fire departments. Technique used for collecting the data was survey both verbal and written.

The research questions were:

- What is the benefit of having volunteers in the organization?
- What factors influence volunteer's decisions to join?
- What factors identify retention of volunteers?
- What factors influence volunteers to quit?

The outcome of this research paper is to gain better retention and understanding of volunteers in the organization.

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The significance of the problem is that throughout the United States the job of recruiting and retaining the volunteer firefighter has become more and more difficult. The nation wide trend is important to recognize and to ensure that the problem is dealt with in the Eagle River Fire Protection District. The Eagle River Fire Protection District is experiencing part of this problem although it has not yet begun to affect the ability of service. The recruitment for the Eagle River Fire Protection District has become more difficult to accomplish. This applied research project will enable the fire department to define and implement a revised recruitment and retention strategy that will ensure the survival of the volunteer fire service in the Eagle River Fire Protection District.

Eagle River Fire Protection covers 65 square miles of response area. The fire department is 70 members strong. This consisting of 35 fulltime and 35 part-time members. It is a resort community with a majority of the income coming from the tourist in the area. During the peak season the department will serve a population of over 40,000 people.

The new strategy will be developed, based upon the surveys from existing volunteer firefighters. Hopefully this strategy could be effective for the next 5 years with updates and revisions as the social and economic climates change. With the idea of having a specific plan for recruitment and retention is not new, however it is new to the Eagle River Fire Protection District. This will allow for a more systematic approach to membership problems and will provide guidance for the Eagle River Fire Protection

District leadership on which factors need to be protected and expanded upon. This approach should make recruiting more attractive to prospective volunteers.

On the surface it may seem that the answer would be to replace volunteers with paid staff. However, this option in many cases is economically unfeasible, and in the case of Eagle River Fire Protection District, could possibly raise the fire protection budget 3 to 5 times the current cost. There may also be an argument that the volunteer has a lot more at stake, as it is their community. While this study is focused mostly on the Eagle county volunteer fire departments and the Eagle River Fire Protection District, it could be said that it could have applications to other volunteer fire departments in the country. The outcome of this research paper is to gain better retention and understanding of volunteers in the organization.

This subject volunteer retention relates to the Executive Fire Officer Development course in the following ways. The research is related to the research unit in Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP).

The problem-solving unit is brought into play by the identification of the problem and solution sought by the research. The marketing section is used since one of the stated goals is to improve recruiting and retention of volunteer firefighters. This also relates to the organizational change and development section of the EFOP in that it is recognizing a problem and taking steps to change and develop the organization to better accomplish the organizations goals. This also relates to the service quality section by the fact that personnel are an essential part of the organizations ability to provide service. Along with the ability to attract and keep personnel, it will have a direct effect on service quality.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There is increasing amount of evidence suggesting that volunteer fire departments are becoming more difficult to staff with personnel. “The problem of finding and retaining volunteers is nothing new, however with family, career and volunteer for an individual’s time, it has become more acutely evident” (Langguth, 2001,p. 16). While there seems to be general consensus that there is a problem, how wide spread and to what extent the problem exists for everyone is not clear”. While the overall number of volunteer firefighters appears to be stable, departments in some parts of the country are facing severe shortages” (Perini, 1989, p. 39). The ability to recruit and retain personnel will determine not only the quality of service but also the very survival of the department. “ Recognizing this need, fire and rescue departments in many jurisdictions have taken a more aggressive role in recruiting additional members to meet their staffing needs. They have also identified additional incentives to retain existing members” (White,1998, p.9). The fact that is volunteers are a very important part of not only the fire service, but of the country’s social fabric. This was brought to light by President George Herbert Walker Bush with the plea for greater contributions by volunteer workers to help solve the country’s short falls. With the President’s plea the editors of International Society of Fire Service Instructors (ISFSI) stated“ It is paradoxical that his request should come at a time when the nation’s fire service is becoming seriously handicapped because it is losing it’s volunteers” (ISFSI, 1990, p. 10). Communities have formed groups to study the problems. These groups have been charged with the responsibility of determining if there is a problem and possible solutions”. In 1994, a committee of volunteer fire service leaders from New Jersey met to discuss the problem of recruitment of new firefighters

and EMS personnel. From shared experiences, they determined that one of the major problems with recruitment is lack of knowledge by the public about the need for volunteers” (Bush, 1998, p. 52). In October 1999, Fire Chief Eric Ward, Chief of the Blue Township (Kansas) Fire Rescue states that, “ Recruitment and retention are continuous struggles for many, if not most, volunteer agencies”. He later stated, “ Some have developed such a reputation in their community that they have a waiting list of applicants, or they have such a large population that their pool of potential members seems endless. Most commonly, however, volunteer agencies serve communities with limited number of potential applicants, and many have perpetual vacancies waiting to be filled” (Ward 1999, p. 36).

There are many different reasons proposed for the apparent change in the volunteer fire fighting service in the United States. Some of the reasons are rooted in the social and economic changes that have occurred in our society.

Ward indicates in his observation that he has divided volunteers into three personality groups, each with its own strengths, weaknesses, challenges and potential:

- Good Neighbors
- Professional and
- Adrenaline Seekers

Ward states that he thought all three groups are essential “ Different personalities, each with a unique view of how things should act within the department, are bound to butt heads once in awhile” (Ward, 1999, p. 38). Today’s volunteers are required to have more extensive training and must be willing to make a greater time commitment. This greater time commitment is required by the nature of how the fire service has evolved

and is continuing to evolve. The training time and requirements placed upon the fire service by the state and federal governments are in place to help firefighter safety and try to insure quality response for the public. If a volunteer does not make these commitments there is a considerable risk, not just to themselves, but the rest of the crew and to the communities that we respond to.

There is also an economic factor involved. In most households both spouses have to maintain fulltime job, to make ends meet. The cost of owning a home and raising a family has forced both parents to work. With this need it is found that all volunteer organizations that rely on volunteers are experiencing a shortage of volunteers.

The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), organized in 1976, is a nonprofit membership association that represents the interests of volunteer fire, EMS and rescue services nationwide. “The council’s primary mission is legislation, ensuring that the volunteers’ interests are protected and promoted in the policy making arena” (Nordberg, 1999, p. 25). All council members are volunteer firefighters, so it is truly a grassroots organization. NVFC supplied the following facts about volunteers:

- Volunteers comprise 74% of firefighters in the United States.
- Communities served by volunteer firefighters depend on them to be their first line of defense for many types of emergencies, including fire, emergency medical incidents, natural disasters, hazardous materials incidents, water rescue emergencies, high angle and confined-space emergencies and other general public service calls.
- The majority of fire departments in the United States are volunteer.
- Communities with populations under 10,000 are typically protected by all volunteer departments.

- According to United States Fire Administration statistics, 57 of the 94 firefighters who died in the line of duty in 1997 were volunteers.
- The number of volunteer firefighters in the United States has declined 5% to 10% since 1983, while fire department call volumes continue to increase.

In light of these statistics, recruitment and retention are very big issues for NVFC. While the focus of this research is to identify the factors that influence volunteers to join and remain with the Eagle River Fire Protection District, solutions to a recruitment and retention problem may, in fact, cause a volunteer to join, remain or leave. It is for that reason that these possible solutions are identified and presented here.

## **PROCEDURES**

The research method used was descriptive. The procedures included both verbal and written survey's of the Eagle county fire department volunteers. The survey was given during the regular business meeting of each fire department. This was done by this researcher and was intentionally done at a time that would insure a maximum number of responses with a minimum number of non-responses.

Surveys where handed out to the members of the department and they were instructed on how to fill them out. There was also an explanation as to why they were being requested to fill out the survey and assurances that their responses would be confidential.

## **Population**

The sample represented the membership of the fire departments in Eagle County with 50 out of 75 members completing the survey and returning it. The population surveyed was a random sample within the membership of the departments, in that it was selected by simply handing out the survey to all members that attended the August 2, 2001 and August 9, 2001 meetings. The 50 surveys that were handed out were collected as each member exited the meeting room. The surveys were then assigned an ID number for purpose of doing the analysis.

The population that participated in the survey where composed of 8 females and 42 males, 30 of the respondents reported that they were married, 12 marked non-married and 8 did not respond to this question. The educational experience of the population is shown in Table 1.

## **Education**

**TABLE 1**

• Some High School	1	0%
• High School Graduate	25	50%
• Some College	12	25%
• College Graduate	12	25%
• Graduate School	0	0%

This shows that 25% of the population has attended some form of post secondary education. This shows a higher level of education than one might have expected. The length of service was distributed as shown in Table 2. The larger number of members with 5 or less years of service does not indicate a high turn over rate. Recruiting is done

on a fairly constant basis; however, the departments are very selective about which applicants it retains. The evaluation of the applicants is based upon hours of availability, address location, and the needs of the department.

### **Length of Service**

**TABLE 2**

<b>Years</b>	<b>Number of Members</b>	<b>Percent of Members</b>
1 to 5 years	25	50%
5 to 10 years	12	25%
10 to 25 years	13	25%

### **Survey**

The survey that was used for this paper was a survey developed by Kenneth B. Perkins, Ph. D. from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Longwood College in Farmville, Virginia. The survey was used only in part, as changes were made to gather other information from the Eagle River Fire Protection District area. With this information you shall get a picture as to the volunteers with Eagle River Fire Protection District.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this survey are: The survey was conducted within a closed group involving other agencies within Eagle County. However, the survey will clearly reflect the organization's attitudes and address the research problem. There was a small group that were not present during the meeting when the survey was conducted. This resulted in a lack of a randomly selected group had no predisposition of missing the

meeting, in part they were all excused prior to the meeting. There is also the limitation that this study focuses on only the volunteers in the fire service and not all the volunteers in Eagle County. The results may not be indicative of all volunteers outside of Eagle County, although the survey can be reproduced and used to study a larger group or other volunteer groups. The results are also based upon factors that might cause a volunteer to quit. The final limitation was the authors own limited ability and knowledge in the area of research and statistics.

### **Definitions**

Volunteer- The sample is made up of volunteer fire fighters who are members of volunteer fire departments in Eagle County Fire Departments. The term volunteer is widely used and has many interpretations. For the purpose of this paper the term volunteer will refer to only fire department members in Eagle County, Colorado.

Benefits: There is small compensation given to the volunteers in Eagle County. They range from \$4.00 per call, regardless of time spend on each call, to \$1500.00 per year, for up to 24 hours of station coverage per month. There is a retirement benefit that is payable after 20 years of service and after the age of 55. The general feeling among most volunteers is that they are providing a service to the community.

## **RESULTS**

The factors, which influence a volunteer's decision to join, were listed in the survey as general categories with a spot to list other reasons. The categories are as follows; fire-fighting is exciting, chance to contribute to the community, always wanted to be a firefighter.

**Benefits**

- Fellowship
- Income
- Other

Each respondent was asked to rank the top three reasons that attracted him or her to the fire department. Table 3 shows the ranking of each category with the number of individuals choosing that category. The columns of reasons to join were the categories that were given as choices to the fire fighters. The columns labeled number 1 through 3 are the rankings of that particular category by the individuals with number 1 being their first choice and number 3 being their last choice. With the last line being the total of people picking that category.

**Table 3****Reasons to Join**

<b>Choices</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Contribute to the Community</b>	27	22	16	65
<b>Fellowship</b>	7	3	5	15
<b>Benefits</b>	3	7	7	17
<b>Exciting to be a Firefighter</b>	13	15	24	52
<b>Income</b>	0	1	1	2

Finding out what factors influenced a volunteer's decision to join was of special interest in that a widely held belief is that the pension benefit would be the primary

motivation. However, as Table 3 illustrates the most important reason for joining was “contributing to the community.” A total of 65 had this listed as one of their top three reasons for joining. The second most chosen reason was “exciting to be a firefighter” with “benefits” being the third most cited reason overall, followed by “fellowship” and “income” being the last of the categories.

There is a question raised as to the importance of the factor of contributing to the community for the volunteer. It has also reinforced the importance of a good benefit system for the volunteers. This benefit maybe in part the recognition for the contribution during the 20 years becomes important. The financial reward may be of importance but it may be secondary to the actual recognition of the service rendered. The factor of excitement is also apparently important as well.

These survey questions have made it clear that a well-rounded approach to developing organizational attractiveness will attract the greatest number of applicants. The sense of community and making a contribution overall is very important and is followed closely by the benefits offered by the organization.

The excitement of being a firefighter is also an important factor and maintaining this action/excitement orientation will also be essential in attracting motivated volunteers. The fellowship aspect of the organization is something that could be fostered by having extra activities for the members. This could be in the form of outside activities, such as sports and other activities that could build a cohesive unit and assuring that a member feels a part of the organization.

### Staying or Quitting

Answering the question of what factors would influence a volunteer to stay with the organization became a difficult one to phrase. The possible wording seemed to favor similar answers and possibly the same outcome as the factors for joining. The reasons that would make a member quit would show what an organization had to do to maintain that member.

The first question asked to the volunteers was if a member had ever considered quitting? The results are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4**

#### Thought about quitting

	# F.F.'s	% Total
Never	40	60%
Seldom	7	3%
Sometimes	2	1%
Often	1	.05%

As shown in Table 4, out of all the members surveyed over half of those who answered indicated that they had never considered quitting. This would seem to indicate organizational stability, and if not satisfaction of the members, at least a very tolerable organizational climate. The benefits of being a member still seem to out weigh the disadvantages.

The question that asked the firefighters to rank the that would influence them to not remain listed the following areas in order;

- Too much time
- Loss of interest
- Personal conflict
- Too many rules
- Too dangerous
- Too much training
- Too hard
- Too much supervision
- Other

Table 5 shows the number of responses and they're ranking by the members. The columns labeled number 1 through 3 are the rankings of that particular category by the individuals with number 1 being their first choice and number 3 being their last choice. With the last line being the total number of people picking that category.

**Table 5**

Factors to Quit

<b>Choices</b>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Total
• Too much time	23	19	14	56
• Loss of interest	7	5	5	17
• Personal conflict	3	6	5	14
• Too many rules	10	6	6	22
• Too dangerous	0	0	2	2

**Table 5**

(Continued)

Factors to Quit

<b>Choices</b>				
• Too much training	0	6	6	12
• Too hard	0	4	7	11
• Too much supervision	0	1	1	2
• Other	7	3	4	14

An overwhelming number of the members surveyed answered too much time as the number one factor that would influence them to quit the fire service. Approximately 85% to 90% listed this reason as their top 3.

To many rules is the next most important factor overall. Seventy five percent listed this factor as their top three reasons to quit.

Loss of interest is the third most cited factor for influencing a member to want to quit. Approximately thirty percent of the members listed this as their top three reasons to quit. This would indicate that interest in the organization is very important and would compliment the excitement factor for joining. The interest and excitement would go hand in hand in maintaining a volunteer's interest in the organization.

Personal conflict is the forth most cited factor for influencing a member to quit. Thirty percent of the members listed this as an important factor. This means that personnel conflicts should receive attention in the organization to maintain a member status. Personnel management for volunteers is probably more difficult than their paid

counterparts. This may lead to the fact the volunteer's feel that they are giving much more than they are receiving in return. The volunteer must be supported and made to feel that their contribution is important. More training in interpersonal dynamics would assist the volunteer in becoming part of the organization.

It is interesting to note that the too much training and too much supervision is listed at the lower end of the survey. The training and supervision may make a member feel comfortable with the job they are asked to perform. With the training helping them to understand the job and the dangers of fire fighting.

The survey also questioned the members if the time actually spent was much more than expected, some more than expected, expected, less than expected, or much less than expected. The results to this question are shown in Table 6.

**Table 6**

Percent of Time Expected

	# F.F.'s	% Total
Much More	1	1%
Some More	9	10%
Expected	40	90%
Less	0	0%
Much Less	0	0%

This would indicate that the majority is spending the amount of time that they expected for the fire department. This should not be mistaken as approval for the amount

of time spent, but rather a realization on the part of the members of the time necessary to be part of the department.

It seems that the factors that would make a volunteer leave the fire service are for the most part, manageable. The time concerns and the loss of interest, which are concerns of the Eagle River Fire Protection District volunteers, can be addressed with reasonable changes in procedures and continued efforts to maintain the excitement and interest in the organization. The factors being identified will help the leadership of the department implement and make changes in the organization.

### **Age Effects on Joining**

The question of age related differences in the factors that have been identified so far will be done by a comparison of age to the factors that influenced joining and a comparison of age factors that would influence a volunteer to leave, as found in Figure 1. With this information and data I hope to help the fire department tailor solutions to age groups in the fire department. This will need to be done with concern to equal treatment of all the individuals.

The highest rated factor for a person to want to join the fire department is “contributing to the community.” It was found that the older volunteers rated this as the number one reason to join, while the younger ones rated this as their second and third reasons to join.

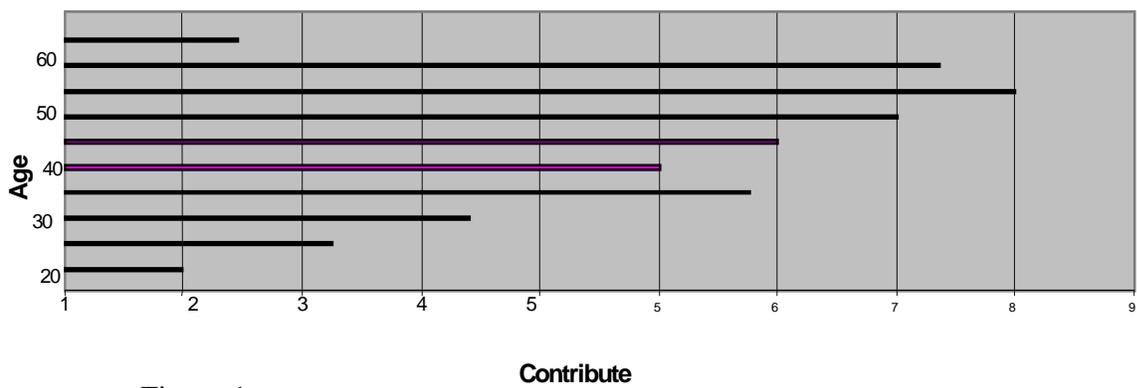


Figure 1

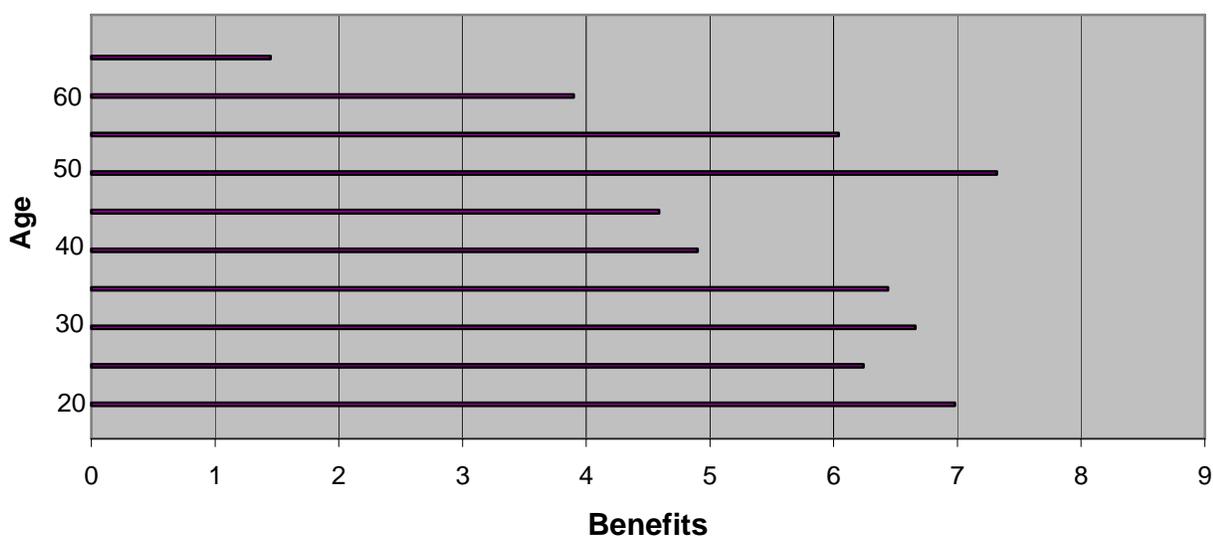
The second highest rated factor for joining was benefits. In Figure 2 this factor shows a fairly even distribution for the individuals rating this number 1 with a slightly higher concentration in the younger age group. The distribution for number 2 is concentrated in the 20-35 age group while the number 3 rating is concentrated in the 45 to 55 age group. This is, as expected, an overlap in the age groups in the importance of the benefits. It does show in the diagram that the younger firefighter does take consideration on the benefits. It also would seem to indicate that the older firefighters believe they would join for motivations other than benefits.

Figure 2



Found in Figure 3, the “exciting” factor shows a higher distribution of younger firefighters in the number 1 rating group. This is as expected with the younger firefighters looking for excitement. This is still a very high rated factor with 52 respondents rating this in their top three reasons to join. The rating also clearly reflects that this is an important factor overall although not as important as contributing or benefits.

Figure 3



Fellowship was not often the number 1 reason for joining. It was more often cited for a number 2 or number 3 reason for joining with the distribution in the younger and middle age. Although it was at almost on the same scale as “exciting to be a firefighter”.

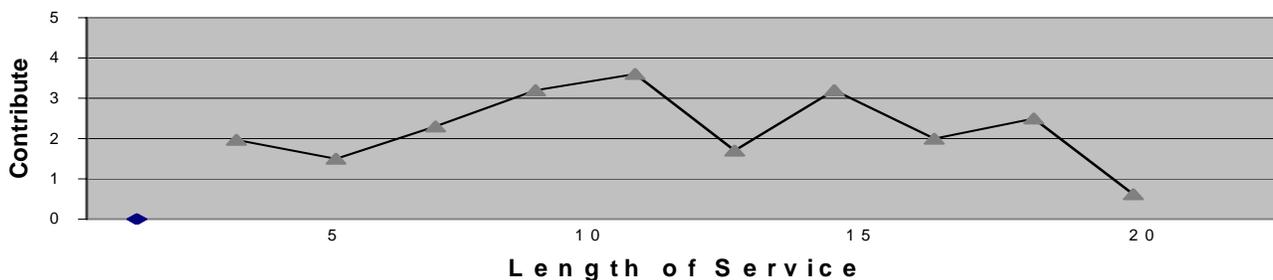
Overall the factors for joining show the increased importance of benefits for younger firefighters with the contribution factor having a higher importance for the older firefighters. The excitement factor was more important to the younger firefighters than that of the older firefighters. However, this was listed as one of the top three reasons for many in all age groups.

### Length of Service

The factors for joining were also compared with length of service for an indication of a grouping of individuals with in a length of service range. The highest rated factor, “contributing to the community”, showed a fairly even spread. With the graph showing that the firefighters that had been with the department for years did not feel the same need for contribution to the community as the younger firefighters.

Graph 4 shows how the groups spread for the factors.

Figure 4



“Length of service” is compared with “benefits”. This shows a definite grouping in the lower length of service ranges for the 1<sup>st</sup> choice of benefits as a reason to join. This shows that the younger age members would have a lower length of service. As it shows that the older group of members would stay for the benefits, with time served. In Figure 5, below will show the time served to the benefits, the younger member with little concern to time in to benefits, with the older member looking at time served to the benefits.

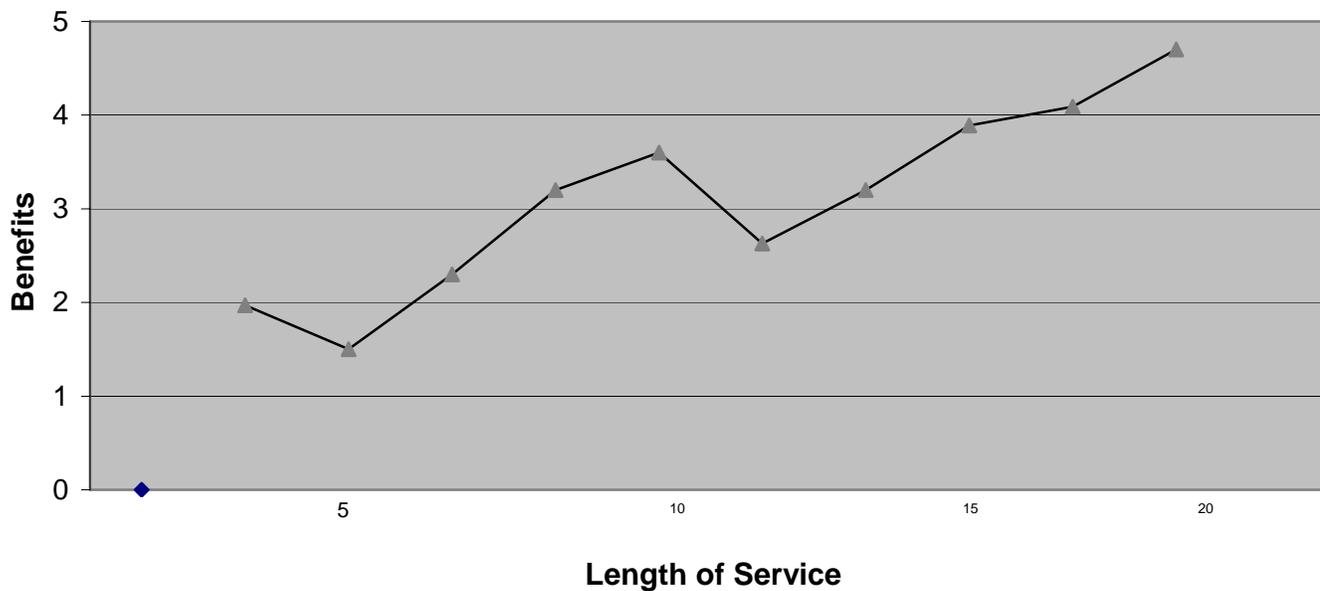


Figure 5

The factor of “exciting”, also shows a grouping in the lower level of service range for a 1<sup>st</sup> choice to join. This would be indicated that the excitement factor was the most important reason for joining, especially for the younger member. The factor is also important to a wide range of members, as the graph 6 will show. The younger the member, the more excitement in the fire service is found, while with the older member the excitement level is lower.

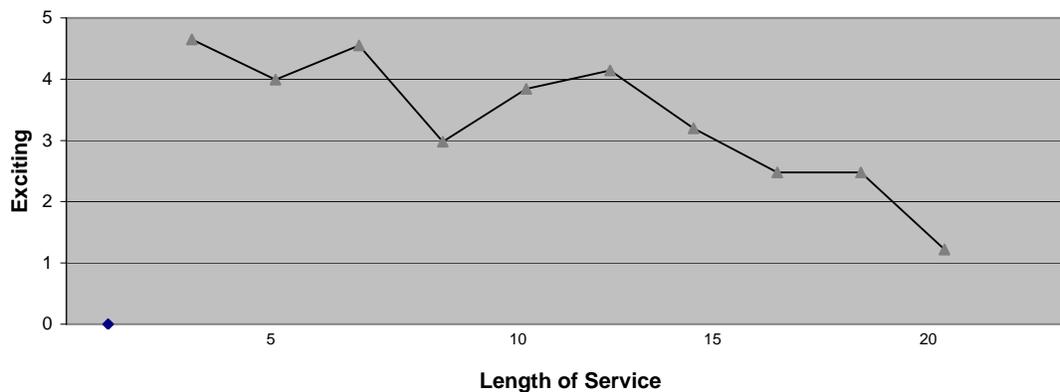


Figure 6

The factor “ want to be a firefighter” also shows a grouping similar to the exciting factor. It shows the factor of “ exciting” and “ want to be a firefighter” were almost one in the same.

The factor on “ fellowship” has no grouping, as there were very few respondents that placed length of service and the fellowship.

The length of service when compared with the factors for joining reinforce the comparison between age and these factors. The length of service shows that for the most part, younger members are more concerned with excitement of being a firefighter, while the older members are looking at the benefits.

### **Quitting**

The factors that would influence a member to quit have also been examined in relation to age and the factor of “ too much time”. A large number of firefighters listed this as the number one reason that would cause someone to quit. This shows the importance of this factor to the entire department and places it as a high priority for attention by the leadership. The younger member shows that the time needed was more than they expected, this causing them to quit. The group in the middle did understand better the time commitment, was making this less a reason for them to quit. While the older members felt the time commitment was too much and causing most to quit after they completed their 20 years of service.

The other factor that would influence a member to leave is the “ loss of interest”. As found from the survey the members felt that they had no interest or less interest in the fire service at around 15 years of service. Some of this was found to be related to other commitments, family, and jobs. Although the area of “ loss of interest” was not ranked as

high as “ too much time”, the large number of respondents, and the evident spread among the age groups, shows that for a large number of members this is a potential reason to quit. This would indicate that maintaining interest for the younger members is important. But regardless of the age group the “ loss of interest” is an issue that needs to be looked at by the leadership.

The age comparison for the factor “ personnel conflict” is fairly evenly spread also. It was found that the area that had the most difficulty with the “ personnel conflict” was those in the age groups of 20-30 and then again 40-50. These age groups have many different responsibilities; some being school and family.

The factor of concern to “ too many rules” did not seem to have a significant conflict as to a reason to quit. All members understood the need for rules.

The factor of the concern to “ too dangerous” had an interesting grouping. The ages in the area of 20 placed this area high as a reason to quit. The older members had very little concern. The ages in the middle had mid range concerns. This was found to be lack of understanding of the dangers of the fire service in the younger members and this changing with the years of service.

The other factor, “ other/quit”, had few respondents answering this as 1<sup>st</sup> reason for quitting.

The remaining factor, “ too hard”, “too much training”, and “ too much supervision”, all had less than 8% of the respondents showing this a concern. Almost 2% of the older group members found this as a concern, while the remaining were younger and new members.

It was found that as a volunteer spends more time in the service, they began to understand the organizational structure and the purpose of the training. This taking away most of the fears of the job being “ too dangerous”, and the purpose of “ too many rules”. The factor of “ loss of interest” and “ personal conflict” when compared to the length of service did not prove to be specific to one special age group.

The outcome of this research paper is to gain better retention and understanding of volunteers in the organization. The answers to the questions were.

What is the benefit of having volunteers in the organization? The benefit to having members of the organization is the ability to have a place they feel they are helping the community. As well as the benefit they bring to the organization the manpower, at a much lower cost to the budget than fulltime members.

What factors influence volunteer’s decisions to join? The factor that make a volunteer want to join the organization is that of “wanting to help the community”. As the survey stated when a person is part of the organization they feel they can give back to the community they are living in.

What factors identify retention of volunteers? The greatest factor found in the area of volunteer retention is that of contributing to the organization. When a member is at the station and or on a call, they feel their importance and performance is the contributing to their community.

What factors influence volunteers to quit? The major factor found causing a volunteer to quit is the time commitment. The time when they joined most felt that all that was expected of them was respond. Once a volunteer if the department they find that

there are many hours of training and maintenance and public service. With this in mind the time commitment takes up more time than most members expected.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results agree in part with the findings of other authors as cited in the literature review. The main reason for joining the fire department is a desire to contribute to the community. This desire would be offset with the concern of the department taking too much time. To help to overcome some of the issues of the time factor is to tell each person up front what to expect. Providing incentives for volunteer firefighters is a challenge. Personal recognition, however, is the single most important incentive, and some of the most effective forms of employee recognition cost nothing. ( Buckman, July 1998, p. 8 ). Everyone must remember that the two single words in the vocabulary and seldom used is that of “ Thank you”. A volunteer must hear those words as they perform activities around the station as well as on the fire ground and training. “Continuous, supportive communication from officers, supervisors, and peers is too often underemphasized, yet it is a major motivator” ( Buckman, July 1998, p. 8 ). The survey showed that the problem of “ too much training” and “ too much supervision” was not listed as great concern for a volunteer to leave. This may indicate that time management during emergency duty and other activities in the fire service, such as fire prevention activities, is very important. It would help to have a time management study completed to help determine how to best manage time.

Benefits are seen as a motivating factor in joining and retention of many volunteers. This is an area that we need to continue to look at and protect to maintain an

effective fire fighting force in the communities for years to come. As found by the German Township Fire and EMS was a need to keep volunteers active, so they came up with performance based point system. As Tim L. Holman explains in an article from Fire Engineering “ we need to attract additional volunteers and retain our present members”. The expectations and challenges for these volunteers were high and since it is common for some volunteers to give more time than others, we wanted to reward individuals based on their performance” ( Holman, March, 1999, p.8 ). So with this in mind the German Township implemented a performance based point system.

The economic factor is also found to be a reason for volunteers declining to join the volunteer fire service. With population turnover as a main reason for both recruitment and retention. As in of Eagle County, the cost of living causes concern and people leaving the area, this not allowing them to volunteer.

As found from the survey, many would contribute their reason for leaving the volunteer service as lack of interest and burn out. The average runs for the Eagle River Fire Protection District are about 2200 calls per year. This includes 20 to 30 structure fires per year, and the remaining number of calls as routine, false alarms, emergency medical and public service. This makes it challenging to keep a volunteer motivated and interested in the department.

The amount of rules and regulations are of some concern to volunteer retention, but was at the bottom of the list as concerns for quitting. This could be due to the lack of understanding the purpose for the rules and regulations, which is taught through training and understanding. As found from William Goldfeder “ If volunteer departments are to be successful in meeting today’s recruitment challenges they must adapt to changing

America” ( Goldfeder, May\_1992, p. 10 ). As described by Mr. Goldfeder some of the areas that departments have found to be effective means in the retention of active volunteers are:

“ Personnel-management seminars, written guidelines and information about the organization, a communication vehicle”, “open recruitment policy, open forums for brainstorming, quality assurance and a volunteer benefit package” ( Goldfeder, May 1992, p. 10 ) .

The main reasons for being a volunteer and motivating factors that should not be overlooked in the recruiting and retention are the areas of “excitement”, “fellowship” and “ always wanting to be a firefighter”.

Although the negative factors “ personal conflict” and “ too dangerous”, are factors that may cause a volunteer to quit. These were not high as to concerns to quit. It is clear that there are several positive factors that must be protected and built upon to maintain the health of the organization. These factors are a members desire to “ contribute to the community”, “ benefits”, “ excitement”, and “ always wanting to be a firefighter”. This remains to be the main reasons for new members and old members to remain a volunteer.

The negative factors identified were the lack of explaining to a volunteer what the expectations were of the member and how to manage time effectively. With less than five percent of the membership resigning in the last 10 years, this issue is of concern but not great concerns. The Eagle River Fire Protection District has focused on explaining the expectation of a volunteer so they better understand.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The importance of time management should not be overlooked. This is the most important factor influencing a volunteer to leave the fire service. The amount of training may not be a major part of the problem, but must be examined with the other activities. The activities such as fire prevention, maintenance, training, and emergency duty must be prioritized and appropriate emphasis placed on each.

What is the benefit of having volunteers in the organization? Benefit of having volunteers in the organization is the fact that they assist when there is a manpower shortage and the need for them to be part of their community. With call levels of today and the need for more manpower on each call. The volunteer can assist to staff a station and assist with the call of unmanageable size.

What factors influence volunteer's decisions to join? The factors that influence volunteer's decisions to join is that of "wanting to part of the community" and that of "benefits". Organizations needs to keep and improve the benefit packages to a level to help retain the volunteer.

What factors identify retention of volunteers? In order for a department to retain their members a department needs to educate the new volunteers before hiring them as to the hours that each person will put into the organization. To retain their levels of training and the levels of training they will be expected to keep.

What factors influence volunteer's to quit? With the educating of the volunteers as to the hours they are expected to perform and their job function will assist with them in not wanting to leave the organization.

As discussed in the literature review the activity that is the most important and the most fun is the emergency duty. This area is one that compliments the excitement factor as well as the fact of the member contributing to the community in a way that will give the most gratification. Time management must be balanced with the maintenance of the member's interest level. The department must maintain involvement of the members, this not just being busy work.

Maintaining the members interest is vital to keeping motivated, active members. This interest level can be maintained through information and clearly useful training. There is nothing that makes a volunteer feel bad, more than spending a great deal of time preparing for something that they feel will never occur. Keeping the members involved in the community will build a sense of belonging. This will also keep the fire department visible and create the image of an organization that is important and prestigious to belong to. The benefits and improvements of the benefits will serve to accentuate the members perceived importance. These benefits can include pension benefits or other membership privileges, but also should include the facilities and equipment. The areas of facilities and equipment may not usually be thought of as benefits, but are very instrumental in maintaining the member's morale and sense of community. Maintaining interest compliments the excitement factor, which many members and prospective members are seeking to fulfill.

Management of personnel and personal issues are important to the members to maintain the sense of belonging and fellowship in the organizations. These areas can be accomplished through improved training, equal treatment, and keeping the members involved in important issues of the organization. A member that is involved and

informed helps considerably in recruiting as a satisfied member, will leave a positive mark for others.

Giving the opportunity for input is what is needed in getting acceptance to the organization. The increasing number of rules, regulations and mandates cannot be escaped. But with the chance for input this will help to make a member feel part of the development of the regulations, making it somewhat easier for acceptance.

The author recommends that we must continue to search for new ways to provide present and prospective members with the incentives to maintain the volunteer fire service in our communities.

## REFERENCES

- Buckman, John (1998, July). Rewarding Volunteers. *Fire Engineering* (p. 8).
- Bush, Reade (1998, April). 1-800-Fire Line A Solution To Recruitment Woes. *Firehouse*. (pp. 50-53).
- Golfeder, William (1992, May). Volunteers Corner: Retaining and Recruiting Members. *Fire Engineering* (pp. 10-13).
- Holman, Tim L. (1999, March). Volunteers Corner: Performance-Based Award System for Volunteer Retention. *Fire Engineering* (pp. 8-10).
- IFSTA The Voice (1990, October). Administration & Management, Attracting and holding volunteers. *IFSTA The Voice* (pp 1-10).
- Langguth, P. Robert (2001, March-April). Lack of Volunteers: Are we doing what we can to solve the problem? *Minnesota Fire Chief* ( pp. 16-18 )
- Nordberg, Marie (1999, April). National Organization Works for Volunteers. *Emergency\_Medical Services*. (p. 26).
- Perini, C.A. (1989, July). Habits of the Heart. *Fire Command* (pp. 39-40)
- Ward, Eric (1999, October). Understanding Volunteers 101 *Fire Chief* (pp. 36-38).
- White, Clarence (1998, July-August). Recruiting Volunteer Fire and Rescue Personnel. *IFSTA The Voice* (pp. 9-12).

**Appendix A****Survey**

Name of Fire Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Before you check the best answer for you, carefully read each question.

Note: Several questions ask you to fill in the blanks.

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your sex?  
 Male  
 Female
3. What is your race?  
 White  
 Black  
 Native American  
 Oriental  
 Hispanic Origin  
 Other
4. What level is your education?  
 Some Grade School  
 Some High School  
 High School Graduate  
 Some College  
 College Graduate  
 Graduate School
5. What type of work do you do for a living?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. How long have you been a volunteer? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Are you an Officer in the Department?  
 Yes What Rank? \_\_\_\_\_  
 No

8. Are you a member of any other volunteer organization?
- ( ) Yes With Whom? \_\_\_\_\_  
( ) No
9. About how many of your close friends are fellow firefighters? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Did you become friends with them before or after you joined the fire department?
- ( ) Before  
( ) After
11. How often do you find being a firefighter seriously interfere with your family or work obligations?
- ( ) Never  
( ) Seldom  
( ) Sometimes  
( ) Often

Skip this one if you are **NOT** married.

12. Does your spouse approve of you being a firefighter?
- ( ) Strongly Approves  
( ) Somewhat Approves  
( ) Somewhat Disapproves  
( ) Strongly Disapproves

Skip this one if you **ARE** married.

13. If you are single, but have a girlfriend or boyfriend, how often do you think they feel about you being a firefighter?
- ( ) Strongly Approves  
( ) Somewhat Approves  
( ) Somewhat Disapproves  
( ) Strongly Disapproves
14. Approximately what percentage of your leisure time is spent doing fire department related activities?
- ( ) 25%  
( ) 50%  
( ) 75%  
( ) More than 75%

15. The leisure time spent at the fire department is what?
- More than you expected
  - About what you expected
  - Less than you expected
16. Are other members of your family any part of the fire department? ( Auxiliary, Explorer, etc. )
- Yes
  - No
17. Have you ever seriously considered quitting the business of being a volunteer firefighter?
- Never
  - Seldom
  - Sometimes
  - Often

## APPENDIX B

### Questionnaire

The following questions may be difficult to answer. It asks about what was attractive about being a volunteer firefighter. You will be given a list of items firefighters often say attracts them to be a volunteer firefighter.

Below is a list of features that often attract volunteer firefighters.

Put a number 1 by the single item, which best fits, then main attraction for you to be a volunteer firefighter. Then a 2 and a 3 and so on by the choices, which attracted you to become a firefighter.

Please use each number only once.

( You may add your own item and rank it, if you wish to do so ).

\_\_\_\_\_ “ So that I could contribute to the community”

\_\_\_\_\_ “ Always wanted to be a firefighter”

\_\_\_\_\_ “ Benefits and/or pension were attractive”

\_\_\_\_\_ “ Fellowship and teamwork were attractive”

\_\_\_\_\_ “ Gave me a chance to do something exciting”

\_\_\_\_\_ If another item, please fill in and rank.

---