

**VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION EFFORTS IN
LOUDOUN COUNTY, VIRGINIA**

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

BY:

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Abstract

The recruitment of new members and the retention of existing members is essential to the health and well being of a volunteer fire or rescue company. The purpose of this research was to exam the effectiveness of the recruitment and retention effort for fire and rescue volunteers in Loudoun County, Virginia during the period from 1985 to 1997.

This study used an evaluative research methodology. The research questions that were answered were:

1. What were the results of the recruitment and retention effort from 1985 to 1997?
2. How did the effort in Loudoun County Compare with similar efforts in other jurisdictions?
3. What steps might be taken to improve the recruitment and retention process?

A review of the literature was conducted to compare the recruitment and retention efforts in Loudoun County with the experiences of other jurisdictions. Additionally, data from the Department of Fire and Rescue's volunteer database and the results of three surveys of members and former members was analyzed to examine Loudoun County's experience.

The findings revealed that Loudoun County's recruitment and retention effort exceeded the national average. Nevertheless, there is significant room for improvement particularly in the area of retention. The surveys revealed that leadership problems are a key reason why people leave the system.

The recommendations of the research were to: 1) conduct additional research on other systems to determine if more unified recruitment and retention effort would prove to be more successful, 2) grant the Commission greater authority to intervene when a company experiences leadership problems which negatively impact recruitment and retention efforts; 3) adopt a uniform set of minimum standards for operational personnel; 4) discontinue the practice of electing officers solely upon the basis of popularity; 5) provide leadership and management training; 6) target non-traditional recruitment pools; 7) recruit more administrative and support personnel; 8) consider offering housing to volunteers, 9) examine the recruitment process to determine if the proper types of people are being recruited and 10) attempt to encourage existing members to become more active and make a concerted effort to lower the system's turnover rate.

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Introduction

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) estimates that 75 percent of the approximately 1,073,600 fire fighters in the United States are volunteers. Of the 30,495 fire departments in the United States, less than six percent (1,778) are all career departments. There are 22,869 all volunteer departments, 4,400 predominately volunteer departments, and 1,448 predominately career departments (NFPA, 1995).

Given the significant role of the volunteer fire service in the United States, it is, therefore, essential for volunteer fire and rescue companies to continue to exist. For this to happen, volunteer companies must continually seek and recruit new members and they must retain their existing members.

Each new member represents a significant investment in both time and money. A new member must be trained and equipped before he/she is allowed to respond to calls and this process may cost more than \$4,000.00 per member. A new member will be required to spend approximately 135 hours to complete a Fire Fighter I Class and/or 120 hours to complete a basic Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) class. This training will take six months to a year to complete.

The purpose of this research project was to exam the effectiveness of the recruitment and retention effort for fire and rescue volunteers in Loudoun County, Virginia during the period of 1985 to 1997. This study used the evaluative research methodology to address the following research questions:

1. What were the results of the recruitment and retention effort from 1985 to 1997?

2. How did the effort in Loudoun County compare with similar efforts in other jurisdictions?
3. What steps might be taken to improve the recruitment and retention process?

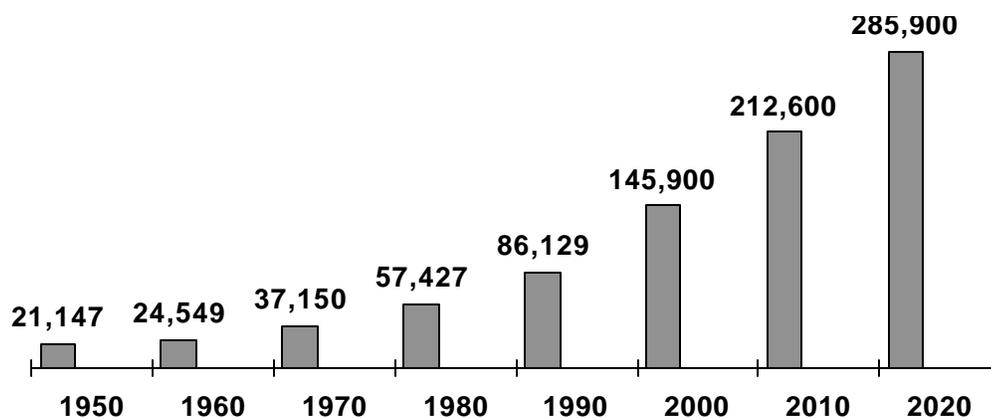
Background and Significance

Loudoun County, Virginia was founded in 1757 and encompasses 517 square miles. The County's population remained constant at approximately 20,000 residents from the first United States Census conducted in 1790 until 1950. In 1980, the County's population began to grow dramatically due to the County's pastoral setting, affordable housing, and the close proximity of Dulles Airport and Washington, D.C.

Loudoun County's population increased by fifty-five percent during the 1990's. The County is the eighth fastest growing county in the United States and is growing at a faster pace than any other jurisdiction in Virginia (Cohn, 1998). In 1997, the County's population reached 133,800 residents (Lipton, 1998). This growth is expected to continue into the next millennium and it is projected that the population may reach 285,900 residents by the year 2020, see Figure One below.

Figure One

Population Growth In Loudoun County, Virginia 1950 to 2020



Source: Loudoun County Planning Department

The County's rapid growth has had a significant impact upon the volunteer fire and emergency medical service (EMS) system. The system utilizes a small career component to supplement and support a large contingent of volunteers. The volunteers are organized into seventeen (17) fire and rescue companies. Chartered as independent corporations, the volunteer companies raise the majority of their operating expenses and own their buildings and apparatus. Table One, below, provides a list of the companies.

Table One

Loudoun County Volunteer Fire and Rescue Companies

Number	Company	Organized
1	Leesburg Fire*	1863
2	Purcellville Fire	1923
3	Middleburg Fire and Rescue	1936
4	Round Hill Fire and Rescue	1938
5	Hamilton Fire	1944
6	Ashburn Fire and Rescue	1944
7	Aldie Fire	1955
8	Philomont Fire	1956
9	Arcola Fire and Rescue	1957
10	Lucketts Fire	1960
11	Sterling Fire	1966
12	Lovettsville Fire and Rescue	1966
13	Loudoun County Rescue	1952
14	Purcellville Rescue	1969
15	Sterling Rescue	1964
16	Neersville Fire and Rescue	1976
17	Hamilton Rescue	1979

Note: Some sources indicate that Leesburg had an organized bucket brigade as early as 1827, but 1863 is listed as the year the Company was organized. It is highly unlikely, however, that a fire company could have been organized during the Civil War. Leesburg changed hands a number of times and several engagements took place in the vicinity.

One impact of the increase in population upon the fire and rescue system has been a dramatic increase in the number of emergency responses. In a study commissioned by the Board of Supervisors in 1984 to evaluate the system's performance, McManis Associates reported that in 1983 the fire and rescue system responded to 2,721 fire calls and 5,007 EMS calls (McManis, 1984). In 1997, the

call volume had increased to 7,596 responses to fire calls and 11,333 responses to EMS calls, an increase of approximately 145 percent.

Another impact of the increase in population has been a significant change in the demographics of the County's residents. When the volunteer fire and rescue companies were originally organized, the County was primarily an agrarian community. Many of the residents worked on a farm or in a small business in one of the small towns. When the fire whistle blew, the volunteers were allowed to leave their jobs to respond to the calls. The relatively low incident volume and the strong sense of community perpetuated this practice until the early 1980's.

Today, approximately 90 percent of the County's residents are transplants, i.e. people who have moved into the County from somewhere else. The majority of the new residents commute to work outside of the County. If a person does work in the County, he or she is typically not allowed to respond to calls during working hours. Many of the new residents have families with young children and it is not uncommon for both spouses to work outside of their home. These factors have reduced the number of volunteers that are available to respond to calls during the day time. In addition, the competition for an individual's time is beginning to impact the availability of volunteers at night and during the weekend in some parts of the County.

In response to the changing demographics, the County hired its first career fire fighters in 1983 to augment the daytime volunteer coverage. Career personnel are now deployed during the daytime, Monday through Friday, in seven of the volunteer stations and there is a growing debate about adding even more career

personnel. There is a growing concern that the career personnel may eventually replace the volunteer system altogether. It is a widely held belief that the key to preventing this from occurring is an effective recruitment and retention program. That is one of the principal reasons for this research project.

The research project is particularly relevant to the Executive Development course because a significant portion of the course focused on organizational change. The Executive Development Course also focused upon the relationship between leaders and followers. In Loudoun County, effective leadership and dedicated followers are essential if the volunteer component of the system is to survive and they must work together within a very dynamic, changing environment. The research sought to apply concepts included in the course to formulate recommendations that might improve the County's recruitment and retention effort.

Literature Review

In conducting the research project, it seemed only logical to compare Loudoun County's recruitment and retention efforts with the efforts of other similar jurisdictions to learn from their successes and failures. Therefore, a review of the literature was conducted. That review revealed a considerable body of literature on the subject of recruitment and retention of volunteer fire and rescue members.

Of particular interest in the literature was a confirmation that other growing jurisdictions have experienced problems which are similar to those currently being experienced in Loudoun County. For example, the literature revealed that it is

common for the influx of new residents into an area to create an increased demand for service. The new residents often have a different set of expectations as well. It is not uncommon for a new resident to move from a metropolitan area. Experience has shown that the people who move from a metropolitan area bring with them the expectation of higher levels of care and faster response times (Keyser, 1997).

It was also reported in the literature that many volunteer fire departments entered the 1980's with waiting lists of people who wanted to join. In the nineties, the same departments are experiencing a shortage of new recruits. In some situations, fire department rosters are depleted to the point that even mustering a skeleton crew for fire suppression operations is difficult. This phenomenon is the result of the many apparent changes in people's lifestyles. People do not have as much free time as they once had and this has had an impact on their attitudes. Being a volunteer conflicts with their work schedules since both spouses typically work. Many people are now forced to commute longer distances than ever before. People no longer work in agriculture and they do not normally live and work in the same community. Employers no longer allow their employees to leave their jobs to respond to fires (Meyer, 1990).

One possible response to these challenges is to expand the traditional recruitment pool. A number of alternatives were suggested in the literature. Among the methods cited were:

- Allowing non-residents to join a company and making company events more family oriented (Meyer, 1990).
- Using student interns (Keyser, 1997).

- Recognizing that not every member of a company has to be a fire fighter. The recruitment and use of administrative and support personnel allows operational volunteers more time to train and to respond to calls (Stittleburg, 1994).

If these methods fail, Perkins and Benoit report that it is tempting to adopt either the “Church Model” or the “Sinking Ship Model” for recruitment. Both techniques are destined to fail according to the two authors. In the Church Model, it is assumed that people will be somehow led by “the spirit” to join the company. In the extreme, some companies believe that it may even be necessary to “close their doors” in order to make the community realize that the company needs help and that people should become volunteers. In the sinking ship model, departments will typically use a flashing sign in front of their building to indicate that they need help. This usually has the opposite effect and communicates that the department is like a sinking ship. People will tend to avoid joining such an organization because no one wants to be associated with a loser (Perkins and Benoit, 1996).

In addition to expanding the traditional recruitment pool, a volunteer company should also re-examine the effectiveness of its retention program. One article compared the recruitment effort to a smoke detector campaign. Fire Departments will often install a smoke detector in every residence in their community, but forget to check for dead batteries. The author of the article suggested that a volunteer department should give at least as much attention to retaining its existing members as to recruiting new ones (Cimino, 1983).

When examining the recruitment and retention of volunteers, a relevant question would seem to be “Why do people join a volunteer fire or rescue company?” Equally important is the question of “Why do people continue to volunteer?” Obviously, there is no single answer to either of these questions, but there is some commonality in the responses to these questions. For example, a survey of 180 volunteers in Troy, Michigan found that the majority of the respondents indicated that they had joined to serve their community, to fulfill a desire to become a fire fighter, and to become a member of a team (Sinclair, 1997).

In another survey of twelve (12) departments near Duluth, Minnesota, 131 volunteers were asked why they had become and had remained volunteers. More than 80% of the respondents indicated that the strongest motivation for joining and continuing to belong were the good feeling of helping others (95%), the opportunity to learn new skills (89%), helping the community (95%), compassion for people in need (89%), working for an important cause (92%), helping other people (95%), and being involved in a worthwhile activity (90%) (Bergstrand, 1997).

Unfortunately, members do quit in spite of the best of efforts. According to one report, volunteer companies must replace between fifteen to twenty percent of their members every year to survive (Ciminio, 1983). Others are less optimistic. An informal study conducted by the Volunteer Firemen’s Insurance Services firm found that for every 100 volunteers recruited, seventy will quit during the first three years and another twelve members will leave between the seventh and tenth year (Wyrwas, 1986). In another study, it was reported that the turnover rate for EMS

volunteers in Vermont was 25% per year and the average length of service was only four years (Garnham, 1995).

The reasons cited for leaving a company are varied. According to one source, the major and common enemy is time. People need the time to have a life (Cimino, 1983). Being a volunteer, however, requires a significant amount of time. For example, volunteers perform five significant activities: they attend meetings, they attend training session, they maintain equipment, they respond to alarms, and they must raise funds. Fund raising, however, is the only area in which a volunteer can delegate his/her responsibility to another (Meyer, 1990).

1983).

Leadership, or the lack thereof, is one of the most frequently cited factors in influencing a person's decision to leave a volunteer company. Leadership, according to one article, is the key to retention and nearly all retention failures can be attributed, either directly or indirectly, to leadership shortcomings. The author suggested that leadership courses and sensitivity training would probably be valuable to those in charge. He also suggested that improved communications is necessary, particularly as it relates to a company's expectations of its members (Stittleburg, 1994).

At least one author suggested that the company officers, not the chief officers, hold the key leadership positions in a volunteer company and play a significant role in establishing the character of an organization. The company officers need to help maintain a positive environment in the station in order for it to be a pleasant place to live, work, and play (Cimino, 1983).

As recruitment becomes more of a problem and members continue to leave a company, retention efforts gain a new sense of urgency. In an effort to retain members, some companies have tried such extrinsic motivators as providing uniforms, training opportunities, awards, compliments, compensation, and promotional opportunities. The greatest motivation, however, is success (Meyer, 1990).

The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) conducted a study on recruitment and retention and identified a number of problem areas in the retention effort. The major areas of concern were leadership, emotional support, time demands, training requirements, recognition/incentives, the fun factor, health risks, and relocation. According to the NVFC, the ability of a fire department to retain its people is directly related to its ability to manage those people. The report went on to suggest that new members must be made to feel welcome. The NVFC found that some departments tend to be clannish and do not appear to have the capacity to assimilate new members into their company (National Volunteer Fire Council, 1993).

A number of other successful techniques were suggested by the literature to assist in the retention effort. The suggestions included:

- Establishing a mentoring program which pairs new members with older members to pass on their knowledge and skills (Stittleburg, 1995).
- Conducting personnel management seminars, adopting written guidelines, providing information about the organization, utilizing a timely communications vehicle such as a newsletter, adopting an open

recruitment policy, using a division of labor (operations v. administrative), conducting company brainstorming sessions, utilizing quality assurance procedures and providing benefits to volunteers (Goldfeder, 1992).

- Using an appropriate volunteer incentive program which includes a high quality training program; an annual potluck dinner and awards ceremony; publicly thanking volunteers for their special contributions; displaying a chart in the station which shows the monetary value of the volunteer effort in the department; allowing volunteers to use facilities to make minor repairs on personal automobiles; hosting a department movie night or car wash; sponsoring community events such as parades, fireworks, or dances; giving members hats, T-shirts, mugs, etc.; issuing vehicles to chiefs for duty nights; furnishing uniforms, patches, badges, decals, lights, and sirens; and management training (Paulson, 1996 and Costigan, 1991).
- Providing effective leadership and motivation to the members, providing financial incentives such as tax credits and retirement programs, making it fun to be a volunteer, and fostering pride in the company (Sinclair, 1997).
- Creating a waiting list. This sends the message that people want in the company because it is a desirable place to be. The list also conveys that a member can and will be replaced in they don't participate (National Volunteer Fire Council, 1993).

- Providing insurance and a retirement program. In Clatskanie, Oregon the volunteer department provides life insurance and a retirement program for its volunteer EMT's after three years of service. After serving for three years, members are given credit for their previous three years service. The program is administered by a private insurance company (Keyser, 1997).
- Providing a retirement program. Length-of-service awards have been around since the 1950's and at least twenty-six states offer some form of incentive program (Wyras, 1986).
- Processing membership applications on a timely basis. Typically this process should not exceed thirty days. In addition, there should be a probationary period for new members. Members should also be disciplined appropriately, but fairly. Finally, members should not be treated as a source of free labor or as an expendable resource (White, 1990).

Another key element in the retention process is to ensure that a prospective member will become a successful member. Selecting the wrong individual for the job costs an organization in time, money, and training. A volunteer or on-call fire fighter should be selected with the same care and concern as would be a career fire fighter. The concept that a "warm body" is better than no body at all is inappropriate. This does not build a stable, harmonious, quality organization. The quality of personnel affects a department's ability to recruit successfully. For group hiring a selection process that includes oral examinations, interviews, and some

type of agility test should be used. The process should also include a background check, a pre-employment physical examination, and a probationary period (Marinucci, 1989).

One approach previously suggested to expand the recruitment pool may actually add to a company's retention problems, however. A student intern, while considerably less expensive than a traditional volunteer or career member, is not a stable solution, because, by the time the interns are trained enough to be an asset to a small system, they are actively seeking employment and will move on to a career position elsewhere (Keyser, 1997).

Others expressed a concern about the generation gap in volunteer companies and the principle recruitment technique of word of mouth recruiting. Volunteers tend to recruit people just like themselves and this practice might serve to inhibit diversity and stifle innovation (Stittleburg, 1995).

Finally, among the recommendations contained In a study of the combination system in Baltimore County, Maryland was a suggestion to expand the County's Recruitment and Retention Committee to include a member from each of the thirty-three fire companies. The study also recommended that the Committee should develop statistics on their membership rolls to include such information as a member's length of service, age, activity level, and how they were recruited. This information might be useful in identifying problems and may indicate which companies are in trouble. It might then be possible to develop an action plan to correct the problem. The plan might include designating a recruitment month and creating public/private partnerships. The study also recommended the elimination

of the Ladies Auxiliaries and the incorporation of the auxiliaries into the departments. Other suggestions included a state income tax incentive for volunteer membership, leadership training for officers, an awards program, an expansion of the County's employee assistance program to include volunteers, and giving every volunteer some responsibility within the company to make them involved (Barnes, 1992).

Procedures

The topic of this research project evolved from the author's participation in a strategic planning process which was undertaken by the fire and rescue system beginning in November 1996. The purpose of the process was to prepare a Strategic Service Plan to guide the system through the Year 2016, but the process had not yet been completed at the time this report was prepared.

During the process, neighboring jurisdictions with similar fire and rescue systems were contacted in an effort to compare their experiences with that of Loudoun County. Unfortunately, none of those contacted maintained very much information about their volunteer recruitment and retention effort. This may in part be due to the independent status of the volunteer companies in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The independent status makes companies reticent to share information about the internal operations of their companies. Unfortunately, this made any direct comparison impossible. The author believes that similar

research projects should be undertaken in order to develop a cohesive strategy for maintaining the viability of the volunteer component of a combination system.

The research procedure used in preparing this report began with a literature review conducted at the National Fire Academy's Learning Resource Center (LRC) in January 1998. An additional literature review was conducted utilizing the author's personal library. While the literature review examined both recruitment and retention, the principal focus of the review addressed the issue of retention.

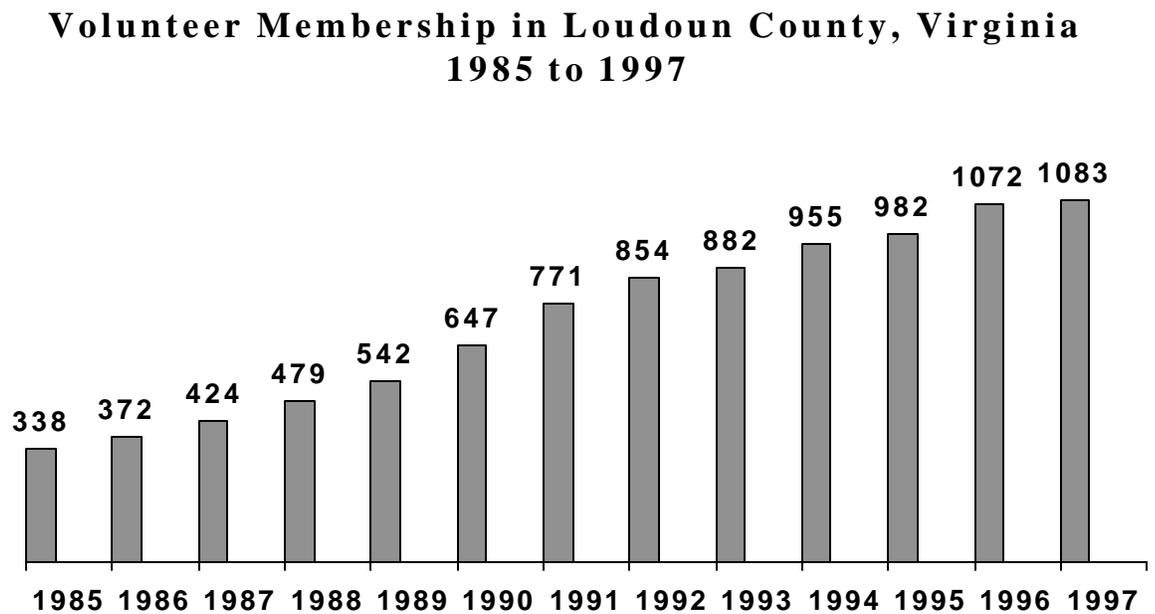
The majority of the data utilized in this research project was obtained from the volunteer database maintained by the Department of Fire and Rescue. This information is used to administer the County's volunteer retirement program. Additional data was obtained from three different surveys of current and former system members. Two of the surveys were conducted by the Fire and Rescue Commission's Retention and Recruitment Committee. The information obtained by the Committee's surveys may not be statistically valid and the questionnaires may have been flawed. Nevertheless, the results tend to mirror information found in the literature. A third survey was conducted as part of a graduate student's research project for his masters degree from the University of Maryland.

Results

The first research question sought to determine the results of the recruitment and retention effort during the period from 1985 to 1997. The research revealed that the number of volunteer members serving in the seventeen (17) fire and rescue

companies increased from 338 members in 1985 to 1,083 members in 1997, an increase of over 220 percent. During this same time period, a total of 1,372 new members were recruited into the system. The system's retention rate during this time averaged 58.6%. A profile of the increase in membership is provided in Figure Two, below.

Figure Two



Source: Department of Fire and Rescue.

The second research question sought to compare the recruitment and retention efforts in Loudoun County with similar efforts in other jurisdictions. A study conducted by the National Fire Protection Association in 1995 determined that

volunteer membership declined from 884,600 in 1984 to 807,900 in 1994, a decrease of 8.7% (NFPA, 1995). By contrast, volunteer membership in Loudoun County increased by 220 percent during the same approximate time period (1985 to 1997).

An informal study conducted by the Volunteer Firemen's Insurance Services firm found that for every 100 volunteers recruited, seventy will leave during the first three years and another twelve will leave between the seventh and tenth year (Wyrwas, 1986). This would indicate a retention rate of approximately 30% at the three year mark and only 18% by the tenth year. A study focused on volunteer EMS members in Vermont reported that approximately 25% of the members leave each year and that the average length of service was only four years (Garnham, 1995). By contrast, Loudoun County's retention rate averaged 58.6% during the period of the study.

The third and final research question attempted to formulate measures that, if implemented, would hopefully improve the recruitment and retention process. In order to address this question, two additional questions were raised. First, "What is the current status of the volunteer membership?". A summary of the system's current membership status is included in response to this question as Appendix A.

The second question was "Why are people leaving the system?" In order to attempt to answer this question, the results of three recent surveys were examined. In the first survey conducted in December 1995, the Recruitment and Retention Committee conducted an exit survey of 400 former members. Only twenty-seven members (6.7%) responded to the Committee's inquiry. Of those who did respond,

30% moved out of the County, 30% left because of personal time constraints, 18 % cited problems within their Company, 11% indicated that they could not meet the training requirements, 7% stated that the time commitments were excessive, and 4% left due to illness or injury.

In July 1996, the Committee conducted a second survey of approximately 1,054 members listed on the membership roll and asked the members to answer four questions. The questions and their responses are listed below. More than one response was provided to several of the questions.

1. What made you first think about joining a local fire/rescue company?

53% personal contact with a member
 19% previously belonged to a volunteer company in another area
 8% CPR or other class
 4% public service announcement, newspaper add, etc.
 27% other

2. Other than wanting to help others, what were the most important reasons you decided to join a fire/rescue company?

50% friendship opportunities
 46% excitement
 30% free training
 16% retirement and tax benefits
 28% other

3. Other than personal satisfaction from helping others, what has made you stay in a fire/rescue company?

59% friendships
 41% excitement
 30% retirement and tax benefits
 27% free training
 22% other

4. If you have ever considered leaving your fire/rescue company, why?

- 38% internal conflicts
- 26% excessive time requirements
- 16 % "Burnout"
- 5% Excessive training requirements
- 3% Inadequate training opportunities
- 24% other

A third survey was conducted in February 1997 by a graduate student at the University of Maryland. The Department of Fire and Rescue provided the student with a list of 384 former volunteer members of the system. The student conducted a random telephone survey of 140 former EMS volunteers and was able to obtain sixty valid responses. The three probable reasons identified by the survey for the retention problem were poor relationships (47%), time commitments (76%), and poor leadership and management (67%) (Bardwell, 1997).

Discussion

The data collected on the system's growth rate seemed to indicate that the system does not have a recruitment problem, but rather a retention problem. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of volunteers in Loudoun County when, according to the literature, there has been a decline in volunteer membership at the national level. One explanation might be the natural increase due to the population increase, but the system's membership has increased at a much faster pace than the population (220% v. 72%).

This might cause one to erroneously conclude that the recruitment of new members is not a significant problem. It would be much easier to conclude that

retention is the real issue when one considers that 568 (41.4%) of the new members recruited into the system have already left the system. Clearly this is a problem, and the system should endeavor to improve upon its retention rate of 58.6%. The literature suggests, however, that Loudoun's experience is better than the national experience.

Therefore, it would be easy to conclude that retention is not a problem were it not for the fact that during a time when the volunteer system was experiencing unprecedented growth, the County, at the request of the volunteer companies, began to hire career personnel. From 1983 to 1997, career personnel were hired to staff seven stations and to provide regional ALS responders in order to guarantee a minimal daytime response in the County's most populated areas. The reliability of the volunteer system for some part or all of the day continues to be an increasing concern and the debate about hiring even more career personnel continues.

In addition to providing information about recruitment and retention, the research revealed that 54.8% of the volunteer members have five years or less experience. This revelation is particularly troublesome in light of the survey results which indicated that the system has some significant leadership problems. The inexperience of the membership poses some significant challenges. A person's leadership ability is certainly influenced by their training and their individual skills, but it is also influenced by their experiences.

Experience is essential for an officer. The collective amount of individual experience erodes even further when one considers that it takes almost a year to

train a volunteer to the minimum acceptable level to be able to respond to a call.

The lack of experience is magnified by the infrequency of working fires.

In spite of performing better than the national experience, there appears to be opportunities for improving the County's retention rate. The survey of the literature identified a wide variety of incentives that have been used to by other fire and rescue companies to induce people to become and remain volunteers. Loudoun County has embraced a number of these techniques with varying degrees of success. The fire and rescue companies traditionally offer benefits such as uniforms, jackets, T-shirts, etc. Additionally, the County provides:

- Workers' Compensation
- Accidental Death, Dismemberment Medical Expense and Disability Income
- Personal Property Tax Reduction
- Free County Vehicle Decal
- Length of Service Retirement Plan

There is no mandate in Virginia to provide a retirement program to volunteers, but Loudoun County has provided this benefit for a number of years. The value of the program an incentive was questioned, however, during the strategic planning process when the perceived high turnover rate in the system was revealed. Nevertheless, the program remains very popular with system members. The cost of the retirement program is approximately \$600,000 per year and the participation in the system is outlined in Table Two, below.

Table Two
Loudoun County Retirement System

Retirees and beneficiaries currently receiving benefits and inactive vested members entitled to benefits but not yet receiving them	232
Current members:	
Vested	579
Non-vested	357
Total	1,168

Source: Loudoun County Comprehensive Annual Financial Report 30 June, 1997.

All benefits vest after ten years of credited service. Members may retire at age 55 and are entitled to \$10 per month for each year of credited service earned after 1 January, 1976 and \$10 per month for each two years of service earned prior to 1 January, 1976 with a maximum benefit of \$250 per month.

Even with the generous benefits package, the results obtained in the surveys by the Retention and Recruitment Committee and by the Bardwell study correspond to the results found in the literature. The results confirm that people become volunteers in Loudoun County for the same reasons that they become volunteers in other jurisdictions and that they quit being a volunteer for the same reasons. The literature also confirmed that the problems currently being experienced in Loudoun County with respect to time constraints and changing demographics are not unique to the County.

Recommendations

It would appear that Loudoun County continues to be fortunate enough to attract a sizable number of new recruits. While the turnover rate is disturbing, it is better than the national norm as well. The County's benefits package would also appear to be at least competitive with other jurisdictions. What then, might the County do in order to improve its recruitment and retention performance? The following recommendations are offered.

Additional research should be conducted to compare the techniques utilized by some of the larger, more successful volunteer systems within the United States in order to determine the advisability of a unified, single approach to recruitment and retention. The Fire and Rescue Commission has established a Retention and Recruitment Committee, but there is no unified effort to address these on a countywide basis. Each company acts independently and is free to accept or reject the Committee's advice and offers of assistance. Therefore, efforts vary.

The Commission should be granted greater authority to intervene when a company is beginning to fail. The Commission has been granted very limited authority to intervene when a company appears to be experiencing leadership problems which impact a company's ability to perform or to recruit and retain members. This may not be the most efficient way to do business.

The County should adopt a uniform set of minimum standards for operational membership in the volunteer system. These standards should include the completion of a uniform application form; a background investigation; a physical

ability examination; a medical examination consistent with NFPA 1582, Medical Requirements for Fire Fighters; and a psychological examination.

The system practice of electing officers on the basis of popularity should be replaced by a process which selects officers on the basis of merit and ability. The system should also promulgate a job description for each rank and a set of minimum qualifications should be established for each position.

Leadership and management training is essential and should be available to all current and perspective officers.

The system needs to get out of the box and investigate non traditional recruitment methods and target special populations for membership, particularly females. The system is more that 70% male and at least one company (Hamilton Fire) does not have any female members. Day care for small children should be provided as an incentive to attract young parents with small children. Perhaps the parents could share daycare responsibilities or an older, retired person might be willing to serve in this capacity. Another option would be to contract with the private sector daycare providers throughout the County.

In a similar vein, the system should recruit more administrative and support members to assume the bulk of the fund raising efforts. This would provide additional time to operational members for training and responding to calls. The system should also explore the possibility of limiting the amount of time required of individual members. For example, it should be possible for a member to obtain the needed training and to satisfy administrative requirements within an allotted duty crew assignment.

Loudoun County is becoming an increasingly expensive place to live. It might be possible to offer some form of housing as an incentive for membership. For example, some systems allow single members to live at the station. In other areas, a family lives at the station in exchange for maintaining the station and grounds. This might improve station security as well.

Additional research is needed to determine the effectiveness of the recruitment effort with the key focus centering on the question of whether or not the proper individuals are being recruited. Approximately fifty-four percent of the new recruits leave the system within their first year of membership. It may well be that Demming's red bead experiment is applicable to this process, i.e. if the system wants to improve its retention rate it may be necessary to improve the quality and suitability of the individuals being recruited into the system.

The greatest opportunity for improvement would appear to lie within the system itself. Thirty-seven percent (377 members) of the system was classified as inactive in 1997 and forty-one percent (417 members) of the system quit during the 1985 to 1997 time period. In two companies, Purcellville Rescue and Round Hill, less than one half of the membership was listed as being active in 1997. In two others, Arcola and Loudoun Rescue, more than fifty-five percent of the members quit during the period reviewed for this project. The situation can be improved if the percentage of members who are active can be increased and the number of members leaving the system can be reduced.

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APPENDIX A
VOLUNTEER COMPANY MEMBERSHIP SUMMARY

VOLUNTEER COMPANY MEMBERSHIP SUMMARY

VOLUNTEER COMPANIES	Current Total Membership	% Membership Making Points FY 97	Average Retention Rate	Length of Service		Gender		Median Age
				0-5 Years	> 5	Female	Male	
Aldie Vol Fire	35	64%	65%	12	23	6	29	35
Arcola Vol Fire-Rescue	31	53%	41%	15	16	9	22	42
Ashburn Vol Fire-Rescue	134	59%	63%	86	48	40	94	38
Hamilton Vol Fire	37	64%	69%	15	22	0	37	42
Hamilton Vol Rescue	22	76%	51%	9	13	10	12	38
Leesburg Vol Fire	80	86%	61%	38	42	16	64	33
Loudoun Vol Rescue	79	69%	45%	52	27	38	41	30
Lovettsville Vol Fire-Rescue	57	80%	59%	39	18	23	34	33
Lucketts Vol Fire	29	75%	66%	11	18	8	21	40
Middleburg Vol Fire-Rescue	39	68%	67%	15	24	16	23	36
Neersville Vol Fire-Rescue	31	62%	74%	14	17	11	20	31
Philomont Vol Fire	42	61%	81%	12	30	6	36	45
Purcellville Vol Fire	40	95%	69%	14	26	4	36	34
Purcellville Vol Rescue	43	38%	66%	22	21	24	19	29
Round Hill Vol Fire-Rescue	50	42%	54%	24	26	18	32	42
Sterling Vol Fire	112	51%	62%	62	50	12	100	31
Sterling Vol Rescue	157	59%	55%	118	39	60	97	32
SYSTEM TOTALS	1018	63%	59%	558	460	301	717	34

NOTE: The above table is based upon information obtained from the Department of Fire and Rescue Services Volunteer Membership Data Base. The above statistics represent membership through October 1, 1997.

COLUMN #1: Current Total Active Membership As of October 1, 1997.

COLUMN #2: The figures represents the percentage of total volunteers eligible to earn points between November 1, 1995 and October 31, 1996 who met the 80-point criteria.

COLUMN #3: This is an average rate of retention by Company. This represents the historical average.

COLUMN #4: This is a count of active membership per Company based upon length of service.

COLUMN #5: Membership Breakdown by Gender

COLUMN #6: This represents the median age per Company.