

Running Head: BARROW VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT RETENTION

Executive Development

Retention in the Barrow Volunteer Fire Department

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CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify this paper constitutes my own product, that where language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

Signed: _____

Abstract

Retention of trained and experienced personnel is a problem affecting fire departments around the country. Retention of responders in the Barrow Volunteer Fire Department (BVFD) jeopardizes delivery of service to residents. Descriptive Research attempted to identify factors influencing BVFD's ability to retain providers and common fire service retention practices. A survey of former members intended to answer the following questions: What are the most common reason members join the BVFD? What actions were effective or ineffective in satisfying member's motivational needs to remain with the organization? What was the primary factor causing individuals to discontinue active membership? What strategies might be successful in retaining future members? Results indicated members left primarily because of employment or family commitments. Recommendations include identifying management methods to reduce demands on volunteer time and implementation of incentives to meet local needs.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction..... 5

Background and Significance 6

Literature Review..... 8

Procedures..... 12

Results..... 13

Discussion..... 16

Recommendations..... 18

Reference List..... 20

Appendices..... 22

Introduction

Retention of trained and experienced emergency responders is a problem affecting fire departments around the country. Losing individuals that have completed numerous hours of training and acquired valuable experience hampers department operations, including delivery of life saving emergency services. This can be especially problematic in small remote communities with limited resources.

Retention of trained and experienced responders has declined in the Barrow Volunteer Fire Department (BVFD) over the past ten years jeopardizing delivery of emergency medical and fire protection service to residents.

The purpose of this applied research project is to identify factors influencing BVFD's ability to retain emergency responders. This shall include an assessment to answer the following questions:

What are the most common reason members join the BVFD?

What actions were effective or ineffective in satisfying member's motivational needs to remain with the organization?

What was the primary factor causing individuals to discontinue active membership?

What strategies might be successful in retaining future members?

Descriptive research shall be conducted to identify issues surrounding volunteer retention, procedures or programs others utilize to retain personnel, and a survey of former BVFD members. Surveys will attempt to identify why individuals joined, why they left, and what the department might have done to retain them.

Background and Significance

The Barrow Volunteer Fire Department (BVFD) is located in the Northern most community of Alaska. Barrow is a rural hub community of approximately five thousand people, primarily Inupiat Eskimo. The community is isolated with the only regular access by daily Alaska Airlines commercial jet service. Prior to oil discovery at Prudhoe Bay in the 1960's and establishment of the municipal government in 1972, most residents relied on subsistence hunting to sustain their families.

BVFD was formally organization in 1970 following the loss of a family of twelve in a house fire. At the time fire protection service mirrored that of early America, consisting of a community bucket brigade or in the winter shoveling of snow. Since there were few roads, a tracked vehicle was purchased to provide early fire suppression, though the slow speed resulted in most structures being a total loss by the time it arrived. Like most organizations, the department has progressed to purchase modern equipment comparable to other areas of the United States.

Recognizing the importance of community support, Chief Thomas Opie recruited respected leaders and those with specialized skills as founding members. Most honored membership in the organization. The department enjoyed unwavering support for nearly two decades.

Over the past fifteen years, the department has experienced a significant rise in the number of emergency calls. As the sole emergency response organization, the department was forced to absorb responsibilities to meet community needs. Emergency medical response was added shortly after fire suppression. This was followed by non-emergency transport and other functions. Increased service demands, as well as

mandated training resulted in many volunteers serving only a few years. Member transition from respected community leaders to a younger generation resulted in the department facing difficult challenges to compete for willing volunteers.

Retention of trained and experienced responders is critical to providing safe and quality emergency services. Alaska Emergency Medical Technician training requires more than 120 hours for initial certification, as well as bi-annual recertification, testing, and continuing medical education. Transitioning from on the job firefighter training to formal certification now requires the same commitment. This combined with other mandates places a heavy burden on the volunteer emergency responder.

Resource utilization is vital in rural isolated communities like Barrow where the available labor pool is largely fixed. While some organizations can expand recruitment efforts to address retention, the population in rural isolated communities does not provide this luxury. Failure to retain trained members increases the risk of injury, as less experienced and qualified personnel respond. This can have disastrous effects, including placing individuals in life and death situations for which they are not properly prepared.

Rapid change from a society based on subsistence to one of a cash economy occurred within a period of two decades. This research attempts to identify factors related to change management in accordance with the National Fire Academy Executive Development course. Leadership must recognize factors that require organizations to change in response to their environment or condition. It must also recognize obstacles that hinder or complicate organizational change. A shift from a subsistence based society to one based on a cash economy challenged a native culture to accept western value systems.

Research is intended to address multiple Operational Objectives of the United States Fire Administration. These include reducing the loss of life to young people under the age of 14, the elderly, and firefighters by retention of trained and experienced personnel. This will enable BVFD to operate more efficiently and deliver quality service. Timely completion of this project will allow the department to respond to an emerging issue in the region.

Literature Review

There is a tremendous amount of information regarding retention of emergency service volunteers. Sources for this research project included; documents and texts written by professional organizations, applied research papers, articles, and other library resources from the National Fire Academy Learning Resource Center. Various publications, journal articles, and other data accessed through the World Wide Web were also evaluated.

Work force shortages in volunteer and combination fire departments around the United States have received significant study for decades. Parker (2004) believes the severity of the problem often eludes the common citizen. People take the emergency response system for granted; believing 911 will always be answered promptly bringing emergency responders. (Parker, 2004)

This is likely one reason many fail to take the problem of emergency responder retention seriously. Failure to recognize the problem may be due in part to today's fast-paced society. Competing interests for an individual's attention and time was identified as one factor affecting retention. (IAFC, 2005)

In the United States Fire Administration (USFA) (1998) report “Recruitment and Retention in the Volunteer Fire Service: Problems and Solutions”, changing trends in society were described as a barrier to recruitment and retention. The report states; “Fire Departments can no longer count on the children of current members following in their parents’ footsteps”. (USFA 1998) Historically, the fire service was an occupation that may transcend family generations. Some consider retention of personnel as one of the most critical issues facing the fire service. (Windish & Scott, 2006)

The USFA report presented opinions of fire service professionals that volunteer recruitment and retention result from a lack of available time for community service and competing interests. (USFA 1998) Snook (1998) identifies time commitments and changing demands in society as a challenge faced by the fire service in “Recruiting, Training, and Maintaining Volunteer Firefighters”. In the “Chief Officer’s Desk Reference”, Windisch and Scott (2006) describe the importance of volunteer time since it is so limited. Stewart (1982) stressed the importance of recognizing volunteers for their performance and contributions.

Meeting the physical and emotional needs of volunteers is critical to making them feel safe and part of the organization. (Snook, 1998) Snook (1998) emphasized the need for modern fire service organizations to adapt including; clearly defining roles, flexibility in training, motivation, and use of managerial strategies to address agency needs.

The need for organizational change and possible transition from volunteer to a combination department is discussed in the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) “Lighting the Path of Evolution: The Red Ribbon Report Leading the Transition in Volunteer and Combination Fire Department”. (IAFC, 2005) Problems mirror those

of other documents including community growth, aging, call demands, and other factors. Solutions to meeting needs included refinement and development of the department, moving from a volunteer system to pay for call, or some form of combination organization. (IFAC, 2005)

Several applied research projects looked at retention in Alaska. Tucker (2004) looked at “Retirement Plans as a Volunteer Retention Tool”. His research included identification of what influenced volunteer retention, actions other Alaska departments were taking, and the effectiveness. The study reported few departments in Alaska were offering retirement programs or health insurance as a means of retention. (Tucker, 2004) Tucker suggests retirement plans can be an effective retention tool, though additional investigation is required. (Tucker, 2004)

Painter (1998) research was entitled, “Volunteer Incentives in Alaska Fire Departments”. While only 29% percent of organizations responded to the survey, he identified volunteer incentive programs as a method to reduce turnover of trained and experienced responders. (Painter, 1998) In addressing research results, Painter (1998) believes “clear, measurable, and realistic criteria must be established”.

Poszywak (2004) researched “Volunteer Recruitment and Retention for Horry County Fire and Rescue”, looking at trends for recruitment and retention and program components. Research identified 45.5% percent were providing some form of monetary compensation, followed by 36.4% with health insurance and 27.3% with retirement. (Poszywak, 2004) Recommendations included development of a comprehensive recruitment and retention program. (Poszywak, 2004) This need was also one of the recommendations for Rockton Fire Protection District. (Stein, 2003)

The need for effective management was emphasized in numerous studies. In “Volunteer Firefighter Motivation and Retention”, Bergstrand (1997) hypothesized firefighter retention could be improved with selected management techniques. He believed that if fire chiefs understood why members joined, they could help satisfy needs to help retain them. (Bergstrand, 1997) Quality management and organizational development was identified as a critical component in the “Lighting the Path of Evolution” report issued by the IAFC. (2005) The ability to address volunteer needs through effective planning, management and organizational change was also a driving theme in “Firefighter Recruitment and Retention Ideas You Can Use”. (Morris, 2004) Marinucci (2003) emphasized retention of volunteers is similar to other employees, including learning why they join and what makes them stay.

Sweeny (2003) focused on motivation of volunteers for Brookline Volunteer Fire Company. This included surveying departments to identify problems and programs utilized to retain motivated personnel. Results indicated annual awards dinners, social gatherings, clothing, length of service awards and financial incentives as common tools utilized to recognize and retain volunteers. (Sweeny, 2003) While the study’s focus was motivation, programs aiding retention were identified as a component to keep individuals active and involved. (Sweeny, 2003)

In research recruitment and retention for Rockton Fire Protection District, Stein (2003) found that many organizations placed great emphasis on recruitment and marketing. These organizations utilized monetary rewards and other incentives to help retain volunteers. (Stein, 2003)

In the report “Recruitment and Retention in the Volunteer Fire Service: Problems and Solutions”, the United States Fire Administration identified many factors that contributed to changes in emergency services. (USFA 1998) These included time demands, training requirements, increasing call volume, operational and societal changes, leadership, and other mandates. (USFA 1998) Many reports cited societal change where both parents maintain full time employment, reducing labor resources available for volunteer community services. (USFA 1998)

The literature review was helpful in developing general survey questions. Reports cited above, as well as countless others seemed to focus on a number of common themes. Societal changes, need for improved organizational management or leadership, the ability of agencies to adapt, recognition of personnel and their needs. This provided some focus to survey former members of the Barrow Volunteer Fire Department.

Procedures

This research project involves assessment of potential retention strategies that might be successful for the Barrow Volunteer Fire Department. It is believed the best method to obtain locally relevant data on desirable attributes is to survey former members.

Membership records prior to 1981 were not available, so individuals who served and terminated service before this date were not included in the population sample. Those still active after 1981 that did complete 20 years of service are included. Membership rosters between 1981 and 2005 were analyzed to identify individuals serving at least one

year, but failing to complete the traditional 20 year period for retirement. Seventy-eight individuals were identified as former members that left before retirement.

The sample population was reduced by identification of individuals that relocated from the North Slope and could not be contacted. This removed 33 individuals, leaving a total survey population of 45.

A written survey was prepared for administration by the researcher. This included a written introduction to insure participants received a standard script explaining research project goals. The survey was written in a simple multiple-choice format in an attempt to focus responses based on general retention problems and solutions.

Participants were contacted by email or phone to schedule an interview for completion of the survey. Emphasis was placed on solicitation of input to improve retention in the Barrow Volunteer Fire Department and that all responses would be kept confidential. Surveys were completed over a four-month period in a location selected by the participant.

One limitation is the small sample. Since individuals actually participated as members in the Barrow Volunteer Fire Department, they are one of the most valid sources for local data regarding retention.

Results

Although the survey attempted to elicit responses to specific questions, many participants willingly provided clarification or explanation without prompting. When relevant, information was recorded by survey questions for future reference.

Nineteen (42.4%) individuals were less than 20 years of age when they became members. Ten (22.3%) were between 20 and 25, 5 (11.2%) between 25 and 30, 8 (17.8%) were between 30 and 35, and 2 (4.5%) were older than 40 years of age.

While all claimed personal interest in community service as a reason for joining, 12 (26.8%) applied primarily because of member encouragement. Twenty-two (49.1%) stated they joined because other relatives were involved. The remaining 11 (24.5%) cited community service as their only reason for applying.

Sixteen (35.7%) respondents were recruited primarily to respond to EMS or ambulance calls. Twenty-seven (60.2%) joined primarily for firefighting operations, with only 2 (4.5%) intending to perform both.

All participants responded the department met their expected needs.

Forty-two (93.7%) received EMS training while serving, 22 (49.1%) completing basic first aid and CPR training, and 20 (44.6%) achieving EMT level certification. Only 3 (6.7%) stated no EMS training was obtained.

Forty-three (95.9%) participants received some level of fire training. Of these 20 (44.6%) received firefighter training including SCBA or self-contained breathing apparatus to enable them to perform interior fire attack. Eighteen (40.1%) received basic firefighter without SCBA, leaving 5 (11.2%) with only introductory training.

When questioned about length of service, 4 (8.9%) admitted to less 6 months, 8 (17.8%) quit before completing a year, 3 (6.7%) remained between 1 to 2 years, 19 (42.4%) completed 2 to 5 years, with 9 (20.1%) active for more than 5 years.

All 45 (100%) participants stated other commitments were the cause of discontinuing department service. Thirty (66.9%) noted active service caused

employment conflicts, 17 (37.9%) citing direct problems with scheduled work hours. Thirteen (29%) claimed they were unsuccessful in performing their jobs the next day because of being up all night.

Fifteen (33.5%) stated they discontinued service because of family. All mentioned this followed the birth of one or more children that now required their full attention.

When questioned about actions the department could have taken to retain them, 30 (66.9%) did not believe options provided would have been successful. Family or work commitments were seen as demanding their full attention and nothing in their opinion would have helped retain them. Fifteen (33.5%) stated more clearly defined duties and responsibilities might have enabled them to feel comfortable remaining.

Thirty-six (80.3%) respondents stated a retention program might have kept them with the department. In choosing programs most likely to have helped, 14 (31.2%) noted pay for call, 6 (13.4%) retirement, and 16 (35.7%) length of service awards. Many felt a mixture would be the most attractive.

All respondents stated they felt their involvement in the organization was valued. All felt the department offered recognition. Concern about member health received mixed results with 9 (20.1%) saying training or personal protective equipment was not provided as it should have been.

Thirty one (69.1%) felt department policies and procedures were not effective in describing volunteer responsibilities. Many commented they were not even aware the department had policies and procedures, including claiming they had not seen one during their period of service.

Eight (17.8%) participants stated they had contributed extensively to department operations. All of these were individuals that joined the department for EMS operational responsibilities. Nine (20.1%) stated service was primarily several hours per week, with 14 (31.2%) being limited to several hours per month. Remaining participants admitted little or no time commitment.

When questioned if changes in department operations would result in them reconsidering active service, 36 (80.3%) stated negatively. All individuals further commented that work or family commitments continued to require their available time. 10 (22.3%) stated they might consider returning, though not at the present time.

All participants stated they would recommend other residents consider joining the department.

Discussion

Though the sample population used to assess issues surrounding retention in the Barrow Volunteer Fire Department was small, results did not present many surprises. As described in the report “Recruitment and Retention in the Fire Service Problems and Solutions” time demands were a major factor in retaining personnel. (USFA 1998) Respondents to the Barrow Volunteer Fire Department survey cited work and family as primary factors affecting retention.

While few respondents seemed to consider leadership and management a major problem, few might associate this with possible alternatives to service delivery. Snook (1998) identified numerous management actions that could be taken to reduce demands on personnel and increase retention. The lack of knowledge regarding policies and

procedures can also be associated with a leadership or management related problem. In “Recruitment and Retention in the Volunteer Fire Service: Problems and Solutions”, organizational issues are considered in the leadership section of the report. (USFA, 1998) The IAFC report identifies items like job descriptions and establishment of expectations as imperative to effective membership. (2005)

Variance between individual values was also apparent. Monetary compensation ranked as the top priority in Poszywak (2004), as it did in this research project. There seemed to be variances for other possible solutions. Poszywak (2004) reported health insurance, retirement, better equipment, enhanced training and better facilities as priorities in order of importance. This study confirmed the interest in length of service awarded followed by retirement. Lack of health insurance as a priority in this research project may relate to the predominate coverage under the Indian Health Service. This means general health care does not usually incur personal expense.

Retirement also ranked lower than other research results. Few seemed interested in retirement in this study, while Poszywak (2004) found it to be in the top three priorities. Tucker (2004) identified retirement plans or length of service award programs as a valuable tool in retention. The low response may be the limited exposure to retirement systems by Native Americans in rural Alaska.

Length of service awards or seniority may be principles more easily understood. Several actually identify length of service awards as a retirement type program. The report by the USFA (1998) discusses retirement and length of service award programs within the same section. Snook (1998) deals with all these issues in the chapter on

motivation. Since fire service professionals classify these programs differently, it may easily be misunderstood by volunteers.

For fire departments to effectively deal with retention, they must understand the problems and available solutions. Stein (2003) recommended that departments conduct exit interviews with personnel to identify why personnel left and to evaluate the effectiveness of recruitment and retention efforts. This will be especially important for organizations like the Barrow Volunteer Fire Department that has a limited labor pool.

Retention of emergency responders is essential to quality service delivery. The department seems to meet most basic needs according to individuals sampled in this research. The problem seems to surround conflicts with work and family commitments. It also appeared members were not aware of policies and procedures guiding department operations.

Recommendations

Based on this research, the following recommendations are offered to deal with retention issues.

The department should conduct exit interviews with members leaving prior to retirement. This will provide valid data to guide management in dealing with changing trends. Since individuals willing to offer explanations, open-ended questions may enable exploration of problems and solutions.

Members should be aware of policies and procedures to understand duties and responsibilities. Individuals citing conflicts with work and family may not have clearly understood obligations.

Strategies should be investigated to reduce volunteer burdens. This might include leadership and management actions like development of specific job descriptions, or reassignment of responsibilities to enable volunteers to remain active.

Efforts should continue to implement a pay for call system. Monetary compensation was identified as a tool that may be effective in retaining volunteers

The department should pursue a length of service award program that encourages long-term service.

Finally, the department should continue to provide training and other services that prepare members to serve. These will aid in personnel confidence and motivation, insuring the department does not sacrifice one successful strategy for another.

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Appendix

Volunteer Retention in the Barrow Volunteer Fire Department

Survey

Date Interviewed: _____ Participant ID: _____

Instructions:

This survey is part of an applied research project for the Executive Fire Officer Program. For consistency in administering the survey, the following instructions were prepared.

No names and other identifying information will be released. The survey is being done as part of an applied research project in hopes of improving retention, or volunteers serving longer with the department. It is hoped completion of surveys and other research can identify methods to keep people involved in the local fire department.

During the survey, please ask me to explain any terms you do not understand or reread any questions. It is important your honest answers be obtained to insure we can make meaningful changes. While specific questions are asked, you are free to clarify your response or provide more information.

Thank you for your time and assistance.

- 1) Age at time of joining
 - a) <20
 - b) 20-25
 - c) 25-30
 - d) 30-35
 - e) 35-40
 - f) 40>

- 2) How were you recruited?
 - a) Member encouragement
 - b) Personal interest in serving
 - c) Relative participates
 - d) Role model of department leaders
 - e) Other _____

- 3) What responsibilities were you recruited for?
 - a) EMS
 - b) Fire
 - c) Both

- 4) Did this reflect your interests in community service?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

- 5) What EMS training did the department provide during your involvement?
 - a) CPR
 - b) First Aid
 - c) ETT/First Responder
 - d) EMT
 - e) None

- 6) What Fire training did the department provide during your involvement?
- a) Basic introduction (PPE/Safety)
 - b) Basic Firefighter without SCBA
 - c) Basic Firefighter with SCBA
 - d) Extensive fire and specialized training (hazmat, SCBA, Extrication, etc)
 - e) None
- 7) How long did you serve as a volunteer?
- a) 1 to 6 months
 - b) 6 months to 1 year
 - c) 1 to 2 years
 - d) 2 to 5 years
 - e) 5 to 10 years
 - f) More than 10 years
- 8) What was the most significant factor contributing to you resigning your service?
- a) Other commitments (*go to question 9*)
 - b) Demands of volunteerism exceeded expectations (*go to question 10*)
 - c) Organization did not meet needs (*go to question 11*)
 - d) Other _____
- 9) If other commitments, were these:
- a) Employment (*go to question 12*)
 - b) Family (*go to question 13*)
 - c) Economic
 - d) Other _____
- 10) If organizational demands exceeded expectations, what was most demanding?
- a) Ambulance responses
 - b) Training
 - c) Fire calls

- d) Other _____
- 11) If the organization failed to meet expected needs, what was the primary reason?
- a) Communication – not made aware of calls, training, etc
 - b) Involvement – did not feel part of the team
 - c) Personal Needs – felt you were asked to give without anything in return
 - d) Other _____
- 12) If Employment, which factor was the primary issue?
- a) Conflict with work hours
 - b) Conflict with management or supervisors
 - c) Work demands required full attention
 - d) Other _____
- 13) If family, which factor was of greatest concern?
- a) Family commitments
 - b) Conflicts with expected service demands
 - c) Fear of injury or death
 - d) Other _____
- 14) What could department have done to retain you as a volunteer?
- a) Increase responsibilities (*go to question 15*)
 - b) Provide additional training (*go to question 16*)
 - c) Provide organization support and encouragement (*go to question 17*)
 - d) Clearly defined duties and expectations (*go to question 17*)
 - e) Other _____
- 15) If increased responsibilities were desired, what could have been done?
- a) Training to perform duties
 - b) Development of skills for job performance
 - c) Assign tasks and duties

- d) Other _____
- 16) If training would have aided retention, which is the most important?
- a) EMS
 - b) Fire
 - c) Both
 - d) Specialized
 - e) All of the Above
- 17) If additional organizational support would have aided retention, which factor was the most important?
- a) Part of the team
 - b) Notification of events and training
 - c) Identification of organizational mission and goals
 - d) Other _____
- 18) Would offering specialized training have helped in your retention?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
- 19) Would an incentive program have helped in your retention?
- a) Yes (*go to question 20*)
 - b) No (*go to question 21*)
- 20) If Incentive Program would have helped, which would be most attractive?
- a) Pay per call
 - b) Retirement program
 - c) Specialized benefits / Compensation
 - d) Length of service award
 - e) Specialized training to prepare for a Fire/EMS career

- 21) Do you feel the department valued your contributions?
- a) Yes (*go to question 23*)
 - b) No (*go to question 22*)
- 22) If No, why do you feel your contributions were not valued?
- a) No recognition
 - b) Poor communication
 - c) Treatment by others
 - d) Other _____
- 23) If Yes, what department efforts acknowledged your contributions?
- a) Recognition by the department
 - b) Communication by members
 - c) Communication by leadership
 - d) Other _____
- 24) Do you feel the department was concerned about your health and safety?
- a) Yes (*go to question 26*)
 - b) No (*go to question 25*)
- 25) If no, why do you feel the department was not concerned about your health and safety?
- a) Lack of education or service provided
 - b) Failure to respond to requests for service
 - c) Lack of training or personal protective equipment
 - d) Other _____
- 26) If Yes, how did the department demonstrate concern for your health and safety?
- a) Education provided
 - b) Services provided
 - c) Counseling or membership support

- d) Other _____
- 27) What could the department do to retain members?
- a) Increased training
 - b) Incentives
 - c) Mentorship
 - d) Cadet/Explorer programs
 - e) Assign responsibilities
 - f) Other _____
- 28) Do you feel department policies and procedures were effective in describing volunteer responsibilities?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
- 29) How much time on average did you contribute as a volunteer?
- a) None or very little
 - b) Several hours per week
 - c) Several hours per month
 - d) Extensive commitment
- 30) If changes were made to department operations, would you consider returning to active service?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
- 31) Would you recommend to other community residents that they consider joining?
- a) Yes
 - b) No