

Running head: FIREFIGHTER PARAMEDIC RETENTION

Firefighter Paramedic Retention in a fire based EMS transport service.

Daniel A. Diehl

Kalispell Fire Department

Kalispell, Montana

Executive Development Course

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CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the 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

The problem is the Kalispell Fire Department has a turnover of firefighter paramedics to larger departments resulting in reduced staffing and increased overtime costs.

The purpose of the research is to identify why firefighter paramedics are leaving this department and identify ways to improve firefighter paramedic retention. The Descriptive Research Method was used to answer the following four research questions:

1. What causes a firefighter paramedic to leave a small career department providing EMS transport?
2. What causes a firefighter paramedic to stay?
3. What efforts have been done in other fire departments similar in operation and size to Kalispell Fire Department to prevent employees from leaving?
4. How can the Kalispell Fire Department prevent losing firefighter paramedics in the future?

My recommendations will include retention training for supervisors, career and personal development of individual employees, changes in current policies and encouragement of more work-life balance.

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## Firefighter Paramedic Retention

### Introduction

Beginning in 2002, the Kalispell Fire Department (KFD) has experienced the loss of several employees. The Kalispell Fire Department operates a fire-based Emergency Medical Transport Service to the City of Kalispell and Flathead County. At the current level of emergency medical service each ambulance is staffed with two paramedics at all times. The goal of the City of Kalispell is to provide the most advanced level of emergency medical service possible to its citizens and taxpayers.

The primary purpose of this applied research project is to identify why firefighter paramedics are leaving this department and identify ways to improve firefighter paramedic retention. The Descriptive Research Method was used to answer the following four questions.

1. What causes a firefighter paramedic to leave a small career fire department providing EMS transport?
2. What causes a firefighter paramedic to stay?
3. What efforts have been done in other department similar in operation and size to the Kalispell Fire Department to prevent employees from leaving?
4. How can the Kalispell Fire Department prevent losing firefighter paramedics in the future?

The current recruiting standards of firefighter paramedics in Montana are limited. In June of each year KFD recruits candidates from across the country that pass the written and physical agility testing. In 2005, 18 firefighter paramedic candidates applied for 9 employment vacancies at KFD. In 2006, 11 firefighter paramedics applied for 4 employment vacancies. The

current staffing at KFD is 32 firefighter paramedics, operating three 24 hour shifts from 2 stations working 24 hours on shift followed by 48 hours off duty.

This research was conducted to determine reasons why employees wanted to leave and also to find answers as how to retain current employees. Having personally retired from a larger metro fire department and having never experienced an employee retention issue, I thought this retention issue was possibly confined to Montana requiring me to collect data from fire departments across the nation.

The research was conducted utilizing the Descriptive Method. The primary instrument for collection of data was a nine question Data Collection Instrument distributed to chief officers around the nation. The instrument was designed to discover similar small career departments experiencing the same problems as the Kalispell Fire Department but also designed to get feedback from any departments. The other source of information used for the collection of data was a ten question Data Collection Instrument distributed to the current employees at KFD to gather information, study results, and compare.

### Background and Significance

The City of Kalispell, Montana is located in the northwest corner of the state with an estimated population of 20,000 and a land area of 8.51 square miles. Kalispell is the fastest growing city in Montana with a 19% population increase in the last 5 years. Kalispell is the county seat and the largest city in Flathead County. The County's estimated population is 82,500, but during the summer months the population swells to approximately 100,000. Kalispell is actively annexing in all directions trying to stay ahead of our current growth rate. The perimeter of Kalispell city limits is surrounded by several volunteer fire departments offering only limited EMS level response which requires KFD to provide Advanced and Basic

Life Support services in these areas. Advanced Life Support units outside Kalispell are not routinely staffed to provide around the clock service requiring KFD to respond to areas 20 minutes one way or more outside the City of Kalispell.

The Kalispell Fire Department began as a volunteer Fire Department in 1891 for the purpose of protecting it's citizens from the ravages of fire. In 1932, the department developed an EMS response system to there regular fire functions and responded with an ambulance in the city and the county on a regular basis. In 1935, the department moved from a volunteer to an all career department with four paid men. This change in staffing required final resolution before the State Supreme Court.

The fire department started to expand in 1970, from 13 personnel to 21. In 2005, KFD added nine new firefighter paramedics and in 2006 added 2 more bringing the total to 32 on the floor. The Kalispell Fire Department responded to approximately 4300 emergency responses in 2005. The department has seen a dramatic increase in call volume the past few years due to the booming population which is expected to rise substantially over the next five years. The Kalispell Fire Department operates with three engines, a ladder truck, four ambulances, a haz-mat vehicle, USAR truck, and a variety of wild land and staff vehicles.

The department is administratively staffed with a Fire Chief, an Assistant Fire Chief of Operations, an Assistant Fire Chief of Prevention, two Fire Inspectors, and two administrative clerks/billing staff. The staffing for each shift is a Fire Captain, two Lieutenants, and seven Firefighter Paramedics with two additional floaters to cover extended vacations, extended sick or injured Firefighter Paramedics. All shift personnel are national certified paramedics, certified firefighters, hazardous material operations or technician, driver operators, and certified wild land firefighters and are assigned to a response unit. They are required to cross-staff apparatus

depending on the type of call. Twenty three of the thirty two staff on the floor have less than 5 years experience in the fire service. The beginning salary for a Firefighter Paramedic is \$46,000 annually plus health, life, and pension benefits. Annual salary increases are determined from a negotiated contract between the City of Kalispell and the local International Association of Firefighters Union.

The City of Kalispell has a permanent living restriction for the fire department requiring firefighter paramedics to live within 15 minutes of a fire station. In July 2006, the median home price according to the Northwest Realtors Association was \$200,000 in Kalispell restricting many of our new employees from purchasing a home.

The firefighter paramedic's at KFD are required to perform many different duties due to the limited size of the department. The KFD has the same management and operational responsibilities as a larger department. Tasks such as fire and EMS training and instruction are done with on-duty staff with no dedicated training officer. Other tasks include code enforcement, pre-fire planning, hydrant testing and flow testing, moderate vehicle maintenance, ordering EMS supplies, maintaining and ordering uniforms and personal protective equipment, and cross training for Hazardous Material Response and Urban Search and Rescue teams. All new employees are required to function as an apparatus operator within one year in addition to passing the fire and EMS training requirements to be removed from a probationary employee status.

The KFD is dispatched by the Flathead County Dispatch Center providing a limited service with no formal emergency medical dispatch training or the inability to dispatch a certain unit to specific calls. It is common many times each month KFD has no resources available to respond to an EMS call requiring the duty officer to transfer those responses to another agency.

Kalispell is a Class 1 city. In Montana those incorporated cities with a population greater than 10,000 and are required by law to employ only full-time employees with no part-time or volunteer staff. All career departments in Montana belong to a state hiring consortium which requires all entry level candidates for hire to test once a year in June. The candidates then apply to the cities of their choice and are considered when vacancies exist. The majority of candidates at the consortium hold an EMT Basic certification only providing KFD with a limited pool of new firefighter paramedic candidates.

The loss of an employee at the Kalispell Fire Department results in several issues when attempting to run an efficient operation. First, depending on what time of year the employee leaves, our ability to replace the employee may be several months due to the hiring policies for the consortium and the availability of qualified candidates. The KFD staffing allows two personnel time off for scheduled leave so if an employee terminates employment it requires the department to fill the position from off-duty staff causing high overtime expenditures. This is a challenge in providing consistent operations, training requirements, and budget management. The rotation of personnel causes changes and disrupts the shift's ability to build an experienced, effective, and safe team.

This project was completed in accordance with the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer (EFO) Program research requirements. This research is related to the United States Fire Administrations (USFA) Operational Objective, to respond appropriately in a timely manner to emerging issues. This project also looks at Adaptive Leadership, Transactional and Transformational Leadership, main topics of the Executive Development course for this Applied Research Project (ARP) was written.

### Literature Review

The basis for the topic is information extracted from research, interviews with experts in public and private employment, and the responses to my questionnaire by chief officers from other fire departments and firefighter paramedics from within the Kalispell Fire Department.

I determined the topic of my research and my search for references after working in the fire service for 20 years and never hearing of retention or a reason why anyone would leave a department once hired. My previous department operated a fire based EMS transport service but was substantially larger than Kalispell. Personnel were switched routinely from ALS ambulances to ALS engines to engines providing only BLS service in an attempt to remove the burnout factor of being on the ambulance everyday until you earned the right to move to a less active apparatus. In a smaller department like Kalispell Fire Department, there are few places to move personnel where they are not actively involved with patient care since every ambulance call in the city also gets an ALS engine response.

I realized after sixteen months on the job in Kalispell Montana retention was a popular topic while I processed the second firefighter paramedic leaving KFD in six months. I began to study applied research projects at the National Fire Academy and quickly learned there was limited information and the research done I disagreed with the recommendations being presented as it relates to the problem (Thomas D. Griffith, 2006). I found several sources as they related to retention of volunteers but found few relevant to my questions. I returned from my first course in the EFO program wondering if I should change my proposal.

I contacted a professor at the local college who also worked at the local hospital and worked several years as a retention specialist for hospitals in Colorado was planning a seminar on the topic in Kalispell. I was unable to attend the seminar however I found an article in the local paper talking about retention after the seminar (Kristi Albertson, 2006). I interviewed Kristin Donahue and she provided surprising insight into a relationship she discovered between emergency room workers in hospitals and paramedics (Kristin Donahue, 2006). She has focused her training on training employees and supervisors about retention. Hospitals are like the fire service have this atmosphere where you must earn your right to be here is a focus of her training and employers must accept employees in the organization and develop ways to keep them instead of ignoring the issue. Preventing employees from leaving also required the hospitals to find other departments to move staff if they requested a transfer or needed a break. This information was very helpful in my research. The relationship in the healthcare industry and the fire service has a similar relationship related to performance during a firefighter paramedic probationary period to the environment existing in an emergency room with hospital workers (Kristin Donahue, 2006). The healthcare industry has been studying and hiring experts to retain staff in hospitals for several years to reduce costs and improve customer service to there patients. Customer service to patients is affected when the employees are unhappy and the doctors refer patients to hospitals where the staff is happy and where a patient will receive better care (Kristin Donahue, 2006).

To answer the question of why employees leave? Several references provided interesting information related to my research. A study completed by the Virginia Department of Health, Office of Emergency Medical Services provided a comprehensive report on retention of EMS professionals. This report looks at the findings, methodology, retention principles, and

recommendations. The report looked at different focus groups such as volunteer or career and different levels of certification. My focus was directed at the Paramedic level, however there is interesting information related to my paper talking about retention when the report talked about increased call volumes, more demanding training requirements, and the changing nature of emergency medical services (Virginia Department of Health Office of Emergency Medical Services, 2004). The report estimated the turnover rate for paramedics at 5-9% and stated little information is available or programs in place to track the reasons for retention of paramedics (Virginia Department of Health Office of Emergency Medical Services, 2004).

I used a questionnaire to gather information about efforts in other fire departments similar in operation and size to KFD. I expected to find more insight into departments experiencing the same retention problems. The fire departments providing EMS transport service experienced turnover however none were experiencing any retention issues similar to KFD or had any formal retention policy. Several provided recommendations to increase pay and benefits (Appendix B).

I used a questionnaire to gather information from the Kalispell Fire Department's firefighter paramedics working in an attempt to research an answer to the questions 1, 2, and 4 in my ARP. The questionnaire I used is similar to one being used by the City of Kalispell as an exit interview questionnaire. I have not received any of the completed questionnaires back from the firefighter paramedics. I have received several verbal responses about a fear of retaliation for being honest. I met with each shift to accumulate feedback in a group setting. Several individuals verbally spoke of the following contributing factors: the problem with responding call-to-call for EMS transporting without a break to complete paperwork, cross staffing apparatus because we don't have enough personnel, the dispatch system problem, trust issues with administration, and the need to have more time away from the job between shifts. This

provided to be very insightful about the history before my arrival in April 2005 and how the information collected in my references talking about developing trust in the organization is required to correct the retention issue or prevent personnel from leaving in the future (National Business Research Institute, Inc., 2006) (Appendix C).

The healthcare industry references stressed the requirement for management to address the retention issue. First, understanding the financial costs both indirectly and directly can be a terrific motivator to address the issue of retention, these references talked about the cost of losing an employee being 150 percent of the employee's salary. All my references from the healthcare industry talk about employees leave their supervisor not necessarily the organization. This is why training of supervisors on retention is so important which is something the fire service has never done or ever had to do traditionally (John Gering, 2002).

The healthcare industry also looked at the cost of the loss of productivity related to an employee who is dissatisfied with management and starts looking for a job. This is considered the ramping down phase and is considered a very stressful time for employees affecting their tardiness, absenteeism, patient care, and safety (John Gering, 2002). I have seen this here at KFD from those employees who left and how their performance declined, starting using more time off, tour trades, and sick leave. This helped me recognize problems and train my staff to identify problems therefore preventing an employee from leaving.

Sharon Cox, a consultant primarily in the healthcare industry stresses engaging the employee with a good manager. Start with training your managers using fundamentals such as integrity, skilled communications, commitment to service, and team building. This information however simple is essential in preventing future loss of employees and currently not being accomplished at the Kalispell Fire Department (Sharon Cox, 2006).

The National Business research Institute helped me locate ways to gather information about trends using the exit interviews from previous employees. I was able to find common complaints as to why employees left KFD. This reference also suggested eliminating or revamping the performance evaluation. This research revealed the evaluation was perceived by the employee to be unfair and misleading to employees about their performance, career advancement, diversity, and discrimination (National Business Research Institute, Inc., 2006).

Michael Terwilliger, former Fire Chief from Truckee California has a retention policy promoting the individual development of his employee's participation in wild land overhead teams (Michael Terwilliger, 2006). This would fit well in our organization since we are in the middle of the Rocky Mountains and would give our employees an opportunity they have expressed interest in developing.

I attended a seminar and interviewed Rebecca Ryan, the company founder of The Next Generation. She talked about her company and the successes they have documented related to retention of employees in foreign countries, State governments and large corporations. She talked about how companies must change the economic, demographic, social, and organizational ideas of the past decade to meet the requirement of the employee in the next generation. Statistics show in 2006, two workers will be departing for every new one coming in (Next Generation Consulting Inc., 2006). This company has extensive research into retention; it draws information from 120 companies, reviewed data from articles, books, and publications plus performed over 4000 exit interviews in different companies and industries (Next Generation Consulting Inc., 2006). This research provides me with specific information and tools to address all my questions, evaluate my fire department, and provide clear and realistic changes necessary to retain our employees.

### Procedures

The review of literature included the National Fire Academy's Learning Resource Center, fire service manuals, fire service journals, on-line articles and websites, and other resource articles related to employee retention.

An introductory letter was developed to send with one of my data collection instruments and served as a primary means of collecting data from similar fire departments around the country. I selected fire departments from a list of chief officers I had attended courses with in the past and classmates in my Executive Development course at the National Fire Academy. I attempted to select cities similar in size to Kalispell Montana and an even number of fire departments that don't transport patients versus those who do transport (Appendix B). Another Data Collection Instrument was used to collect data from current firefighter paramedics at KFD. This Data Collection Instrument was designed to answer research questions about what causes a firefighter to stay at KFD and how to prevent losing firefighter paramedics in the future. A copy of this data collection instrument is contained in Appendix C.

### Assumptions and Limitations

There was a limited amount of research material directly targeted at career firefighter paramedic retention or fire service retention. It was researched and shown to be linked to the healthcare industry in certain applications and it was assumed that employees in the fire service are similar to those in the private sector. It was also assumed that employees in the fire service in this generation are different from generations previously in the fire service. I received 100% of the Data Collection Instruments from those departments selected to be similar in size. I have

not received any Data Collection Instruments distributed to the firefighter paramedics at the Kalispell Fire Department. Although I didn't receive any questionnaires I did have several individuals come to my office and I have met with all three shifts talking about the questions and provide feedback.

### Results

I used two Data Collection Instruments for my research of this applied research project. The first Data Collection Instrument was submitted to a cross-section of fire departments across the country specifically using chief officers from my Executive Development course and other chief officers from other National Fire academy courses. 16 questionnaires were sent and all 16 were completed and returned to the author of this research project for his review and analysis.

The first Data Collection Instrument contained 9 questions. Question 1 and 8 requested the size of the city and the size of the department along with the response volume. This was important to select departments of similar size to get relevant information to my research questions. The size of the cities ranged from 10,000 to 333,000. The number of career personnel from 12 to 435 and the number of responses from 2100 to 20,000. Question 3 requested the certification level of the EMS responder. All departments were a minimum of an EMT-Basic and those departments transporting patients were using two paramedics or a combination of one paramedic and an EMT-Intermediate. Questions 4, 5, 6 and 7 all addressed retention. None of my researched departments showed any retention issues related to questions 4 and 5. Question 6 was designed to generate a response regardless of whether they had a retention issue. Several departments specifically addressed increased compensation while others addressed different work assignments or removing personnel from EMS duties. None of the departments had a retention policy related to Question 7. Several commented, when I complete a policy they would

like to see it. Question 9 addressed training; all responders to the questionnaire agreed manager training would be very helpful even if they didn't have a retention problem. All suggested first line supervisors should be given the training.

The second Data Collection Instrument was submitted to all firefighter paramedics in the Kalispell Fire Department. All 32 questionnaires were submitted to the officers on A platoon and placed in the mail box for each employee to be filled out and returned to me. I made two attempts to submit the questionnaire thinking many of the first batches was lost in the move to our new station location. To date I have not received any of the questionnaires. Many personnel expressed concern about retaliation if they where to honestly complete the form and return them to administration. The questionnaire used questions from the current employee exit interview form and some I created on my own in regard to retention. The questionnaire had 10 questions and did not require any signature or way to identify who filled out the form. The employees were told this information would remain confidential and was to be used for my Executive Fire Officer Program applied research project.

### Discussion

I began this descriptive research project with a specific theory about the nature of this problem in the City of Kalispell Fire Department. I specifically knew there was little or no research in the area of firefighter paramedics and I assumed retention had little or nothing to do with monetary compensation as reported by another EFO applied research project (Thomas D. Griffith, 2006). I felt my study results provided me with information I knew before I started. The majority of other departments suffer no great loss in regard to high employee turnover.

I found the relationship between the healthcare industry and the fire service to be very unique however relevant to the issues of retention (Kristin Donahue, 2006). I believe the fire

service has no idea of the employees of the next generation and we continue to operate on traditional organizational structures instead of understanding how we must adapt to these needed changes required to keep employees in the future (Next Generation Consulting Inc., 2006). I also was surprised by the cost of retention, the overtime or replacement cost, the processing costs, and the productivity cost of an employee when they are preparing to leave (John Gering, 2002). I was very disappointed by the result of my two Data Collection Instruments; I was looking for more feedback and received only minimal information from other departments. The firefighter paramedics here at KFD did not surprise me in failing to fill out the Data Collection Instrument. I feel guilty completing the applied research project without more study research other than the fact the firefighter paramedics provided no information also sent a message that could be interpreted many ways.

In terms of new knowledge for our organization to use, the research is comprehension enough to develop a retention policy and make recommendations for changes to the Fire Chief and the City Council when they consider a retention policy for our city. The reasons why the firefighters did not complete the questionnaire will be a road block when it comes to the implementation of any retention policy.

#### Recommendations

My first recommendations would be work on the relationship between the firefighter paramedics and the administration. This is essential before the other recommendations can work or be implemented. This may include professional assistance from a mediator or counselors who work on developing working relationships, team building, open communication, and personal accountability.

Provide training for managers and employees to understand and identify how to reduce turnover, understanding the costs to our organization, and develop programs to prevent losing firefighter paramedics in the future.

Identify ways to reduce exposure to the EMS transport portion of the job by changing personnel more routinely to ALS engines, reduce the time required for medical report writing using paperless entry, and develop individual training objectives such as wild land overhead teams, hazardous material response functions or urban search and rescue functions.

The fire service should recognize retention is an issue that affects departments differently such as those who provide EMS transport service versus those who rely upon a private agency to transport. This data is also helpful for those fire departments looking to take over the transport function in their city. They should first examine the cost of retention or additional requirements placed upon their personnel before only looking at the revenue produced.

The fire service must also prepare to market themselves for the next generation and understand employees will move more frequently from department to department. The information shows the next generation employee will look for a place to live before looking for a job. The fire service must organize itself through the IAFF or other EMS organizations to collect data related to retention and looks for trends to help manage this issue.

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Appendix A

April 6, 2006

Kenneth Cline  
Fire Chief  
East Wood Volunteer Fire Department  
1284 Dutch Ridge Road  
Parkersburg, WV 26104

Dear Chief Cline:

My name is Dan Diehl and I am enrolled in the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program. I would like to ask that you take the time to complete the attached questionnaire.

This questionnaire will be utilized to research retention of Firefighter Paramedics in fire departments around the country. I am specifically researching some of the reasons firefighter paramedics choose to stay and why they choose to seek employment with other departments.

Please distribute this survey to someone in your operations division. Please choose those individuals that will provide objective answers and complete the questionnaire.

The questionnaire can be emailed to [ddiehl@kalispell.com](mailto:ddiehl@kalispell.com) or faxed to (406) 758-7952.

Thank you for your time and knowledge related to my research.

Sincerely,

Dan Diehl  
Assistant Chief  
Kalispell Fire Department

Appendix A

Firefighter Paramedic Retention Questionnaire  
National Fire Academy  
Executive Fire Officer Program

1. What is the size of the city you serve and what is the size of your department?
2. Does your fire department provide EMS transport?
3. What is the education level(s) for EMS responders?
4. Do you have a retention problem with your department?
5. If you have a retention issue, what have you done to correct the problem and what are the specific issues?
6. If you were a consultant and asked to make recommendations/changes to the fire service, what would those be related to the retention of Firefighter/Paramedics?
7. Does your city or township have a retention policy? If it does please send me a copy.
8. How many responses annually does your department respond?
9. Do you have a supervisor training course related to retention? If not, do you think it would help?

Appendix B

Firefighter paramedic Retention Questionnaire  
National Fire Academy  
Executive Fire Officer Program

1. Do you like to work here and why?
2. How do you feel about the communication within the department?
3. How do you feel about the supervision you receive?
4. Do you feel like you know what is expected of you in your position?
5. How do you feel about pay and benefits you receive?
6. Do you feel you get enough time off work?
7. What can be done to make this job more attractive to you?
8. Do you feel the department has integrity/values?
9. If you were asked as a consultant to improve retention in the Kalispell Fire Department, how would you do it?
10. If you left the department, what would be the reason?