

Running Head: VOLUNTEER RETENTION IN THE SAUK VILLAGE FIRE DEPARTMENT

Volunteer Retention in the Sauk Village Fire Department

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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 Sauk Village Fire Department is predominantly comprised of Volunteer/Paid on Call (POC) staffing. Due to changes in the economy, demographics of the community and other factors retention of Volunteer/POC firefighters has become our most troubling issue. The purpose of this research is to identify what volunteer retention methods are used by both the fire service as well as other National volunteer organizations. The research then identifies what retention methods are currently employed at the Sauk Village Fire Department. The ultimate goal of the research is to present a footprint that helps solve one of our largest issues facing the Sauk Village Fire Department, retention of our Volunteer/POC response.

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Volunteer Retention in the Sauk Village Fire Department

Introduction

The Sauk Village Fire Department is a suburban combination fire department approximately thirty miles south of Chicago, Illinois. It has a paid Fire Chief and Training Officer, a part-time day slot from 6 am to 6pm, and an approved roster of Volunteer/Paid-on-Call firefighters. Even though the fire department is approved to have forty POC's on its roster, the actual number of POC's is typically thirty to thirty-five at any given time. Because the largest portion of department staffing is Volunteer it is critical that the department does everything possible to retain its members.

Once an individual submits an application to the department they are subject to a background check conducted by the Sauk Village Police Department, A National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Standard 1582 compliant physical, issued a complete set of NFPA approved turnout clothing, and put through an Illinois Office of the State Fire marshal four hundred fifty hour Firefighter II Certification program. This presents a tremendous financial and time commitment to both the fire department and the applicant.

Sauk Village's tax base is mostly comprised of residential property taxes. As such funding is limited we have the fiscal responsibility to spend those tax dollars in a manner that provides the citizens with the biggest bang for their buck. With the cost of hiring and training new personnel continually escalating other factors need to be considered. Once a new member is trained and certified we also have the responsibility of meeting their personal needs, keep them motivated, productive, and help them grow within the organization so the fire department's ranks can be filled with experienced qualified personnel.

The community itself has become very transient and economically depressed creating additional challenges to the recruitment and retention of volunteer personnel. The purpose of this research is to identify retention processes for volunteer firefighters. The research will ask three basic questions:

1. What are the retention processes utilized by national Volunteer Organizations?
2. What retention processes are utilized by departments of similar size and demographics?
3. What are the retention processes for the Sauk Village Fire Department (SVFD)?

After answering these three questions, a footprint exists that can benefit other departments facing similar challenges as the Sauk Village Fire Department.

Background and Significance

Sauk Village lies in South Suburban Chicago, Illinois. The southern suburbs of Chicago are within Cook County, Illinois, an area that has long been economically depressed with large areas of low to middle income housing. The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) had large high rise buildings full of welfare recipient families that they have torn down as part of redevelopment of the city. Cook County has subsequently given these displaced families housing vouchers and steered them to the south suburbs where housing stock is relatively inexpensive. With the influx of this population has also come an influx of related gang and drug activity that has placed a tremendous burden on emergency services within the community.

The Village of Sauk Village was developed shortly after World War II. As the service men came home from the war there was a great need in this country for quick cheap housing stock. Since Sauk Village had close proximity to Chicago and was basically farm land

developers quickly threw up single family homes on small lot sizes. Future energy needs in this country were thought to be inexpensive so these homes were poorly insulated and construction materials weren't of the highest quality or dimension. All of this resulted in cheap housing stock that a young couple could purchase and start a family in.

As time went on this same housing stock is now ideal for low income families and thus the previously mentioned gang and drug activity that is prevalent throughout the community has caused a tremendous turnover within the community's population. Working middle class families that don't want their children exposed to these elements in the neighborhoods and schools have simply moved to other communities where these problems don't exist. As working families leave the community rental property owners gobble up the homes and then rent them to anyone with a Cook County housing voucher, further compounding issues within the community.

Because the fire department has to draw its volunteers from the community, the pool of applicants with high school diplomas that can successfully pass a criminal background check continues to decline. The bottom line is once we are able to find an applicant that has the traditional qualities that firefighters possess we must employ proven methods of retaining them so the fire department doesn't have the same turnover rate as the community. The current retention difficulties have resulted in several negative impacts to the department including:

- Increased demand placed upon the fire department training division.
- Lack of experience within the firefighter ranks.
- Rising personnel and training costs.

- Fewer applicants with an understanding and respect for traditional core values typical of the volunteer fire service.

Volunteer retention is by far the number one struggle facing the Sauk Village Fire Department. When answering the third research question, what are the retention processes for the Sauk Village Fire Department (SVFD)? The SVFD currently utilizes a number of retention methods including:

- Annual appreciation dinner including distribution of service awards.
- A \$10,000 life insurance policy for all members.
- Call pay based upon rank and state certifications.
- A dedicated full time Training Officer position to ensure a quality training program is being presented.

Despite these investments, the SVFD is currently looking for other cost effective methods of improving employee retention during a time when ever increasing demands are being placed upon the organization by the community. This applied research proposal takes a look at how other national volunteer organizations and fire departments are addressing these vary same issues through literature review and research.

Literature Review

Managers the fire service and other national organizations know that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find good volunteers. Even worse yet is retaining a good volunteer for any length of time. The United States Fire Administration (USFA) in conjunction with the national Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) performed a three year study on the retention and recruitment of fire service volunteers. The study identified several factors that can be attributed to this anomaly including: economics, time demands, leadership problems, training requirements,

changes in “the nature” of the business, increasing call volumes, Federal and State legislature/regulations, housing costs (in affluent communities), sociological changes, and the aging of communities. (Murphy, 1999)

The study conducted by the NVFC showed that poor leadership was largely responsible for the dwindling number of volunteers. The fire service as a whole does a poor job of community awareness. The study showed that if the community understood the advantages of a healthy well-staffed volunteer fire department, it would be much easier to find volunteers. Most residents throughout the community have no idea what fire departments really do. Fire departments, at best, typically do a poor job of marketing themselves. (Murphy, 1999)

Poor leadership in the volunteer world starts at the top. The days of volunteers electing the most popular firefighter to be the “chief firefighter”, instead of having a “fire chief” to manage personnel, operations, and budgets must come to an end. This old concept has lost a great number of volunteers who see the advantage of a fire officer with sound management skills. Volunteers simply become frustrated and quit. (Murphy, 1999)

Increased time demands on volunteers due to changes in “the nature of the business” i.e. public education, EMS, maintenance, finance and budget, etcetera can be addressed by adding non-fire service volunteers to your department. In other words, you would bring on volunteers to perform strictly EMS tasks, or maintenance, or public education, or some other support function thus helping to relieve the burden of additional time constraints that are placed on volunteer firefighters. This concept may seem quite obvious, but it is often overlooked. (Murphy, 1999)

This concept has been developed further over the years and is evident today by taking a look at “Fire Corps” programs that are being implemented throughout the country. Volunteers give their time freely to perform data/record entry, canteen services, and other non-operational

tasks. This program is designed to be of little or no cost. One may provide t-shirts, baseball caps, and office space and in return valuable services are being provided reducing the time commitment strain being placed on volunteer/POC firefighters. More information about these programs may be obtained by visiting [www. Firecorp.org](http://www.Firecorp.org). (Chairamonte, 2009)

Economics is a major killer to the volunteer fire service. In today's society, two incomes are often needed to raise a family and maintain some level of social status, especially with current housing costs. Corporate America has employees working more hours than ever before, with higher educational demands than ever before as well. Because of this a volunteer's available time is at an all time low. (Murphy, 1999)

Changes in a community's sociological status have an effect on recruiting. A sudden residential boom in a community of larger more expensive housing will attract the white-collar resident. White-collar residents are less likely to volunteer in the fire service than blue-collar residents are. The fire service is a hands-on field, which is more attractive to a blue-collar educated person. Attracting volunteers in sociologically changing communities adds additional challenges to fire chiefs. (Murphy, 1999)

The aging community affects the volunteer fire department in several ways. First, the elderly present an increase in the demand for services which in-turn places a strain on the time demands of volunteers. Secondly, it becomes more difficult to find volunteers in an "aging" community. Sixty year-old residents don't typically make good fire service volunteers. However, their talents may be useful elsewhere, public education, social events, or as driver-operators. This could help to further reduce some of those "additional" burdens placed on volunteer firefighters. (Murphy, 1999)

Federal and State legislature and other outside agency influence has stifled the volunteer fire service. Although unfunded mandates has plagued both career and volunteer fire departments alike, the additional training hours alone placed on volunteers is enormous. As an example the State of Illinois Firefighter II certification requires four hundred and fifty hours of documented training. This would take a volunteer firefighter one hundred and fifty weeks to complete if they trained on three-hour session per week.

Another example is the Insurance Services Office (ISO) grading schedule for community fire protection. This numerical rating system is from one to nine, with a rating of one being the best. A person's homeowner's insurance premiums are often based upon the fire protection rating of their community. According to the ISO rating schedule the documented training requirements for an ISO Class 1 fire department is twenty hours of training per month per volunteer. This goal is nearly impossible to achieve for most volunteer departments. Alternative training methods need to be pursued to help the volunteers achieve these requirements (i.e. distance learning, packet training, etc.).

Now that we have analyzed several negative outside factors that affect volunteer firefighters let's discuss methods of retaining volunteers once we find them. After all, with the expense of protective clothing, training and certification, and wellness programs anything we can do to keep good volunteers is in everyone's best interest. I think it is important to look at the different types of personalities that volunteers have and what motivates them. According to one author there are three basic categories of personalities that volunteers may be placed into, they are: The good neighbors, the professionals, and the adrenaline seekers. (Ward, 1999)

The good neighbors usually live and/or work within the community they serve and really care about the place they live in. The usually have witnessed some sort of tragic event first hand

and have decided to volunteer in order to try to make a difference. These individuals are very dedicated because they have a personal stake in the community. Good neighbors are more willing to participate in things that they perceive will benefit the community. As an example a good neighbor may view training in rural water supply as critical to the community, but could care less about training in fire service hydraulics; because as long as water gets on the fire who cares about the specific scientific stuff? In order to gain participation and support from these volunteers you must first give the training purpose. For example an explanation that proper pump pressure increases fireground safety and efficiency of the fire attack will give the good neighbor an understanding of the benefits of good fire hydraulics. The good neighbor isn't a glory seeker and could care less about recognition or butt-naked firefighting t-shirts. (Ward, 1999)

The next group of volunteers is the adrenaline seekers. This group of volunteers includes the rescue-geeks, and is comprised of those that watched rescue 9-1-1, Rescue Me, Ladder 49, or a whole host of other movies and television shows and think it would be cool to be a firefighter. Adrenaline seekers camp out at the firehouse to do their homework in case a call comes in. These individuals enjoy training as long as it's fun and usually practical oriented. They fight for the nozzle, and need a challenge in order to stay motivated. (Ward, 1999)

Adrenaline seekers join looking to save a lot of lives and property. If they found out that 80% of all calls are typically handled by one company, working fires are few and far between, most patients aren't very sick at all and the ones who are usually die, and few firefighters don't run from burning buildings with a baby under each arm, then they probably wouldn't have joined in the first place. A small percentage of adrenaline seekers like to "create" their own calls. This must be dealt with swiftly and decisively. However, you will find that if you keep adrenaline seekers motivated, they make good volunteers. (Ward, 1999)

The professionals are those volunteers that are looking for a career in the fire service. These individuals often shop for a department to join. They evaluate equipment, training, job potential, and other aspects before choosing where to join. It's not uncommon for them to join a neighboring combination department in hopes of future full time employment. These volunteers seek any and all training, especially in the specialty areas even if there is no need for it in the community in which they serve. As an example they may take a class in air-crash rescue even the closest airport is thirty-five miles away. (Ward, 1999)

In-fighting isn't at all uncommon between "The Professionals" and the "Good Neighbors", so good sound management techniques by administrative staff is a must. In-fighting and backstabbing is detrimental to any organization, and everyone will suffer as a result. Poor morale will lose volunteers quickly and a revolving door syndrome has subsequently been experienced by many departments. (Ward, 1999)

One method of retaining volunteers is to look at what kills firefighters today. In 2008 43.8% of firefighter deaths were derived from a heart attack (United States Fire Administration, 2009). This accounts for more firefighter deaths than any other category. Offering annual NFPA 1582 compliant physicals, fitness programs, and wellness programs will demonstrate to the volunteers that the community recognizes that they are the most valuable asset that the fire department has. (Murphy, 1999)

A performance based awards system is another means of recognizing the volunteers for what they do. The concept is simple and can be accomplished many different ways. One method is to place some fixed dollar amount aside for this annual reward system. Next you assign points to every call, training, or department function that is held throughout the year. Paramedics may get more points than EMT's, officers more than firefighters, etc. This helps to motivate the

volunteers to improve their education status. At the end of the year the points are added up and then divided by the fixed dollar amount. You then simply multiply an individual's total points by this number and distribute their portion of the funds to them. This may not be a lot of money, but if it's distributed at an annual banquet, it can be a nice token of appreciation to the volunteers.

(Holman, 1999)

The point system may also be used to trim any dead weight that the department may have. For example, if you establish a minimum number of points that a volunteer must achieve throughout the year, this would then provide a means of accountability which is also important for a volunteer department to be successful. (Holman, 1999)

Collectively, the literature reviewed for this project displayed a common theme. All of the key issues pointed out in the original study performed by the USFA & NVFC's document: economics, time demands, leadership problems, training requirements, changes in "the nature" of the business, increasing call volumes, Federal and State legislature/regulations, housing costs (in affluent communities), sociological changes, and the aging of communities continued to reappear over and over again.

Procedures

Descriptive research methods were used to obtain answers to the following three questions.

1. What are the retention processes utilized by national Volunteer Organizations?
2. What retention processes are utilized by departments of similar size and demographics?
3. What are the retention processes for the Sauk Village Fire Department (SVFD)?

Once this data was collected it was used to identify what retention methods may be either better deployed within the SVFD, or if not already in place, implemented within the SVFD in order to improve retention of its volunteer/paid-on-call membership. The primary sources of data collection were through literature review and questionnaire. A number of textbooks, periodicals, journal articles, and internet sources were reviewed and previously documented in the Literature Review portion of this document.

The next step was to put together a questionnaire and distribute it with the goal of obtaining a large enough dataset to ensure accuracy of the data being collected. To accomplish this, a subscription to an on-line service called SurveyMonkey.com was obtained. Utilizing this service a ten question questionnaire was developed and a hyperlink to the questionnaire was created. The author had two key staff members of the SVFD answer the questionnaire before it was distributed and then the author received feedback from these staff members in an effort to ensure that the questionnaire would obtain the information that the author was looking for.

After ensuring that the questionnaire was ready to be published and disbursed a hyperlink to the questionnaire was distributed electronically throughout four different organizations: Illinois Mutual Aid Box Alarm System (MABAS), the Illinois Fire Chief's Association (ICHIEFS), the Wisconsin Fire Chief's Association (WFCA), and an Executive Fire Officer's Program (EFO) Yahoo user's group. These groups were selected in order to obtain a diverse dataset with a focus on our immediate region (Central United States). The thought process being that regionally departments would be facing similar issues.

The survey asked a series of ten questions. The first two questions simply collected demographic information about the responding department that could be used to *scrub* the data

so statistical information could be obtained. The remaining questions were designed to obtain information that would help answer the three original research questions. Scoring was predominantly in a Yes/No format. However, the last question was free-form allowing the participant to describe any other retention methods they employ that are not covered by the other research questions. A sample of the questionnaire is contained in Appendix “A” for your review.

Results

The survey results were subsequently downloaded into Microsoft Excel to be calculated and massaged in a format that could easily be interpreted. The original survey results before any scrubbing of the data is as follows:

1. Please provide your contact information below.

Name: 99.3% responded

Department: 96.6% responded

Address, City, State, and Zip: 97.9% responded

E-mail address: 95.9% responded

Phone number: 93.1% responded

2. What type of department do you have?

a. Volunteer: 18.5%

b. Volunteer/Paid-on-call: 13%

c. Combination: 50%

d. Career: 17.8%

3. Is Volunteer/POC retention an issue for your department?
 - a. Yes: 58.9%
 - b. No: 41.1%

4. What retention methods do you currently employ?
 - a. Call Pay: 71.9%
 - b. Training Programs: 77.3%
 - c. LOSAP: 47.7%
 - d. Medical Benefits: 10.2%
 - e. Pension System: 20.3%
 - f. Mentor Programs: 19.5%

5. Do you think improved training methods/programs would improve retention in your department?
 - a. Yes: 52.6%
 - b. No: 47.4%

6. Do personnel issues have an effect on retention in your department? (I.e. personality conflicts/tension)?
 - a. Yes: 52.6%
 - b. No: 47.4%

7. Is poor leadership (somewhere within your organization) a key contributing factor to improving retention within your department?
 - a. Yes: 32.3%
 - b. No: 67.7%

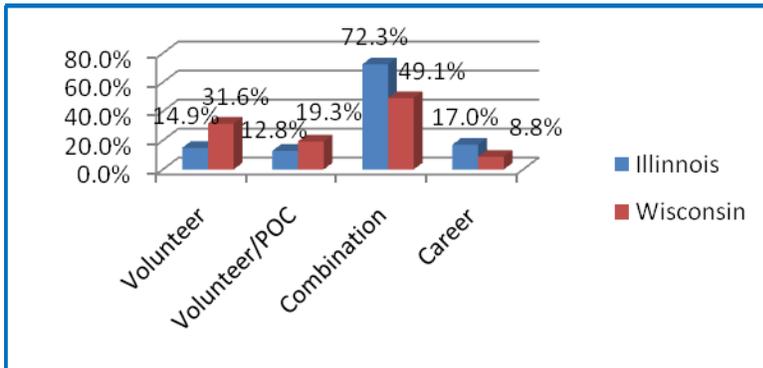
8. Does economic conditions or demographics have a negative affect on retention within your department (aging population/transient community/or other situation)?
 - a. Yes: 60.6%
 - b. No: 39.4%

9. Do you think a participation based medical and/or pension benefit program would improve Volunteer/POC retention?
 - a. Yes: 66.7%
 - b. No: 33.3%

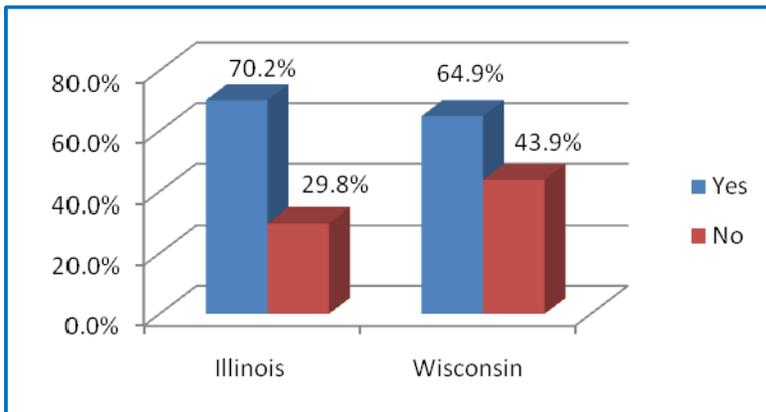
10. Please describe any other programs or changes your department has made to improve Volunteer/POC retention?
 - a. 67 respondents or 45.9% answered this question.
 - b. 79 respondents or 54.1% did not answer this question.

After reviewing the raw data, any responses from any all career departments was subsequently removed. The responses were then grouped by state and since Illinois and Wisconsin accounted for 117 of the responses I used their data to provide clean scrubbed statistical information in order to provide regional information more pertinent to the Volunteer/POC retention situation in the Midwest. The scrubbed responses are as follows:

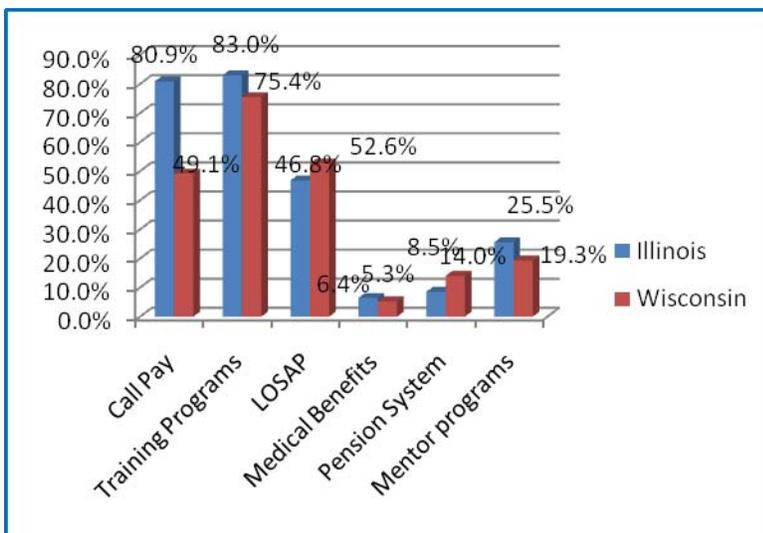
Question #2: What type of department do you have?



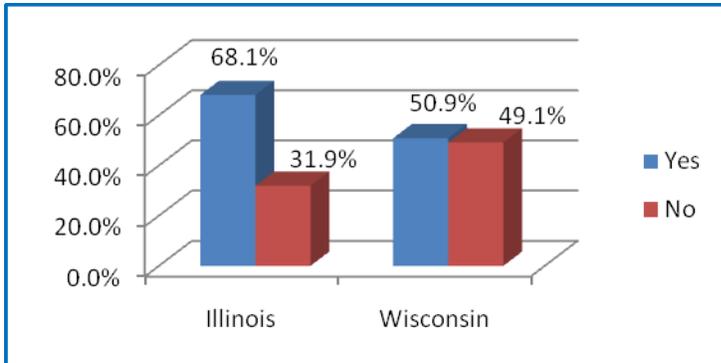
Question #3: Is Volunteer/POC retention an issue for your department?



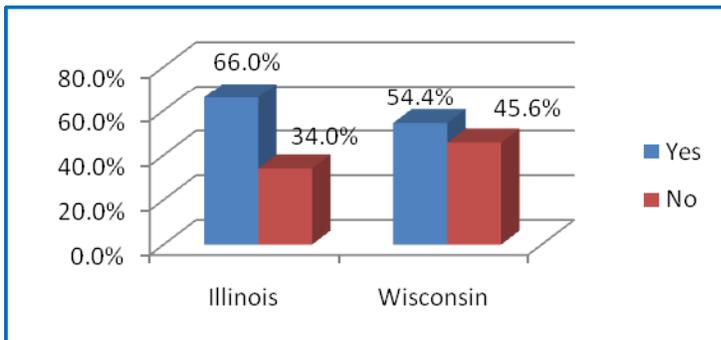
Question #4: What retention methods do you currently employ?



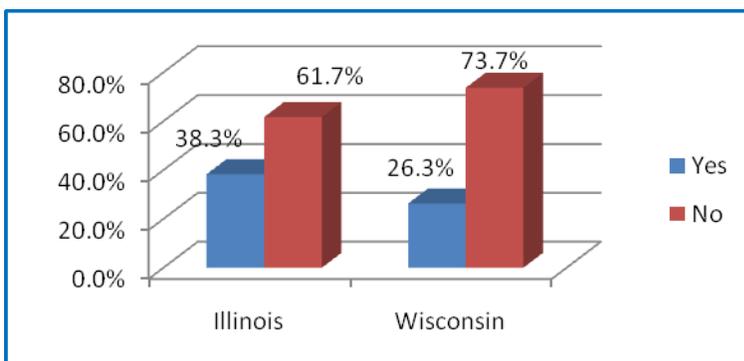
Question #5: Do you think improved training methods/programs would improve retention in your department?



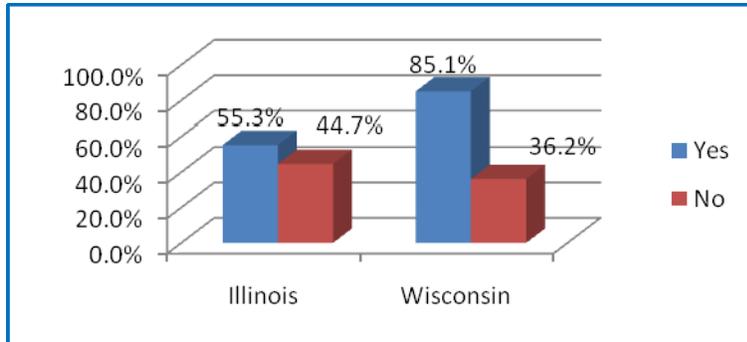
Question #6: Does personnel issues have an effect on retention in your department? (I.e. personality conflicts/tension)?



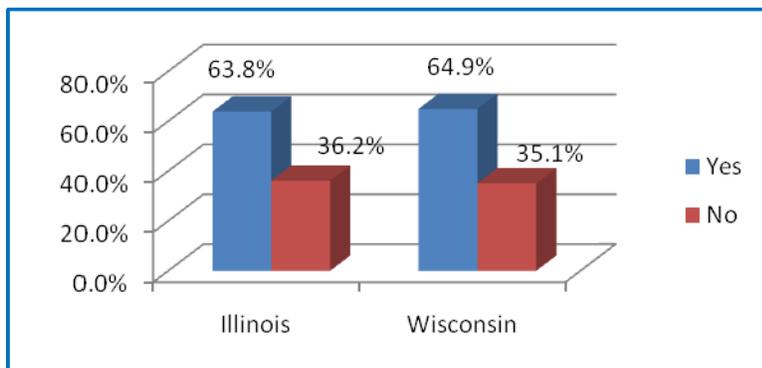
Question #7: Is poor leadership (somewhere within your organization) a key contributing factor to improving retention within your department?



Question #8: Does economic conditions or demographics have a negative affect on retention within your department (aging population/transient community/or other situation)?



Question #9: Do you think a participation based medical and/or pension benefit program would improve Volunteer/POC retention?



Question #10: Please describe any other programs or changes your department has made to improve Volunteer/POC retention?

Because question ten was designed as a free form answer in an effort to obtain ideas that hadn't already been discussed, the responses collected from Illinois and Wisconsin by state is as follows:

Illinois Responses:

1. Created part-time positions that allow members to make a little extra income working hours at the station. Tuition reimbursement. Currently working out a way to give a limited amount of paid time off for those that work a given number of hours.
2. We strive to be highly visible in our community to help with customer relations and it lets our men take pride in what they do.
3. We get young people with aspirations to be career FFs. They stay for 3-4 yrs, get CFFII, etc. go to medic school, start testing, they get hired and they are gone due to IAFF pressure. We hire and train 12-15 FFs every year.
4. I believe incentives work for POC retention. Training, deferred savings, high attendance send two POC's to FDIC or Fire Expo.
5. Gave different people different responsibilities other than as an officer.
6. Annual appreciation dinner with response awards, company citations. Ref Question #5: I think we need to re-tool our training program. We offer great training we just need to re-think the timing, possibly use JPR's Ref. Question #6: The tension between volunteer and career has an effect. Ref. Question #8: I think that the world we live in (economy, busy children, etc.) makes it difficult for volunteer service. If you have not done so, check out www.vcos.org and read through their Ribbon Reports.
7. Many, programs. Building a unity between firefighters is the beginning. The traditions of the Fire service, buddy system, Maltese cross, St. Florian and others cement the group.
8. Lower Interest rates on Home Mortgages
9. Opportunity to work part-time shifts, assist with public education programs and special teams. Standardized payroll system.
10. Our POC program is aimed at non-firefighter students who are trying to get into the fire service as a career. We start at the Explorer level, and then they move to Interns, and finally POC. We do not allow any current firefighters on other departments to fill these positions. The biggest thing our POCs need is the opportunity to do more on the fireground once they have completed their FF2 classes. Our program is still relatively new and all in all it is working pretty well.
11. provide life insurance
12. We use a stipend program designed around certifications. There is a monetary stimulus for each approved certification once all qualifications are met. Generally if you meet the requirements you are part of \$60,000, dependent on the certification you have and maintain. We put 5% per hour worked in to ICMA pension program and they can contribute as well. Our shift program is based on 12 hour and everyone is required to work a minimum of 36 hours per month. Promotions are based on testing rather than the good old boy method and staff looks at that as a much better way to promote.
13. Increased training opportunities preparing for possible career opportunities
14. Given the current economic situation, even the traditionally strong volunteer fire departments are having issues with recruitment and retention. Providing educational benefits beyond the traditional firefighter/EMS training is something to consider, such as college scholarships to attract the young kids that are typically the majority of volunteer firefighters. Kids today seem to want the benefit of promotion without working towards it, adding a step in the firefighter rank might be a reward that would please this new generation of kids that are looking at the volunteer fire service.

15. We received SAFER money for recruitment and retention. We now pay our paid-on-call members for attending training. This has resulted in a slight increase in attendance at weekly trainings.
16. Interesting & more intense trainings, group trips to sporting events at least 3 times per year.
17. better screening of applicants, provide necessary training at no cost

Wisconsin Responses:

1. We have run out of ideas and have reached the point of frustration. We would have loved to begin the LOSA program, but available funding to start and then keep it feasible has been a BIG issue.
2. Call back bonus. \$50 per POC is placed in an account every month. If a POC makes 70% of the training classes, this bonus money is divided out on a per call basis. This is an incentive to make sure they attend training and come back for calls.
3. We try and recruit home town members because they are more likely to stay and not move away, being a small town they seem to take a little more pride in there job.
4. Explorer Program
5. We actually have a taskforce working with a couple other departments in Wisconsin on this very issue. We also have a retired member who is working with us on recruiting and awareness issues within the community.
6. I have been successful in recruiting people. The ones that have left are because of retirement or personnel conflict.
7. For us the issue is not retention. It is recruiting. Same deal, different end of the spectrum
8. We need more web based training the current method scares people away and also is difficult for some because of work schedules.
9. The career personnel are required to participate with the paid by call personnel in all training activities. Paid by call personnel may be on duty with the career personnel on their own time. We are a non-union department so we don't have those issues. We have several special incident groups that any member can join. Water Emergency Team, includes dive, rescue, evidence recovery, ice rescue High and low angle rescue, RIT unit, collapse, fire investigation, 1st Responder Medical, vehicle extrication. The key is keeping people interested, ability to respond to incidents, provide quality training that is worth their time. Train-Train and no responses and personnel loose interest. Give them plenty of activity so they feel they are making a difference in their community.
10. Annual appreciation dinner. Treat each member with respect and make them feel like a member of the team.
11. I am fairly new here as the Fire Chief, personnel get a \$50,000.00 life insurance policy as well as the LOSA. What I have seen so far is that since the economy is so bad they are working more at there primary jobs and spending the free time with family. I think there has been a great impact on POC retention and recruitment due to the current economic status.
12. Those on the department stay its recruiting new firefighters. Too much time away from families. Too much mandated training and new programs coming at us.
13. Opening up the residency requirement to allow for "out of town" personnel to work for organization.

14. Pay for certification up to FF2 and EMT - I
15. Our members are paid a quarterly "stipend" officers receiving more than regular members. Chief \$2500yr, Assistant Chief \$2000yr, Captains \$1250yr, Regular members \$1000yr Probationary \$750 That said it's chump change in regard to the real amount of time, personnel sacrifice and deeds done without reimbursement such as repairs, reconditioning, remodeling of storage space, training nights, weekend training and so on. Chief is also required to attend Village Board meetings twice a month. In our case we have 2 monthly FD meetings and the Village also holds 2 meetings per month. Chief averages 15 hours a week doing work in regard of the FD not counting the 4 meetings a month he attends for FD and village as well as meeting at the county level.
16. We allow, encourage and support professional development opportunities for our POC members.
17. Treat the firefighters fair and equally. One big negative for retention of firefighters is the increasing training requirements.
18. Good management. We make sure our people are treated right and treated well.
19. We are improving our training program and implementing a one person point of contact for the POC's. We will also improve our training schedule so that the POC's will know exactly what we are training on month to month.
20. We implemented a recruit academy to work in conjunction with the mentoring program that I believe has helped put new firefighters online quicker and feel more comfortable immediately with the other department members. I believe that also that you need to have good rules and regulations, quality training and discipline within the organization to improve retention. Most of our openings occur due to time constraints or leaving the area.
21. Retention is not a major problem. I think #8 describes what does effect more than anything. Job locations and family time are the bigger issues. Getting persons interested in joining because of the time commitment with schooling and all is the larger road block. Mandates are a big issue. There will always be members coming and going, it being a major issue with us is questionable.
22. Started an association to get other members involved and become leaders in a less professional atmosphere.
23. Better training, to get members more involved. Letting people know when a job is done well, not just the negatives.
24. None at this time but I am looking into a few things.
25. Fortunately retention has not been a problem for our department. We are authorized a maximum of 55 members and currently have 49. We do not pay on call as the membership is very opposed to that philosophy. However LOSAP has had a huge effect in retention - the membership has contributed significant additional funds of their own through the city's contribution to this program. In six years we have over \$300,000 in the program. It will be a tremendous asset to a young ff when he/she turns 60.

Discussion

The findings of the applied research suggest that the Blue Ribbon Report published by the International Fire Chiefs Association has validity. When you consider the major contributing factors cited for poor Volunteer/POC retention: economics, time demands, leadership problems, training requirements, changes in “the nature” of the business, increasing call volumes, Federal and State legislature/regulations, housing costs (in affluent communities), sociological changes, and the aging of communities (Ward, 1999), the questionnaire responses indicate that the Blue Ribbon Report is on target.

As a result the following observations can be made:

1. Participation based medical benefits and pension programs are the least implemented methods, however through feedback received via questionnaire this is an area that should be explored further. These methods cannot be implemented without significant funding, thus is probably the reason only a few departments have implemented them. Certain states have implemented these programs through legislative efforts removing the financial burden from municipalities (Pennsylvania for example). I have had preliminary conversations with the Illinois Fire Chief’s Association about started a similar effort here in Illinois.
2. Current economic conditions appear to have a significant affect on retention. 55% of the respondents in Illinois and 70% of those from Wisconsin have indicated that time demands and economic conditions have a negative affect. Methods of lessening time demands placed on Volunteer/POC firefighters should be sought. With dual incomes being required to raise a family, a volunteer’s available time is ever decreasing.

3. 66% of the Illinois respondents indicate that personnel issues have an impact on retention. This would suggest that better leadership should be developed throughout one's organization.
4. Several responses to question ten indicate that either increased training demands or quality of training is impacting retention rates. Personnel like to be challenged, training needs to be fresh and innovative. Non-traditional methods of training should be pursued wherever possible. On-line programs/distance learning is just one possibility. In any case this is one area that requires a significant investment by the municipality.
5. The responses to question ten also suggest money is a key issue, again, probably due to economic conditions. Any changes in this area will have a financial impact on a department. A few suggestions would include: Departments that pay their personnel quarterly or annually may want to consider bi-monthly payroll, thus placing money in one's pockets now, not quarterly or annually. Giving bonuses for meeting participation minimums is another possibility.

Recommendations

The findings suggest that the SVFD could pursue one or more of the following in an effort to improve Volunteer/POC retention:

- Some form of medical benefits and/or pension program tied to participation based criteria.
- Increase the existing call pay.
- Bring on civilian members to perform some non-firefighting duties reducing some of the time demands being placed on existing personnel.

- Continue to pursue changes in state legislature to help fund the recommended programs (participation based pension and benefits).

References

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Ward, E. (1999, October). Understanding Volunteers. *Fire Chief* , pp. 36-38.

Appendix A

Questionnaire posted on <http://www.surveymonkey.com>

1. Please provide your contact information below.	
Name:	<input type="text"/>
Company:	<input type="text"/>
Address:	<input type="text"/>
Address 2:	<input type="text"/>
City/Town:	<input type="text"/>
State:	<input type="text" value="- select state -"/>
ZIP/Postal Code:	<input type="text"/>
Email Address:	<input type="text"/>
Phone Number:	<input type="text"/>
2. What type of department do you have?	
<input type="radio"/>	Volunteer
<input type="radio"/>	Volunteer/Paid-on Call
<input type="radio"/>	Combination
<input type="radio"/>	Career
3. Is Volunteer/POC retention an issue for your department?	
<input type="radio"/>	Yes
<input type="radio"/>	No
4. What retention methods do you currently employ?	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Call Pay
<input type="checkbox"/>	Training Programs
<input type="checkbox"/>	Length of Service Awards Program (LOSAP)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Medical Benefits
<input type="checkbox"/>	Pension System
<input type="checkbox"/>	Mentor Programs
5. Do you think improved training methods/programs would improve retention in your department?	
<input type="radio"/>	Yes
<input type="radio"/>	No

<p>6. Does personnel issues have an effect on retention within your department (i.e. personality conflicts/tension)?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p>
<p>7. Is poor leadership (somewhere within your organization) a key contributing factor to improving retention within your department?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p>
<p>8. Does economic conditions and/or demographics have a negative affect on retention within your department (Aging population/transient community/or other situation)?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p>
<p>9. Do you think a participation based medical and/or pension benefit program would improve Volunteer/POC retention?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p>
<p>10. Please describe any other programs or changes your department has made to improve Volunteer/POC retention.</p> <div data-bbox="246 1150 836 1270" style="border: 1px solid black; height: 57px; width: 363px;"></div>