

Running Head: VOLUNTEER PARTICIPATION: EVALUATING THE CAUSES

Volunteer Participation: Evaluating the Causes of a Progressive Four Year Decline

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Abstract

The problem was that Wolfforth Fire and EMS, over the past four years, had a progressive decline in volunteer participation in regularly scheduled training. This lack of participation had contributed to a decrease in efficiency and effectiveness in emergency response.

The purpose of this research was to identify possible causes why volunteer participation had decreased and develop possible recommendations to improve involvement.

A descriptive research method was employed wherein these questions were answered: a) What is the current trend of volunteerism nationwide?, b) What factors influence volunteer participation in fire and emergency services?, and c) What strategies have been shown to improve volunteer participation in fire and emergency services?

A thorough literature review concerning volunteer participation was performed to ascertain current trends at both the local and national levels. A questionnaire was developed and distributed to command staff of similar departments. Three personal interviews were conducted with chief officers of similar departments and one personal interview with a regional representative who was well-versed in volunteer activities.

The data derived from these sources was analyzed and subsequently demonstrated that there were multifarious aspects that exacerbated the decline in volunteerism. These influences included: economic challenges, social and family concerns, time constraints, and generational issues.

Recommendations were derived that addressed the issue. Among the solutions presented were needs for: effective leadership; consistency in expressing gratitude; avoiding apathy; awareness of generational traits; and adequately addressing volunteer needs.

Certification Statement

I hereby certify that 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: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Introduction

The problem is that for the last four years, Wolfforth Fire & EMS has experienced a progressive decline in volunteer participation—in training, fire call response, and departmental functions. The department provides fire, life safety, and emergency medical services to not only the 4,170 people composing the citizenry of Wolfforth, but also to an approximate population of 15,000 in the 98 square mile response area. Aside from these normal response duties, the department provides, through volunteer participation, Hazardous Materials response for a 15 county region in the Panhandle of Texas. The city was formed in a time of urban sprawl from the nearby city of Lubbock. The aforementioned lack of participation has contributed to a decrease in efficiency and effectiveness in emergency response.

The purpose of this research is to identify the causes of decline in volunteer participation and to develop recommendations to improve involvement. A descriptive research will be used to answer the following questions: a) What is the current trend of volunteerism nationwide?, b) What factors influence volunteer participation in fire and emergency services?, and c) What strategies have been shown to improve volunteer participation in fire and emergency services?

## Background and Significance

Wolfforth Fire and EMS was established in 1956. It had been an all volunteer organization until four years ago when it was changed to a combination department. The number of volunteers participating in the department ranged from a humble beginning of a very few to a full complement of 36 names currently on the roster. Obviously, the number of names on the roster is not the problem, but rather a lack of participation. The transition to a combination department was made with input from the entire organization and city government. It was a move to improve the department by decreasing response times and providing faster care. It was

the desire of the fire department membership to provide care faster, but we have learned, unfortunately, that faster is not always better.

Since the implementation of paid staff, our overall participation by volunteers has decreased. Prior to our transition, training was always well-attended and command/retention of the subject matter seemed good. The current lack of participation has become evident recently on fire and EMS scenes when rudimentary functions are inadequately performed. Some of the most recent examples include:(a) volunteers inappropriately utilizing hose streams; (b) an apparent lack of knowledge of departmental procedures; (c) lack of knowledge of response procedures, rules, and regulations; (d) improper usage of ventilation; (e) confusion with the basic aspects of patient care; and (f) a documented increase in near-miss incidents - i.e. poor engine placement that nearly resulted in a second accident. Wolfforth Fire & EMS has always been proud of the services provided, but now, with the noted decrease in participation at regularly scheduled trainings, the department efficiency and effectiveness has been compromised. Because city government cannot afford to hire a complete paid staff capable of adequately handling the call volume of our service area, Wolfforth Fire & EMS must have participation of volunteers. If probable solutions are not investigated and needed changes implemented, the efficiency in the future will only further decline.

This problem is directly linked to the Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP) – Executive Development Course, Unit 3: Change Management. A technical knowledge change must be gained by volunteers through stringent (and more frequent) training. Also required, through adaptive change, is a revamping of beliefs to reflect a drive focused on improvement and advancement. This research supports one of United States Fire Administration (USFA) operational objectives, that being to respond appropriately and in a timely manner by changing

people's knowledge base, as well as improving the determination and drive for a more productive fire service.

### Literature Review

In an effort to more completely evaluate trends of volunteer participation, research was conducted on not only fire service trends but also the changes in volunteer participation of other organizations. The purpose, then, of this literature review is to examine organizations and national trends as compared to the fire service.

On April 21, 2009 President Barack Obama signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act. President Obama "called on Congress to create new service and volunteer opportunities for Americans that will help to build a stronger country. This legislation answers his call. It will launch a new era of service that will give Americans of all ages the opportunity to help our nation recover and make progress on education, health care, energy concerns, and other key goals by volunteering, whether it is helping students achieve in school, weatherizing homes and greening communities, rebuilding cities in times of disaster, feeding the hungry, helping seniors live independently, and much more." (ServeOhio, n.d.) The very language of this bill was written to help increase American volunteer effort. This is in direct response to the national trend - noted by the new administration - of decreasing volunteerism. The federal government has now taken an active role in trying to change volunteer participation.

Gavin Leonard (2006) suggests that two distinct volunteer approaches exist:

1. Charity -- an approach that few people continue to use. It means helping somebody with little or no regard for what the people or group of people with little or no personal involvement in the process. There is an underlying assumption that anything a volunteer does is helpful.

2. Solidarity – an emerging approach which encompasses a person volunteering for the benefit of the common good. People are more likely to volunteer in order to promote a common cause, as it makes them a part of an organized movement.

Steve McCurley (2007), in his article entitled *Keeping Volunteers Engaged*, lists several reasons why maintaining trained volunteers is of utmost importance. He explains that with the loss of a volunteer comes a high price, thereby making retention much more beneficial than recruitment. With the loss of a volunteer there is a loss of knowledge, loss of current trust and relationships, and an outlay of money for replacement training, not to mention the losses incurred from accidents and mistakes directly attributable to inexperience. McCurley states that to retain volunteers, the organization needs to be active, not waste their time, let them do the work they want to do, thank them for their efforts, and constantly evaluate their satisfaction.

The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) posits that the national trend of volunteerism is in a steady state of decline. The NVFC has published literature showing significant characteristics and statistics pertaining to the fire service. Among these, are:

- That volunteers comprise 72% of the firefighters in the U.S., and that
- Of the 30,185 fire departments in the U.S., 21,168 are all volunteer.

According to their figures, the numbers of volunteer firefighters in the U.S. have experienced a steady decline in the past twenty years. "Retention and recruitment remain a challenge for our volunteer fire and emergency medical services," said Philip C. Stittleburg, Chairman of the NVFC. "Statistics show that the number of volunteer firefighters has declined as much as 10% over the last 20 years, yet our nation relies on the volunteer fire and emergency services now more than ever." (National Volunteer Fire Council % United States Fire Administration, n.d.)

The NVFC also states that retention of volunteers is a major issue being addressed by the

National Volunteer Fire Administration and United States Fire Administration. Several factors identified as contributing to this decline are time demands, training requirements, call volume, changes in sociological conditions, poor leadership, increased use of combination departments, and internal conflict. (Department of Homeland Security, National Volunteer Fire Council, & United States Fire Administration, 2007)

Some investigation on the Internet revealed an interesting website - [governinginamerica.com](http://governinginamerica.com). This website allows an in-depth look at volunteer statistics by state and can compare national numbers. The site provides the ability for the user to take a better look at individual states and will even provide a breakdown of the specific area of volunteerism. This site serves to support the aforementioned theories that volunteerism is, in fact, in decline. In the state of Texas, there is an illustrated decline in volunteers since 2005. Along the same line, the total hours volunteered also shows a progressive four-year decline. One last bit of data collected showed that among the areas for volunteering, the civic portion received only 4.9% - the second smallest, only larger than sports and arts which received a minuscule 2.4%. (These charts are available in Appendix A). (National & Community Service, 2008)

In an article in *Fire Chief* magazine, six chiefs used a round table approach to evaluate combination departments. Among the many issues discussed were items such as approaches to training, equipping of membership, settling firehouse tensions, and avoiding double standards. Regarding training, the consensus of this article was that the volunteers must be included in decision-making, utilized in training, and must have a voice. They must be constantly encouraged to participate and their participation must be considered worthy. Aside from ensuring participation, many of the contributors expressed concern about the need for adequate and accurate communication. Chief Donald F. Warden -Director of Emergency Service

Corporation of the Town of Wasaga Beach, Ontario - when asked about the best advice for transitioning a department, made a very simple reply: “communication, communication, communication.” (Hutchens, Paulsell, Ray, Scott, & Warden, 2005)

There are several Applied Research Projects (ARPs) concerning volunteer participation. The first is by John P. Oprandy (2007)– Albermarle County Fire Rescue – who identified, in his work, that volunteers are the most effective in organizations where their role is widely understood, valued, and showed through active involvement. Oprandy also emphasized the need for effective leadership - to increase retention and improve the satisfaction level of the volunteers.

Robert Mitchell (2002) - Millcreek Township Bureau of Fire – cites, in his work, that volunteers accepted the need for help from career firefighters but did not want to lose their identity. Mitchell indicated (from the perspective of the members the Millcreek Township Bureau of Fire) that some form of incentive was of value and stood to increase volunteer participation.

Tracy B. Lyon (2006) – Gig Harbor Fire – determined by his research that maintaining open lines of communication was paramount to the success of the volunteer organization, and included that volunteer input was beneficial, if not essential. Volunteer involvement in the teaching of fire fundamentals and training evolutions was paramount.

Jack Smith (2006) - North Slope Borough Fire Department - investigated the retention of volunteer responders and found that his department was losing volunteers due to employment and family commitments. He recommended reducing time constraints as much as possible and implementing incentives to his volunteers. The incentives were not-so-much centered around fiduciary tokens but more about recognition and signs of appreciation.

David Burke (2007)- Duval-King County Fire District #45 - researched the loss of his volunteers and found that employment requirements were causing a reduction in participation. He suggested that a flexible approach to participation be evaluated. He also stressed implementing a family/social interaction to lessen the burden members felt by being away from their families.

Peter Siecienski (2000) - Danbury Fire Department - researched his department's declining volunteer participation and developed a strategy of mentoring his volunteers. His tenured firefighters were encouraged to train and encourage younger volunteers. He found that this approach fostered a better team-like environment. His volunteers learned the mission statement of the department easier and felt like actual team members while following that mission. He felt his retention had improved with the mentoring program.

The final evaluation in the literature review centers around leadership (or the lack there of) in precipitating volunteer decline. *Volunteers: How to Get Them, How to Keep Them*, by Helen Little (1999), identifies that leadership is a key component in maintaining active and motivated volunteers. The leader must be innovative, understanding, dedicated, and a good listener. There is a profound belief that volunteer departments lack leadership. It must be noted that true leadership takes time, patience, skill, knowledge, and appreciation.

This literature review has revealed that multiple factors have contributed to decreased volunteer participation. Suggested methods to counteract this decline include insuring that volunteers: 1) are made to feel welcome, 2) are encouraged to participate and train, 3) feel like their families are welcome and are considered to be an integral part of the organization. The fire service, by its very nature, is demanding and requires its own definitive due diligence-training, safety commitments, and discipline. Strategies shown to help were: a) obvious displays of

appreciation, b) defined roles and responsibilities, c) effective and consistent leadership, d) active mentoring programs, and e) flexible schedules.

### Procedures

This research utilizes a descriptive research approach. The objective, in this research, is to evaluate the lack of volunteer participation in departments similar to Wolfforth Fire and EMS and to discover what changes their leadership has implemented to address this decline. A literature review of associated material was performed at the National Fire Academy Learning Resource Center while in attendance at the Executive Development class. Aside from the data collected in this review, magazines, websites, and books were also reviewed upon my return back to Wolfforth.

Next, a questionnaire/survey was developed and distributed to approximately two hundred upper level officers at the municipal school at the Brayton Fire Field on the campus of Texas A&M University. The questionnaire was designed to encourage answers from the officers that have implemented changes in their departments. The questionnaire is in Appendix B for review.

I also interviewed three different chiefs from departments with not an exact, but similar make-up to mine. These chiefs were selected for a number of reasons: proximity to my department, size of staff, tenure in the fire service, interest in the outcome of research, and willingness to participate. These interviews were carried out in a relaxed (but formal) setting in an effort to encourage truthful, yet honest and rational, responses. My line of questioning for these interviews centered on the actions and changes these leaders have implemented to improve volunteer participation in their departments. The interviews lasted from approximately one-half

hour to one and one-half hours. Although being far from exhaustive, the basic list of questions used during the interview process is in the appendix.

Finally, because of his extensive experience in working with volunteers, I chose to interview my father. He has done post-graduate work in church related issues and I was aware of the subject matter that was the object of his focus in that effort. I simply asked him what he thought about the state of volunteerism today. His responses were very revealing concerning an external issue that bears much relevance to the discussions presented in this paper.

### Results

The literature confirmed that a decline in volunteer participation is a systemic malady that permeates the fire service. The literature also reveals that the problem is multifaceted and, as such, will require a complex and disciplined approach to arrive at a solution. The factors which contribute to the decline are economic, social, generational, and organizational. The economic factors are difficult to control or even predict. The social issues revolve around family and the ever-increasing time constraints that are thrust upon volunteers by the cultural milieu. History itself supports the contention that the generational cycle strongly affects the trends in volunteerism. Organizational leadership is a prevalent influential factor in the modern fire service. Simply addressing one or two of these key components will not solve the problem.

Two hundred questionnaires were distributed to prospective fire department leaders. The questionnaires were randomly given to fire department officers of both volunteer and combination departments. A total of 186 were returned within the appropriate time frame which consisted of five days. Responses from 172 of the returned questionnaires were able to be utilized. Eight questionnaires had responses that were either inappropriate or not truly worthy of

evaluation. Six of those returned were totally unreadable. The surveys that were valuable and reviewed had a wide variety of answers but a common endpoint.

Question #1: "How many volunteers are currently in your department?"

Answers ranged from 0 volunteers to 44. The mean number was 20. This range is consistent with the number of firefighters my department utilizes under normal staffing situations.

Question #2: "How many paid members are currently in your department?"

Answers ranged from 0 to 12. The mean number was 4.

Question #3 "Have you had a decline in volunteer participation in your department?"

All of the surveys returned, with the exception of 10, said they felt their department's volunteer participation was less than in the years past. Ten officers felt their departments had remained unchanged in volunteer participation. The questions and responses received were not concise as to an exact percentage of decline but rather that overall participation had decreased.

Question #4 "If you answered "yes" to question # 3, please briefly explain your suspected reason for the decrease / lack of participation. If your response to question # 3 was "no", proceed to question # 6."

The most prevalent answer was the changing economy. In the literature review, it was established that men and women are working more to provide the same level of well-being for their families. The second ranking most common response was that more people were involved in activities with their families and not in community service activities. Reason number three was that the officers were of the opinion that people feared there was a greater risk of harm and did not want to have to devote time to training in order to be safe. [It should be noted that the individuals participating in the surveys were attending a training academy and eager to train and

learn. I was not able to remove the obvious bias of those who were in attendance that others who did not attend were less dedicated than the attendees.]

Question #5 “Again, if you answered yes to question # 3, what solutions has your department implemented to correct the decline in participation?”

This particular question had a wide variety of answers as to how departments have changed and what strategies they have implemented to help with volunteer decline. Suggestions included possibly establishing rewards or incentives for volunteer responses, giving families breaks on water bills and sewer bills, praise and promotion of volunteers, and encouraging certification and advancement. Other answers and suggestions received included service rewards, pension plans, and encouraging family-type involvement and participation. A common theme was that departments were, in fact, diligently reaching out in their neighborhoods and promoting the fire department to actively recruit new volunteers.

Question #6 “Does your department allow volunteers to train the members of the department?”

The majority of the responses revealed that the departments did allow volunteers to train the membership. Most felt that, in doing so, it contributed to a sense of belonging and importance.

Question #7 “Does your department encourage volunteer participation in management decisions?”

This question received mixed answers with the certified departments having a wide variety of mixed emotions. Volunteer participation in management decisions was not necessarily discouraged, but the final decision always stood with the fire chief. It was evident that

volunteers wanted to have a voice, and many of the departments surveyed were not allowing them to be heard.

Question #8 “Is training for your volunteers required / mandatory?”

All the surveys evaluated had required training. The amount of training varied for each department and the exact training regimens were not listed. The majority of the surveys showed that prospective training sessions were not as regularly attended as in years past. They indicated, however, that departments with members who trained together had better morale and camaraderie.

Question #9 “Does your department encourage your volunteers to obtain training and other certifications?”

The majority of the departments did not encourage certifications. The leaders surveyed did not seem optimistic about certifications or encouraging certifications. I find this somewhat detrimental due to the fact that they felt morale was improved with training but did not encourage aggressively achieving new certification levels.

Question #10 “What strategies has your department developed or implemented to reward your volunteers?”

Strategies to reward volunteers included personal reward systems, city bill avoidances, personal recognition, pension plans, and a few monetary reward procedures for responses.

Because all three of the chiefs interviewed command combination departments and actively use a staff of volunteer firefighters, their comments were especially valuable in ascertaining corrective approaches that apply to the issue at hand. Their comments were valuable not only in the ways they exposed the extent of volunteer decline in their areas but also in the manner they revealed possible solutions.

Paul Jenkins (personal communication, July 21, 2009) is the Chief of the Dumas Fire Department in Dumas, Texas and a prior Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP) candidate. I presented Chief Jenkins with the survey questions listed in the appendix. He informed me that he currently utilizes volunteers. Jenkins explained that his department consisted of 12 paid firefighters and 27 volunteer firefighters. He indicated that there had definitely been a decline in volunteer participation. He felt that the decline was due, in part, to his department adding paid staff. Jenkins said "I have actually had the volunteers ask me that if we have paid staff, do we still need to come, because they can handle it." He said that one step that had been taken was that the department has been very active in a volunteer pension plan to reward his volunteers. He stated that the pension plan seems to have made a difference and, as a result, his participation has improved. When asked about training, he stated that he encourages his volunteers to lead training for his department and that "they do a good job." Jenkins, among his officer corps, has four volunteer officers in his department and encourages them to be active. Jenkins attempts to utilize the volunteer officers and strives to support their decisions. He felt that the volunteer officers have worked well with the paid staff and have positively influenced the other volunteer firefighters. When asked about strategies he has used to improve volunteer participation he felt the pension plan was helpful and that several well-implemented strategies were helpful. These strategies included small rewards for a good job along with personal recognition. He felt the strongest motivator was to simply tell them "thank you, we appreciate what you do."

Chief Marvin Brewer (personal communication, July 22, 2009) from the Levelland Fire Department in Levelland, Texas had similar responses to the questions. Chief Brewer feels that his volunteer decline has been primarily during the daytime hours. He has a combination department with seven paid staff and 21 volunteer firefighters. He stated that his daytime

participation started to decline in the late 1990s following a change in the economy. He indicated that employers in his community became increasingly concerned with more efficient productivity and did not think the volunteers should respond as frequently. He stated that most of his paid staff had been trained and developed from volunteers in his department. He felt that the camaraderie between paid and volunteers in his department was excellent due to that specific reason. His department also participates in a pension plan to reward volunteers and the city takes care of the volunteer's water bill and pays them with a \$5 per call allowance. He encourages his volunteers to train and opined that they did an excellent job. Chief Brewer explained that one of the biggest positive influences to help strengthen volunteer participation is to encourage family participation. The department hosts regular family nights and they have also developed a mentor program. He feels that the pension plan, mentor program, and active family participation are helping to change his volunteer participation. In closing, Chief Brewer stated that his department is actively educating the surrounding industry and businesses in his area about the necessity of volunteers.

Fire Chief Marvin Dawson (personal communication, July 23, 2009) with the Brownfield Fire Department stated that he felt like his volunteer participation had been steadily declining for approximately 10 years. His department had four paid firefighters and 19 volunteers. He felt that the strategies that Chief Jenkins and Chief Brewer made were valid, but he had implemented those changes with minimal effect. He felt that it was going to take a big change in attitude to effectively revive volunteer participation. His volunteers trained but attendance to training had been declining. His department actively participates in a pension program and he also encourages family participation. His department hosts fifth Tuesday social functions for the family members at the fire station. He is also recruiting new members and trying to educate his

local industry. He stated “I will be very interested to see what changes this work identifies to help me.”

A totally alternative viewpoint was encountered in an interview with my father, Charles E. Addington I (personal communication, October 28, 2009). He is the Region 4 Service Extension Representative with the Texas Division of The Salvation Army. His job is to oversee the work of extending the mission of The Salvation Army into fifty-two of the smaller towns of the Texas Panhandle and Rolling Plains. He works almost exclusively with volunteers throughout the region and actually only has employees at one location where they have a thrift store. As a former United Methodist pastor for almost twenty years, he has done extensive post-graduate work at the university level which focused on generational influences on the church – another largely volunteer organization. While he contends that volunteerism in his sphere of involvement seems to be holding steady (and even increasing in some areas), he pointed me toward the work of William Strauss and Neil Howe, in their books *Generations* (1991) and *The Fourth Generation* (1997). I found a concise discussion of these books on Wikipedia. Rather than “reinvent the wheel,” the major points of the findings of Strauss and Howe are quoted from this article below:

Strauss and Howe “divide Anglo-American history into saecula, or seasonal cycles of history... These saecula are further divided into generations by birth year and are classified as one of four types of generations or historical periods. Since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the only exception to the ‘four-season’ cycle was the Civil War saeculum, when the generation type jumped from Reactive to Adaptive with no Civic generation.

According to Howe and Strauss, just as history molds generations, so do generations

mold history. Modern Anglo-American history runs on a two-stroke rhythm. The two strokes are an Awakening and a Crisis.

*Awakening.* During an Awakening, rising adults are driven by inner zeal to become philosophers, religious pundits, and hippies, thereby alienating children (who see the adult world becoming more chaotic each day) and older generations alike. Civil order comes under attack from a new values regime. Examples of Awakening eras include the Protestant Reformation (1517-1542), the Puritan Awakening (1621-1649), the Great Awakening (1727-1746), the Second Great Awakening (1822-1844), the Third Great Awakening (1886-1908), the Consciousness Revolution (1964-1984). Seen as a tumultuous time, somewhat echoing a “Crisis”.

*Unraveling.* An Unraveling is an era of relative peace and prosperity between an Awakening and a Crisis. The most recent Unraveling was seen between the Consciousness Revolution and the time just before September 11 (1985-2001), a time of paradigm shifting. Seen as a positive time, somewhat echoing a “High”.

*Crisis.* A Crisis is a decisive era of secular upheaval. The values regime propels the replacement of the old civic order with a new one. Wars are waged with apocalyptic finality...Examples of Crisis eras include the Wars of the Roses (1459-1487), the Spanish Armada Crisis (1569-1594), the colonial Glorious Revolution (1675-1704), the American Revolution (1773-1794), the American Civil War (1860-1865), and the twin emergencies of the Great Depression and World War II (1929-1946), and now speculatively the present time from September 11, 2001. There is a consensus that we are in the next Crisis Era, but the start date is being debated right now. Some say 9/11, some Katrina or the housing bubble burst, and some start it with the Crash of 2008.

*High.* A High is an era between a Crisis and an Awakening. The most recent High was seen between World War II and the Consciousness Revolution.

The four types of generations in their theory are as follows:

*Prophet/Idealist.* A Prophet (or Idealist) generation is born during a High, spends its rising adult years during an Awakening, spends midlife during an Unraveling, and spends old age in a Crisis. Prophetic leaders have been cerebral and principled, summoners of human sacrifice, wagers of righteous wars. Early in life, few saw combat in uniform; late in life, most come to be revered as much for their words as for their deeds.

*Nomad/Reactive.* A Nomad (or Reactive) generation is born during an Awakening, spends its rising adult years during an Unraveling, spends midlife during a Crisis, and spends old age in a new High. Nomadic leaders have been cunning, hard-to-fool realists, taciturn warriors who prefer to meet problems and adversaries one-on-one.

*Hero/Civic.* A Hero (or Civic) generation is born during an Unraveling, spends its rising adult years during a Crisis, spends midlife during a High, and spends old age in an Awakening. Heroic leaders are considered to have been vigorous and rational institution-builders, busy and competent in old age. All of them entering midlife were aggressive advocates of technological progress, economic prosperity, social harmony, and public optimism.

*Artist/Adaptive.* An Artist (or Adaptive) generation is born during a Crisis, spends its rising adult years in a new High, spends midlife in an Awakening, and spends old age in an Unraveling. Artistic leaders have been advocates of fairness and the politics of inclusion, irrepressible in the wake of failure. ("Generations," 2009)

## Discussion

National & Community Service (2008) revealed that volunteer participation throughout the U.S. has declined. The surveying of fire officers from numerous departments and the interviews of three different fire chiefs confirm this theory as well. The literature review, especially the research conducted by the USFA and the DHS (2007) showed that there are a variety of reasons participation has declined. There are economic factors, perceived lack of identity, lack of value, level of accomplishment, and a supposed lack of personal benefit. Evaluation of the questionnaires showed that the leaders were of the opinion that giving the volunteers something back was very helpful. The fire chiefs interviewed were convinced that their pension plans and encouraging involvement help with reducing their decline in participation.

A fundamental find, which absolutely bears mentioning, is that in no way did monetary gain play a role in stopping volunteer decline. In fact, the most prevalent and promising findings revealed by the questionnaires and interviews were that appreciation, a sense of belonging, active involvement of the family unit, and long term appreciation (i.e. pension plans, etc.) were effective in helping retard decline. The volunteers wanted to be appreciated, have the ability to provide leadership, and be told “thank you” for a job well done.

Thus, with the results of the survey and interviews, it would appear that a return to the basics is in order. As Tracy Lyon (2006) revealed, we need to provide the volunteers with active but defined roles. We, as the fire service, need to encourage their total involvement, let the volunteers make important decisions, support those decisions, and actively involve them in training. The USFA and DHS study (2007) determined that the fire service is composed of approximately 70% volunteers. Thus, we as the leadership, need to reevaluate how we treat our

members. Leaders in the fire service could benefit from public administration training and learn to provide for personnel even though that task is accomplished in a different manner from paid departments. Paid staff are nice to have because they can be required to be there and to work hard for a paycheck. This supposed advantage can also be problematic, however, due to the attitudes of superiority often adopted by those who are directly rewarded for their service. Thus, as emphasized by the chiefs interviews, paid staff absolutely cannot be allowed to discourage or demean volunteers. When people are working harder for even less, they have to sense an appreciation for their efforts.

Trying to encourage volunteers with money is not the answer to personnel problems. Nowhere in the literature review or in the surveys and interviews was paying the volunteers more money a tactic used to stop decline. If volunteers wanted more money, they would simply go to work at a second job and/or spend more time at their present employment. People still want to belong and (as stated in the literature review) still want to be a part of the common good.

The desire to be an active participant will only last when (and if) it is fostered. Several things have been listed above to help people want to be involved. The best solution for each department is to actively evaluate your own situations and start to make a change. If your department is declining, then your best efforts should be put forth to quickly identify possible causes. The first objective is to look within yourself and evaluate the leadership you are providing. Ask if you can change your mentality or beliefs and be more effective if necessary. If the answer is “yes”, then put the ball in motion to make change.

Applying the tenets of generational theory posited by Strauss and Howe in *Generations* (2009), to the problem can only help to support the above recommendations. Volunteer fire departments of today are primarily manned by the cohort named Generation X (or the 13<sup>th</sup>

Generation because they are the 13<sup>th</sup> generation of Americans since American Independence) with some Baby Boomers still active. The current decline in volunteerism can be attributed (in part if not in the whole) to the desire of this generation's attempt to be as well-off, financially as their parents. To do so, they are required to work longer and harder – some holding as many as three jobs – and to be more intent upon their careers. This leaves less time for volunteer activities. Still, within the human heart, however, is a foundational desire (some would describe it as a “need”) to give (both of themselves and of their possessions). The fire service would be well advised to understand both the economic situation confronted by this cohort and the basic psychological influences that drive their activities. Both would support the contention that (while they do need more money) financial rewards will not fill the void created by their need to give of themselves to a worthy cause. Hence, recognition of the fact that they are, indeed, willing to sacrifice time (their most precious commodity) in order to serve their fellow human beings and a knowledge that their opinions count in the way that service is rendered is fundamental to the process of maintaining their loyalty.

Carrying generational theory a little further, a bright spot on the horizon of volunteerism is represented by the emerging generation known as the Millennials. They are showing every sign of being exactly the civic-minded generation that (according to generational theory) they are destined to be. As such, they will certainly be more than willing (in fact, they show every sign of being eager) to be involved in activities that foster and preserve the good of humanity. The fire service (among other noble pursuits) is a perfect venue in which they can grow into the natural leanings of their generation, finding fulfillment and order in their lives.

### Recommendations

The data indicates conclusively that the best solution may be to routinely tell the volunteers thank you for what they do. Leadership should constantly be aware of both the needs of their personnel and the natural influences of their generational traits. As always, apathy is a death sentence for any organization. It is insane to assume that our volunteers are just going to continue to do the activities or training we request because we think they should. A quote commonly accredited to either Benjamin Franklin or Albert Einstein explains that insanity is doing the same things over and over and expecting different results. Hence, the ultimate answer to stopping decline will require that leaders acknowledge the problem and implement change. To do nothing and continue down the same path, expecting everything and everyone - staffing, participation, involvement - to be sufficient, is insane.

The following are recommendations for those who wish to replicate this study: (a) acknowledge that numerous fire departments have recognized their volunteer participation has decreased but few have taken an active role in reversing the decline, (b) understand that numerous variables affect people's decision to serve others, (c) accept that fire departments have no control over the economic environment that will continue to exacerbate the decline of participation, (d) seek and identify departments that are in a state of growth by requesting responses from a broader spectrum of organizations – volunteer, paid, and combination – perhaps even at the national level, and (e) conduct further research on generational influences that are affecting decline in volunteerism.

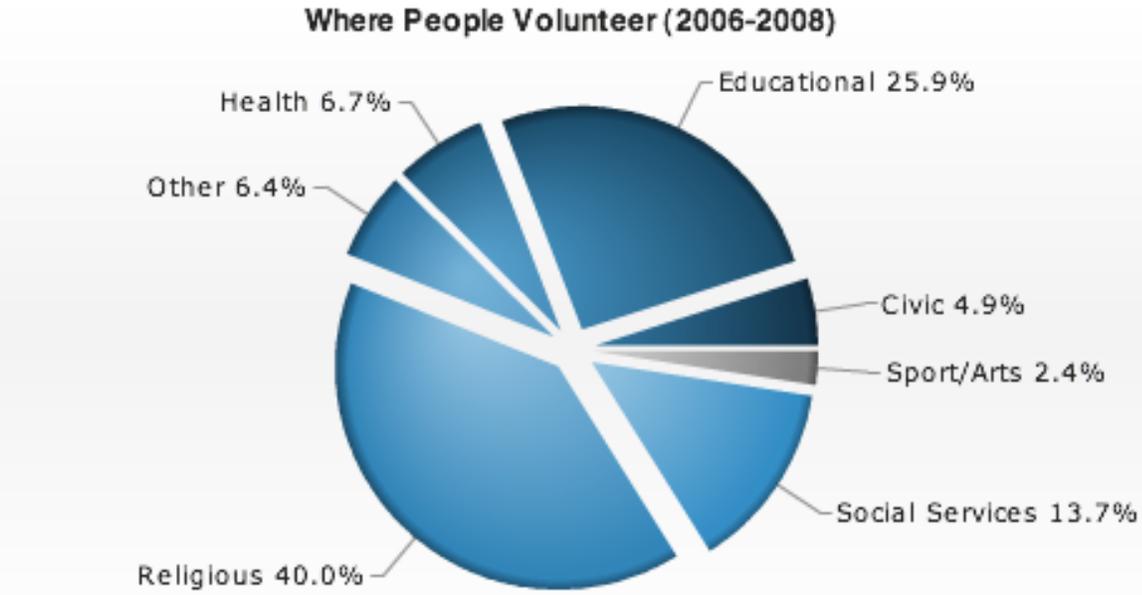
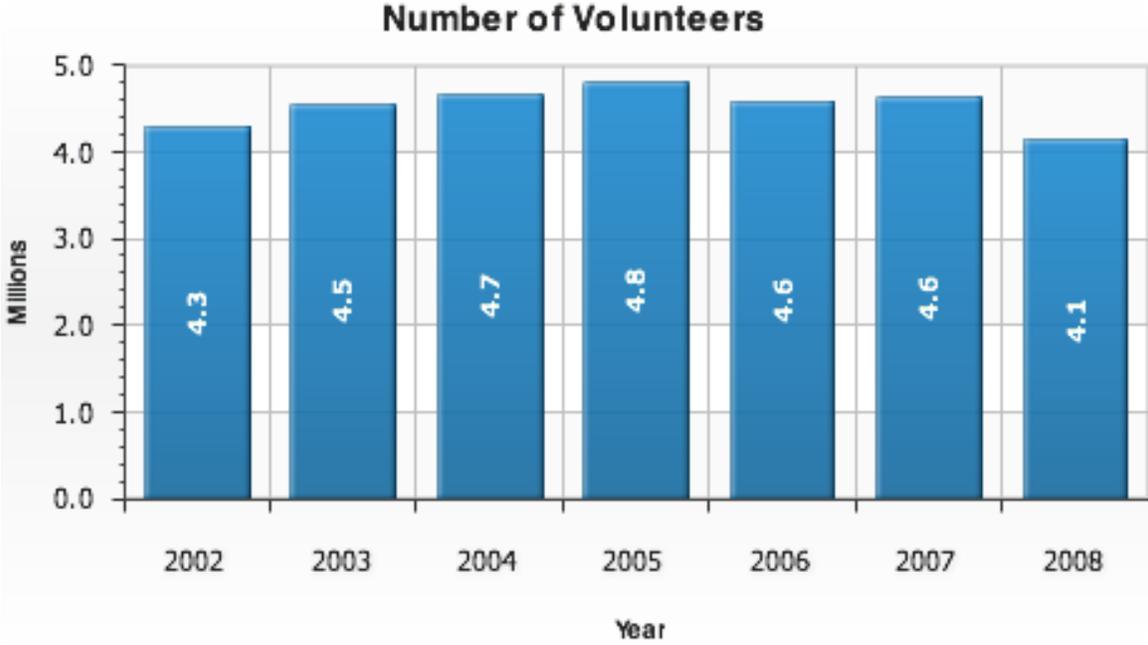
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Appendix A



Appendix B

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Department: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

**Executive Fire Office Program Questionnaire / Survey**

1. How many volunteers are currently in your department?
2. How many paid members are currently in your department?
3. Have you had a decline in volunteer participation in your department?
4. If you answered yes to question # 3, please briefly explain your suspected reason for the decrease / lack of participation. If your response to question # 3 was no proceed to question # 6.
5. Again, if you answered yes to question # 3, what solutions has your department implemented to correct the decline in participation?
6. Does your department allow volunteers to train the members of the department?
7. Does your department encourage volunteer participation in management decisions?
8. Is training for your volunteers required / mandatory?
9. Does your department encourage your volunteers to obtain training and other certifications?
10. What strategies has your department developed or implemented to reward your volunteers?

Appendix C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Have you seen a decline in volunteer participation in your department?
2. How long do you feel like this decline has been happening?
3. How long has your department been a combination organization?
4. Do you feel that being a combination department has caused your volunteers to be less involved?
5. Do you participate in a pension plan rewarding your volunteers?
6. What strategies have you implemented to improve volunteer participation?
7. How do you reward your volunteers?
8. Do you encourage your volunteers to train?
9. Do you encourage your volunteers to lead training activities?
10. If your volunteers lead training, do you feel like it improves their participation?
11. Has your department implemented any of the following strategies:
  - a. Reward system?
  - b. Involve volunteers in command structure?
  - c. Departmental decision-making involvement by volunteers?
  - d. Encouraging family involvement?
  - e. Encouraging volunteers to gain additional certification or education?
  - f. Encouraging volunteers to operate in leadership roles?
12. What do you feel would be the best solution to slowing or reversing decline in volunteer participation?

Appendix D

**LIST OF GENERATIONS**

<b>GENERATION</b>	<b>TYPE</b>	<b>BIRTH YEARS</b>	<b>FORMATIVE ERA</b>
<b>Late Medieval Saeculum</b>			
Arthurian	Hero (Civic)	1433-1460	Retreat from France
Humanist	Artist (Adaptive)	1461-1482	War of the Roses
<b>Reformation Saeculum</b>			
Reformation	Prophet (Idealist)	1483-1511	Tudor Renaissance
Reprisal	Nomad (Reactive)	1512-1540	Protestant Reformation
Elizabethan	Hero (Civic)	1541-1565	Intolerance & Martyrdom
Parliamentarian	Artist (Adaptive)	1566-1587	Armada Crisis
<b>New World Saeculum</b>			
Puritan	Prophet (Idealist)	1588-1617	Merrie England
Cavalier	Nomad (Reactive)	1618-1647	Puritan Awakening
Glorious	Hero (Civic)	1648-1673	Religious Intolerance
Enlightenment	Artist (Adaptive)	1674-1700	King Philip's War
<b>Revolutionary Saeculum</b>			
Awakening	Prophet (Idealist)	1701-1723	Augustan Age of Empire
Liberty	Nomad (Reactive)	1724-1741	Great Awakening
Republican	Hero (Civic)	1742-1766	French and Indian War
Compromise	Artist (Adaptive)	1767-1791	American Revolution
<b>Civil War Saeculum</b>			
Transcendental	Prophet (Idealist)	1792-1821	Era of Good Feeling
Gilded	Nomad (Reactive)	1822-1842	Transcendental Awakening
Progressive	Artist (Adaptive)	1843-1859	American Civil War
<b>Great Power Saeculum</b>			
Missionary	Prophet (Idealist)	1860-1882	Reconstruction/Gilded Age
Lost	Nomad (Reactive)	1883-1900	Missionary Awakening
G.I.	Hero (Civic)	1901-1924	World War I/Prohibition
Silent	Artist (Adaptive)	1925-1942	Great Depression/World War II
<b>Millennial Saeculum</b>			
Baby Boom	Prophet (Idealist)	1943-1960	Super Power America
13th/Generation X	Nomad (Reactive)	1961-1981	Consciousness Revolution
Millennial	Hero (Civic)	1982-2003	Culture Wars
New Silent	Artist (Adaptive)	2004-Present	Millennial Crisis