



## Connecting with Your Local Underrepresented Communities

As fire and EMS responders, we are faced with a multitude of challenges when we interact with underrepresented and marginalized communities. An underrepresented group is best understood as a minority group (racial, ethnic, or cultural) whose presence in a subset of society is much lower than in society as a whole. For example, women make up half of the American population but only about 4% in the fire service nationwide.

Difficulties arise when most of our members do not look like the racial and cultural minorities that live in our service areas, opening the possibility of mistrust and misunderstanding due to language barriers or missed social cues. We need to respond appropriately in order to regain the trust we have always expected. Building relationships with all communities in our areas of responsibility becomes even more important as we face increasing shortages in our volunteer ranks. We need to learn to connect with people outside of our traditional ranks in order to tap into those resources and strengthen our membership.

Some of the most commonly marginalized groups include:

- LGBTQ
- Senior citizens
- Racial and cultural minorities
- Military combat veterans
- Persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities
- Persons with serious and persistent mental illnesses
- Gamblers and substance abusers
- Persons on the Autism spectrum
- Persons living in poverty
- Felons

The easiest way to reach out and connect with many of the people on this list is through already established groups and charities that work with these underrepresented communities. National organizations are a great place to start by asking if they have a local chapter in your area. You can then contact that local chapter and ask what your first responder groups can do for that population by understanding their needs and fostering the inclusivity and acceptance that may have been missing in the past. Faith-based organizations and local churches are also helpful resources to learn how your agencies can meet community needs. Attending local organizations' meetings or informal social gatherings shows group members that you want to build relationships with them. Those relationships could also lead to potential nontraditional or administrative volunteer roles for members of marginalized groups. Consider alternative ways for them to be involved, such as gear inventory, cleaning, or clerical work.

Reaching out to marginalized groups helps mitigate the all too common issues of misunderstanding when responding to calls for unfamiliar populations. This gives us the ability to increase our skill level and simply do a better job helping vulnerable people. Not everyone on this list will be a candidate to

serve as an operational volunteer in our departments, but everyone can be better served by our gaining understanding of their needs and challenges.

Finding local chapters within national organizations is as simple as a web search:

- Within the LGBTQ community, look for chapters of [PFLAG](#) or [GLAAD](#), or the [Human Rights Campaign](#) for local involvement. You can also focus on students by searching for [Gay Straight Student Alliances](#) or the [Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network](#).
- Senior citizens tend to have local senior centers, making initial contact with active and vibrant groups fairly easy. You can also seek out local organizations through the AARP.
- Racial and cultural minorities' organizations can be found through the [Department of Health and Human Services](#) website under their Office of Minority Health. Search their site for National Minority Organizations to get an inclusive list.
- Military combat veterans' groups can be found by contacting local and national community veteran serving organizations like [Team Red, White & Blue](#) or [AMVETS](#).
- Persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities often find assistance through [The Arc](#), an organization with many state and local chapters.
- Persons with hearing, visual, and physical challenges have a broad variety of foundations, many of which can be found on [The American Association of People with Disabilities](#) or the [National Center of Disability and Journalism](#) website.
- Groups serving people with serious and persistent mental illnesses can be found through the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#), an organization with subset assistance for veterans and LGBTQ people struggling with mental challenges.
- Gamblers and substance abusers have chapters worldwide through the various "Anonymous" groups, though the very promise of that anonymity makes it feel intrusive to attend meetings, even with the best of intentions. It is better to reach out to a program like [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) to seek community-based organizations.
- Persons on the Autism spectrum have great organizations in [Easter Seals](#) and [Autism Speaks](#).
- Persons living in poverty are often served by local food banks and pantries, which can be found through searching online or through social work organizations.
- The homeless are also found through local shelters and other groups that serve them. The [Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) has a list of programs by state.
- Felons may not initially seem like a group we would like to have in our ranks, but they are a marginalized population that we have an obligation to help. Programs like the [Lionheart Foundation](#) have a list of re-entry programs by state that provide support networks and encourage positive contributions following incarceration.

This list is not inclusive; it is meant to show the breadth of organizations that focus on marginalized communities that are traditionally difficult for us to get to know. With appropriate outreach to these organizations, we will begin to build trust with people underrepresented in fire and EMS agencies nationwide. Not only will these efforts improve our care for people seeking help, but the relationships we develop may encourage people to volunteer with our departments.

*Assistant Chief Debbie Carpenter, Carrollton Fire Rescue*

*Carrollton, Texas*

*Council for Future Volunteer Firefighters*

*IAFC Diversity Executive Leadership Program (iDELP)*