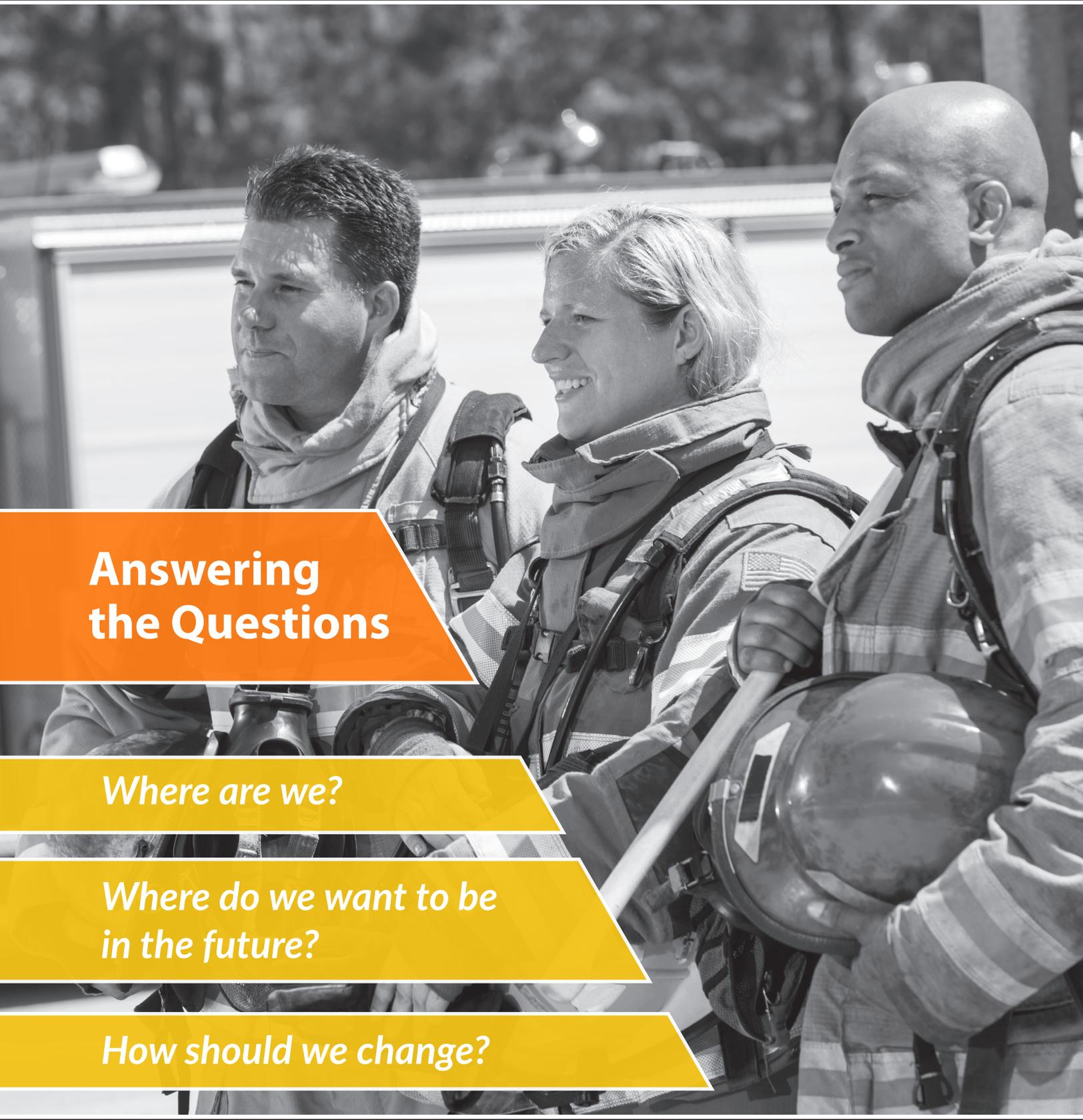


# STATE OF THE VOLUNTEER FIRE SERVICE REPORT 2018



## Answering the Questions

*Where are we?*

*Where do we want to be  
in the future?*

*How should we change?*

# STATE OF THE VOLUNTEER FIRE SERVICE REPORT 2018

*Recruiting and Retaining the Volunteer of the Future*



Release Date: November 2018

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# STATE OF THE VOLUNTEER FIRE SERVICE REPORT 2018

## *Recruiting and Retaining the Volunteer of the Future*

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# Introduction

No other profession, we could easily argue, is more valiant, noble, and steeped in tradition than that of the American fire service. Various groups of organized responders can be traced back to the 1600s, but the “modern” fire service as we recognize it today is often credited as beginning in 1736 with Benjamin Franklin’s Union Fire Company in Philadelphia. In the years since its inception, we’ve seen untold changes and advances in technology, but at its heart, the fire service will always comprise local citizens who are willing to give of themselves and sacrifice for the protection of their neighbors and the betterment of the community.

Franklin’s model used volunteers from the community who were well-trained, attended regular meetings, and assisted with fundraising. And while many municipalities around the country have been able to retain full-time, career staff over the years, the volunteer fire service is still the vital lifeblood for our nation’s first response sector. That lifeblood, however, is at risk if we do not seek to change as our world has changed.

According to 2013 National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) statistics, there are 30,052 fire departments in the U.S., of which only 2,477 departments are fully career. There are 7,768 combination departments, meaning 19,807 departments are all-volunteer. In terms of individuals, 69 percent of firefighters are volunteers whose contributions save our nation an estimated \$139.8 billion per year. The number of volunteer firefighters has been declining for the last several decades, but the declines are now becoming precariously critical. Many departments struggle to meet NFPA standards for operational staffing levels, and the ability of communities to respond to disasters is being threatened. This is a national problem that needs to be addressed immediately.

For the last three years, the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) has been working with a SAFER (Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response) grant, focused on improving national volunteer recruitment and retention, with emphasis on reaching women and other underrepresented groups in communities across the country. Part of the grant involved starting pilot programs in 10 departments around the country to observe and study the problem. This program culminated with a summit at IAFC headquarters in Chantilly, Virginia, in September 2018, with leaders from around the fire service community gathering to examine the current state of the volunteer fire service and to forecast what it will look like in the future. The IAFC and its Volunteer and Combination Officers Section (VCOS) partnered with the International Association of Women in Fire and Emergency Services (iWomen), the IAFC’s Volunteer Workforce Solutions, the Council for Future Volunteer Firefighters, and other national interest groups to create a solutions-based framework that will offer combination and volunteer fire departments throughout America a means to improve their leaderships’ ability to recruit, retain, and manage the volunteers of the future.

This report is born from that summit and will focus on seven areas that were identified as being crucial to reversing the negative trends: Onboarding; diversity and inclusion; leadership and succession planning; staffing models and roles; communication; recognition and benefits; and marketing and media. The goal of this report is not to tell you how to recruit to your individual department (if you are looking for new ideas, however, the IAFC has many more resources on the topic), but instead to paint a picture that begins with the reality of our situation, help you identify future potential membership, and offer a road map for departments and other volunteer fire service organizations to aid their efforts in retaining and recruiting the volunteers of the future. We need to ensure that we make the appropriate changes to our departments and the way we look at how we treat each other internally in order to better serve our

communities and retain the best members in or organizations. Without making these changes we will be forced to continue to see our departments struggle to keep the apparatus running as the numbers of volunteers continue to disappear.

## Our Current Fire Service

Without trying to overstate the situation, we can unfortunately say that the volunteer fire service in the United States is at risk of even further decline due to the decline in volunteerism. Because 69 percent of U.S. firefighters are volunteers and 92 percent of departments rely on volunteers in some fashion, the fact that the vast majority of departments from coast to coast are struggling in terms of membership means that our traditional systems are not working as well as they have, and that immediate changes need to be implemented. Think of your department—and the fire service as a whole—as a bucket, where problems are water. Water gets added to the bucket from numerous different sources. The more that gets added, the more difficult it is to carry the bucket. Eventually, if you can't remove some of the water, it's going to start to overflow uncontrollably on its own and be at risk of failure.

### Traditional Volunteer Sources Have Changed

The old model of neighbors helping neighbors is all but gone in most places, as many people don't have strong ties to or even know their neighbors anymore. We have always relied on multigenerational families passing down the tradition of joining the local fire department, but that is also becoming a thing of the past. As with many other industries, as the baby boomers retire en masse on the back end, they need to be replaced with young people on the front end. In sheer number, there aren't enough millennials and iGens to replace the baby boomers, and worse for us, those two younger generations aren't trending toward the fire service. With many young people needing two jobs to survive, plus other obligations, the free time necessary to be part of the emergency sector is a luxury few can afford. In addition, the number of nonprofit organizations recruiting the same volunteers is at an all-time high, and frankly, our fire service, as it exists with its current culture, is not an attractive option for younger generations who value flexibility, creativity, and inclusivity.

### We Have Failed to Collect Data

Despite the obvious critical impact volunteer firefighters make/have made on our nation, their contributions are not always understood or appreciated by the general public or even the governmental agents they serve. When governmental organizations track firefighting data (outside of call types), it is almost always surrounding career departments. Recent data suggested an upswing in volunteerism, but further research showed that that may not have actually been the case. Our best data is driven by user input, but until all departments are inputting their data accurately, we will be left with incomplete and suspect information.

Other organizations have tried to record data on volunteers, but the results are porous at best. Because collecting data isn't as exciting as responding to a call, and it's not an immediate need like a community fundraiser, it has mostly fallen by the wayside for decades. Does your department participate fully in the Near-Miss Reporting System or USFA's Fire Department Registry? Does it conduct exit interviews with all members who leave, and does it document those reasons? The lack of data occurs at every level, and as we are all responsible, we must all step up to address it.

## **We're Over-Regulating Ourselves**

Being an emergency responder is as serious an occupation as it gets, as lives are literally on the line. When citizens call with an emergency, they expect the most well-trained professionals to show up instantly to solve the problem, and to our credit, we've been pretty good at providing that service for centuries. Currently, community expectations are at an all-time high in terms of services, and we have taken an all-hazard approach for training so that our people are theoretically ready for anything.

The problem, however, especially as we learn more about the dangers of the profession and everything around it gets more and more complicated, is that regulations keep piling up to ensure that every responder is supremely trained to the highest level possible. It's a great level to strive for, but the reality is that most people who work full-time jobs outside of the emergency sector just don't have the time for the hundreds of training hours that are ultimately required. Training and certification is not just a problem with new volunteers; it is also often a problem with department leaders who are appointed or voted into positions without formalized training. While they may have the operational skills to be successful in the department, they don't necessarily have the leadership experience and/or soft skills to advance their departments. We need to start looking at alternative ways to keep our level of training safe and effective but manageable for those who seek to join our ranks.

## **We are Divided**

It is easy to look at your department and see what makes it unique. It's easy to see the differences between a huge volunteer company in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., versus a small-staffed one that covers thousands of square miles in Montana, versus a department in a two-stop-sign town in Maine or Utah. However, we need to stop looking at the differences and focus on the similarities—the problems from which all volunteer departments suffer.

In individual departments, division is another serious problem. While our communities are continuously becoming more diverse, the demographics of our fire departments continue to be alarmingly stagnant. This lack of diversity comes from numerous factors that often begin with recruiting, but it also can include current members shunning, harassing, or otherwise making new or potentially new members feel unwelcome. Inclusivity is part of our modern world, and it is here to stay.

Very few departments these days mirror the communities they serve. Women and other underrepresented groups are vastly underrepresented in the emergency sector. If your department is struggling for membership, you have few women and the percent of minorities in your department doesn't match the demographics of the community, then there is still room for improvement.

## **Our Marketing is Off**

In terms of recruiting, if you look at the traditional, stereotypical marketing done by the fire service as a whole, nearly everything is geared toward 18- to 30-year-old white males. And for a century, the "superhero" persona of the guy carrying a child out of a burning building worked for them. Not only is that marketing inaccurate of what we actually do these days, but we have the wrong people being targeted, and even within that group, that persona is no longer resonating with potential members.

On the other side of that persona, we have created our own image problems when members do negative things that make the news or go viral on social media. Job titles are rarely included in the headlines when

a member of the general public does something wrong but are almost assuredly there when an emergency responder finds himself/herself in trouble. As a result, the general public tends to hear more of the negatives about us, and our collective reputation continues to take hits.

In terms of damage control, we as an industry have never been particularly good about controlling the message. Firefighters, traditionally, shy away from taking the credit that would boost public perception, and they often fail to educate the people they serve. The sad fact is, most Americans believe the firefighters protecting them are all paid for their services and have all the equipment needed provided by tax dollars. We have a great story to tell the public. We just need to get better at telling it.

## **Moving Forward**

Obviously, it pains everyone involved to point out the negatives in our beloved fire service, but it's not even a matter of making strides or improvements anymore; it's a matter of making drastic changes for our continued success. We've been talking about needing a change of culture for more than a decade, and now is the time for it to stop being idealism and to become a reality. Fortunately, the fire service is loaded with some of the best people on the planet, who are unreservedly invested in leading us into the future. In order to do so, however, we have to use our history as a springboard, not a crutch.

Being a volunteer first responder is one of the most noble and rewarding experiences anyone can have. We just have to keep getting that message out and be prepared to adjust our own visions for what we believe our department should look like. In short, we should figure out what type of system we would set up if fire and emergency response was only just becoming a need of the community today and how would we start our outreach to have individuals to respond to these emergencies. The other bit of good news is that 70 percent of new volunteers entering the service are doing so because of word of mouth. That is to say, if we can get our existing departments healthy, and focus on retention and inclusivity, we will be in much better shape to bring in new volunteers. The changes we need to make are very much within our grasp.

## **The Ideal Future**

Before you begin on a journey, it's always helpful to have an idea of where you'd like to end up. Each department has unique qualities and needs that have to be addressed, but for the most part there are several areas we can all strive to improve. Whatever it is we come up with, it has to be sustainable and self-sustaining. That is, 10 years from now, it still has to be working and working well.

The volunteer fire service should be more inclusive and involve less stereotyping. Bias, even if it is subconscious, against prospective members who do not look exactly like your typical firefighter should not be tolerated. We need to change the paradigm and make it known that volunteer fire departments are needed in our communities. We need to get the word out on the importance of volunteer departments and work hard at changing any negative perceptions that may exist. We must find a way to motivate people to be passionate about volunteering. We need to get past stereotypes, appreciate differences, and break down cultural barriers.

The ideal volunteer fire service would meet the needs of the community as defined by that community, the local government, and the department. It would strive toward best practices such as OSHA and NFPA standards, and it would accomplish all this through the most efficient and effective use of resources, including volunteers' time.

## **Starts with Leadership**

As we begin to reshape the future of the fire service, it's best to start at the top, examining the chief of each department. How does your department choose its chief? If the chief gets promoted based on firefighting ability, he or she may very well be the best person for the job, but it doesn't automatically mean they are instantly qualified and ready to lead the department. If the chief is chosen by vote, chances are the members will select the best person for the job, but we somehow need to ensure there are safeguards so it's not just a popularity contest in which you could then have a leader who is more interested in keeping people happy than making hard decisions.

Leaders need to lead! Running a department is exactly like running a business and convincing a qualified leader to volunteer that much time and expertise is a difficult task. In any case, getting the chief and chief officers in place is only the beginning. Now they need to get to work, taking classes, networking with peers, building relationships with governmental officials, and becoming the public face of the department.

With the proper leadership in place, we should return pride to our organizations. Not the pride that keeps the engines washed and shiny, not the pride that comes from a hero complex, and not the pride that says "our department is better than yours." We're talking about the old-fashioned, genuine pride that we get from being true servants to the community. We need to be masters of customer service. When a citizen calls 911, if the police don't show, it's more likely going to be us in one fashion or another. We, as a department, must be prepared for anything. It doesn't mean every member has to be able to do everything, but we collectively have to have someone available that can do the job effectively, efficiently, and professionally.

## **Be More Flexible**

As the department needs to be flexible in the services it offers, that creates the opportunity to bring in new members with nontraditional skills. You don't need to be interior certified to do the fundraising, handle marketing and media, or cook a meal. Anyone who has free time during the day could help with dozens of tasks that we're currently handling.

Another skill many departments probably never prized previously was the ability to speak multiple languages and to understand different cultures. As our communities become more diverse, having members that can communicate with those with limited English-speaking skills will be critical. After all, how can you meet your customers' expectations if you don't speak the same language? The fire department should set the example in the community, and we should be reaching out to everyone about the importance of fire prevention to ensure no one is afraid to call us should there be an emergency. Reaching out and showing we want to work cohesively together will make those who previously would have never considered it want to be part of the department. Also, by building connections with the community before bad times occur, you already have their trust, and if you ever need something from them, you have the benefit of establishing the relationship before they ask.

## **Examining Standards**

Every fire department prides itself on being professional; knowing whether you receive a paycheck for your services is irrelevant. It's important that we have national standards to strive for and guide us, but we also need to safely and realistically be able to adjust what we do within our own community. A rural community can't expect 3-minute response times. Why train for a 20-story building when the nearest one

is 100 miles away? People who have interstate highways going through their district have very different needs than those who don't.

Individual departments (and the fire service as a whole) have to keep pace with the needs of their communities. Traditional models are where we're starting from, but we need to start learning from working models. We need to be receptive of best practices, communicating and networking with our peers, and leveraging technology and data to improve our effectiveness and efficiency. In the end, our goal is to have a high level of service policy legislation so that our community's expectations are met.

### **Changing Membership**

While the declining number of volunteers across the country is alarming, the most important number to any individual department is its own. And while we're always talking about bringing in more volunteers, the fact is that we need to be bringing in the right volunteers. Most people can agree they'd rather have five professional, motivated, hardworking members than 30 half-hearted ones any day. So, quality is still important over quantity, but we also have to be sure we're measuring the correct way.

We're talking about being progressive and making changes to the way we do many things, but the fundamental nature of the fire service—having members who exude honor, loyalty, selflessness, and high morals—will not change. Where we can adjust, however, is how we define the people who can fit our needs—that is, people who are educated in various fields and those who might not be physically capable of doing interior firefighting but are more than fit enough to handle roles where we are currently lacking.

And of course, one of the biggest "abilities" we are looking for is availability. Part of that, however, is the department knowing where members are and scheduling volunteers to cover throughout the day. We can't expect a volunteer who works a full-time job 60 minutes away from town to respond to calls, and we can't ask employers to let their employees leave multiple times a day. We don't need every member to respond to everything; we just need quality people available throughout the day. Thus, we need to adapt the way we schedule and call in our members.

### **Constant Education**

We never stop learning, and good fire departments can never stop teaching. It's important that we are constantly bettering our members with classes and training, but it's also critical that we're educating our community as well. We must teach our citizens and government leaders alike what it is we do and how we do it. We must show them what we do well and what we struggle with. We have to tell them how they can help us.

One of the most effective ways to reach a new audience is to start with their kids. In school, children are taught all the basics of math and reading, but we also need to be reaching them and teaching about the importance of fire safety. While we're doing this, of course, we can also impress the importance and nobility of volunteerism and giving back to the community, as well as teach young girls and those from different ethnic backgrounds that this is indeed a job for anyone.

As communities become more diverse, it is critical that the fire department reach out to these new groups and try to understand their cultures. Some cultures shy away from authority, and it becomes your responsibility to build a dialogue of trust with them, so they aren't afraid to call when help is needed. Other cultures are very much interested in public service but do not join volunteer fire departments simply because they've never been asked. Reaching out and bringing in just one or two new members from a group may open the floodgates for talented, dedicated volunteers. And that extends beyond culture.

We've seen many cases where a woman became a member of a volunteer department, and not wanting to be the only female, spearheaded recruiting drives that resulted in dozens of high-performing new members joining.

Finally, we must educate each other. In recent years, the fire service has become better about working with neighboring departments for the benefit of all. That attitude needs to continue and even improve. Shared training and classes are just the start. If a quality member of your department is moving, are you going to reach out to the chief of his or her new town and let them know that a great new member just showed up in their jurisdiction?

## Who is the Volunteer of the Future?

If you were trapped in a burning structure or involved in a serious car crash and a first responder showed up and was literally going to save your life, would you care what color they were, what their native language was, if they were a man or a woman, or what their sexual orientation was? Neither does anyone else. If you have a dedicated, passionate, quality person who is willing to give his or her precious free time in order to benefit your department, why would any of that noise matter?

People with tattoos, piercings, and different hairstyles may not look like the traditional firefighter from 50 years ago, but they may be just the people you need today. Maybe it's time to get past our internal biases (or – get past labeling people who are different than us), change some of our appearance policies, and focus on who can do the job best.

### Physical Attributes

Obviously, we want all of our members to be as physically fit as possible, and while we'll always have a need a 6-foot-4 former football player who can bench-press a Volkswagen, the bottom line is that we just need people who are fit enough to do the job they are being asked to do. There are certainly strenuous parts of the job where it pays to have younger, stronger, more physically fit men and women, but there is also plenty of need for older, more experienced volunteers with different skills. If your community hardly fights fires but is typically involved in community engagement and risk reduction, then that changes your needs.

As we are trying to make our departments more diverse to match our communities, being biracial is a huge advantage. Likewise, having members who are bilingual and understanding of various cultures is not just a luxury but essential. In short, the volunteer of the future will be dictated by what your community looks like.

### Mental Attributes

We've always used words like brave, valiant, tough, and fearless to describe firefighters, and those are all excellent traits for a firefighter to have. Other words, such as intelligent, passionate, generous, selfless, competent, and caring have also been part of our ideal member, along with integrity. Now, new words—sometimes referred to as soft skills—are also becoming more important, like personable, persuasive, soothing, respectful, and empathetic. People who come from human resources backgrounds are more valuable to us than ever.

In leadership roles, we need those who are strong, decisive, and logical. We need servant leaders who lead without ego. We need progressive leaders who are open-minded and put the needs of the community first. We need leaders who are open to new technology and make data-driven decisions. We need team players who are adaptable to change.

### **Where Do We Find Them?**

Most kids at least go through a phase where they are fascinated by first responders, so the earlier we can reach out to people and capture their interest the better. Having outreach programs in elementary schools is a great place to start, as kids not only get to learn about fire safety and volunteerism, but they are almost guaranteed to go home and have those same conversations with their families. Recruiting members from high schools and colleges is not only helpful for your department but also gives them invaluable knowledge and experience that will be included on their resumes forever. Make a list of your department's needs and see what types of professionals might be most likely to help you. Accountants, teachers, and truck drivers almost assuredly live in your area, and they may have no clue how much their skills and experience could help the department.

We need to expand the idea of what being a firefighter means. Maybe it's time to rename some departments to incorporate the rescue or overall emergency services parts so people better understand what you do. We need to stop doing passive recruitment and get out there and connect with the people at all corners who can certainly help us.

## **Getting to the Ideal State**

It could be argued that the biggest problem with the fire service is that we don't have one, overarching brand delivering a unified message. Instead we have many competing brands (dozens at the national level and thousands at the local level). We need our organizations to come together with a specific vision and create a single, cohesive message on behalf of all firefighters. All organizations, including paid unions, have a vested interest in making the volunteer fire service the strongest it can be.

We also know that firefighters are collectively modest and don't do a great job of telling our story. As a result, we have communities (including local governments) that don't have a clue what we do, how we do it, or where our needs lie. We need to create a stronger base of leadership, create a shared vision of the future, and then reach out to the public. We can't be afraid to make difficult changes!

Up until this point we've been reliant on the federal government and individual organizations to track data on our behalf, and for the most part, data revolves around career departments but is lacking for volunteer departments. We need to drive this change. We need to determine what answers we need and to design the questions to be asked. We have to take an active role in collecting and reporting our own information for the betterment of all.

How do we do this? Utilizing ten departments nationwide that ranged from small, rural departments, to large urban departments to aid in finding out the answer to that question, the general consensus was that there are seven key focus areas that departments can work towards changing in order to move our service towards a more ideal state.

## Onboarding

Onboarding refers to the process of bringing new members into your department, running from the very first contact that person has with the department (whether in person or online) until they are integrated as an operational or administrative member. This process can greatly depend on what role this individual will fill and what your requirements are to get a new member to that point, but an organized, well-designed orientation and onboarding process can positively affect your new recruits' outlook on your department and the fire service as a whole.

Be open and honest and set expectations from the beginning. If there's a deal-breaker for that candidate, it's better to find out upfront before much time and/or resources have been spent. Offer clear and concise information and interact with his or her family as well.

One of the biggest drawbacks about becoming an emergency responder is the time it takes to get trained. Being a first responder is a critically important and complicated job, and everyone understands that it takes time to be properly trained for the safety of all. However, review your processes to ensure there are no delays. Can any of the onboarding steps be streamlined, reduced, or eliminated? It's important to move the process along briskly so the candidate doesn't lose excitement.

### Points to consider:

- Set clear, realistic expectations from the beginning (especially about time commitments).
- Examine your onboarding process to see if it can be shortened.
- See if local or state regulations can be adjusted.
- Make your process for joining the department known to the public.
- Avoid jargon and complicated terms so the information you are providing is clear and concise.
- Be transparent and discuss training, time commitments, duties, expectations, etc. upfront.
- Create videos and reading materials that explain what to expect when joining.
- Offer flexibility in training by making more classes available. Partner with nearby departments for shared training if possible.
- Make information and applications available online.
- Ensure there are no discriminatory issues.
- Increase quality and quantity of the interactions with the applicant.
- Involve the applicant's family in the onboarding process (hold a family day for new members).
- Do after-action reports after every training. Asking what they learned keeps them engaged.
- The younger generation expects things to be done quickly, so streamline your process, keep candidates engaged, and get them into their desired role as quickly as possible.

## Diversity/Inclusion

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the current population in the United States is 18.1 percent Hispanic or Latino, 13.4 percent black or African-American, 5.8 percent Asian, and 50.8 percent female. According to U.S. Department of Labor (the latest available statistics are from 2013), the fire service is 9.3 percent Hispanic or Latino, 7.1 percent African-American, 0.7 percent Asian, and 3.7 percent female. These statistics are for career firefighters as volunteers aren't tracked, but antidotal evidence suggests the volunteer numbers are similar. An important question to consider is: How does your department's demographics match those of your community? Having a membership that mirrors the races, backgrounds, religions, and other

aspects of your community is the first step toward creating diversity and should be standard these days, but it still isn't as important as inclusion.

Inclusion means you forget the demographics and put the right people into the roles for which they are best suited. It means everyone is treated with respect by everyone. It means new and old members are treated alike. The new generations of potential volunteers you need to tap into (millennials and iGens) are very interested in how organizations incorporate inclusivity, and they aren't likely to bother with those that don't. This means not only having a diverse department but more that everyone in the department feels welcome and appreciated and works cohesively and respectfully.

By being inclusive and open, underrepresented groups will organically be drawn to your department. Once they are, ensure that they are included and appreciated, otherwise they will not last long. There are many nontraditional roles in today's fire service where someone can be an asset, so be sure to weigh and take advantage of each member's full skillset. If you don't have members with soft skillsets, those who are friendly, outgoing, and have interpersonal skills, find some! Make a greeter-like role for someone who is organized and good at building relationships, and have them be a conduit with potential members, especially in the early stages. You're not just looking to put bodies in seats; you need quality people who will stick.

**Points to consider:**

- Have clear definitions of *inclusive* and *diversity*, and ensure current members understand the importance of each.
- Stress quality over quantity.
- Consider peoples' entire skillsets when assigning their roles.
- Ensure advancement within the department is fair and equal to everyone.
- Weigh your department's demographics against those of your community, and reach out to the underrepresented groups.
- Make new members feel part of the department immediately.
- Ensure your department's culture is one of respect and inclusion.
- Create a mentorship program where new members are paired with senior members.
- Ensure information is shared with everyone.
- Don't use training as a means to weed out people you don't like.
- Have company officers who will interrupt bad behavior.
- Create a respect pledge.

## Leadership/Succession Planning

Two of the most common reasons people give for leaving volunteer fire departments are what they considered to be poor leadership and the fact that there was no official path for progression within the department. Members don't leave the fire service; they leave people. If you are seeing fluctuations in membership, the leadership in place might not be as cohesive as you think. Two good questions to ask yourself often: Am I leading a department that I would want to be part of, and are we teaching people to be good leaders?

From the moment each person is promoted, he or she should be training a replacement. If something happened to the chief or a senior officer today, would there be a plan in place to keep the operation running seamlessly? More importantly, would there be people ready and capable of stepping up to fill the void? Often people get promoted because they are good at the technical aspects of their role and/or because they've been a longstanding member of the department. Unfortunately, that promotion comes without any formal training, especially for those promoted to fire chief. It is your responsibility, then, to make sure that's the last time that ever happens. As chief (or a chief officer), you must lead by example. That means seeking out educational opportunities like classes and conferences, networking with your peers, helping those now under you to advance, passing on information, and empowering your members. This type of progressive leadership will greatly assist with retention, and it will make recruiting that much easier.

**Points to consider:**

- Begin training your replacement the day you are promoted.
- Ensure members have a clear understanding of what it takes to move through the ranks.
- Place a premium on education (IAFC/VCOS tools, classes, handbooks, etc.).
- Empower members by giving them responsibilities and trusting them to be handled.
- Implement a transparent, department-wide succession plan.
- Volunteer departments suffer from turnover; therefore, it's important that information is not held by just a few key people.
- Set clear levels of expectations for all.
- Recognize your emerging leaders.
- Realize change is happening, and that new "softer" skills may have more value than skills we traditionally needed.

## Staffing Models/Roles

One of the biggest challenges we face in the fire service is that there are no governing standards that work for everyone. In fact, we can't even come up with a true definition of the word "volunteer" that everyone agrees with. To say there is no one-size-fits-all solution is a gargantuan understatement. As a result, departments have always been forced to "figure things out for themselves" based on national, regional, state, or even local standards. We've always done what it takes to get by. Now, however, the game has changed.

Since "getting it done" is in our DNA and we are in survival mode, perhaps it's time to embrace our traditional resourcefulness. Other nations have adopted models that we could certainly learn from, ones in which we utilize our personnel resources to the fullest. Do we actually need every member of the department to be interior qualified? Can we not utilize exterior firefighters? Drivers? Crew leaders? Administrative staff members? Local departments could use performance-based standards to define what each member of the department is allowed to do. If a department is able, why shouldn't they look to add administrative staff members to assist with the duties some of your operational members have? By utilizing people's full skillsets and expertise, we free up others by taking roles they are less interested in off their plates.

Another topic that is screaming for our attention revolves around members of the department who choose to leave. The fire service has been talking about recruiting and retention forever, with most of the emphasis being on recruiting. Easier than recruiting and training a new person, however, is keeping the already trained members on staff. The big question we have to ask is why are members leaving the fire service, and the sad answer is that we don't definitively know. We don't know because the information usually isn't even gathered and is almost never reported. On the local level, how good are you about conducting exit interviews for departing members?

#### **Points to Consider:**

- Are we asking members why they are leaving the department? Are we successfully documenting those reasons?
- Conduct exit interviews by non-officers or by administrative members to determine the causes of members leaving the department. Having someone outside of the chain of command might lend to better insight and aid with future retention.
- Are we concisely and accurately describing all roles in the department? Are we giving clear expectations on how to achieve "the next step" (i.e., promotion, change in responsibilities, etc.)?
- Can you reduce some of the administrative workload for your operational firefighters?
- Does everyone need to be interior qualified?
- Can you divide department roles so they make better sense for the staff you have in place?
- Are we utilizing each individual person to their full capacity? Do we know each member's experience, skillset, and/or background?
- Are we successfully filling every role that is needed in our own department? Do we have enough operational, medical, administrative members to fill these roles?

## **Communication**

You control the words that come out of your mouth, but you can't control how people hear them. Two people can hear the same words and walk away with two very different understandings. The best way to combat this is to be clear, concise, and consistent in your message, and to speak openly with the masses instead of having lots of private conversations that can lead to misunderstandings, rumors, and alternate interpretations.

In leading a fire department, there are numerous types of communications that are all different yet important. For instance, you have to communicate with your staff and membership, with the general public, and with your local government/stakeholders. To compound matters, you have to be able to communicate to the various groups using several different methods, including face-to-face meetings, websites, emails, formal reports, social media, and more. Each generation is also going to turn to the means of communication its members prefer. Generation Xers, for example, are generally straightforward and to the point, and they just want to know the facts. Millennials, on the other hand, generally like to understand the reasons behind actions. They aren't being difficult or defiant; they just like to have a full picture of the end goal to see if they have any new skills or thoughts they can bring to the table.

Being able to handle all of these communication scenarios is now one of the most critical parts of running a fire department. Know your strengths in such dealings and utilize the skills of those around you. If you

happen to have an attorney as a member, let him or her speak on the department's behalf at town meetings and government functions. If you have a teacher, let him or her handle youth education festivities. A top salesperson would likely be a good pick to speak with prospective recruits. Utilize the skills of those around you.

**Points to consider:**

- Poor communication leads to misunderstandings, confusion, and dissention, and it makes everyone's lives more difficult.
- The most important part of communicating is listening.
- Be able to clearly define your mission, vision, values, and expectations.
- Communicate your expectations clearly while recruiting.
- Clear communications are your best retention tool.
- The younger generation learns by asking why things are done a certain way.
- Eliminate the "one person knows everything" mentality in which knowledge is hoarded.
- Eliminate "secret societies" by passing information along freely.
- Learn how your members and potential members prefer to communicate.
- Clearly communicating that members are doing well is the best, most sincere form of recognition.
- Word of mouth is still the best way to recruit and get your message out locally.
- Current members are your best sales pitch.
- Use every communication as a chance to educate.
- Create and execute a comprehensive media plan.

## Recognition/ Benefits

The fire service is built on top-down recognition, which is to say we use ranks and promotions to recognize high achievers. That, however, leaves a lot of time when people are receiving little or no feedback. As we rack our brains trying to come up with new and effective means of retention, a poll among firefighters indicated that 60 percent of those surveyed say that motivation would increase if superiors offered a simple "thank you" on occasion.

Benefits and recognition are important to the fire service because they give individuals and groups a sense of worth and allow everyone to see that their efforts are not going to waste. This boost in department morale gives each person the sense that their time is of benefit to others, which in turn results in them being more likely to continue to volunteer.

There are many ways to reward your membership, including promotions, small stipends, educational opportunities, awards, and so on. The best benefits are the ones that are wanted by the membership, so communicate with your department to find what would incentivize members to stay or join your department.

**Points to Consider:**

- Promotion is a part of recognition, and shows trust as a leader and as a peer.
- Most firefighters said a simple "thank you" from superiors would motivate them.

- Celebrate department successes.
- Recognition can be as small as a social media post.
- Officers need improved people skills.
- Research and implement recognition and benefit practices that are personalized to your department and are scalable.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the practices you implement.
- Include your members' families in recognitions.
- Focus on both tangible and intangible benefits.
- Recognize administrative members for their contributions, not just firefighters.
- Make sure recognition not only comes from the top but also from peers.

## Media/Marketing

The rule of thumb used to be that if someone was happy with you, they would tell two people, but if you did something they didn't like, they would tell 10. In today's world, with the internet and social media, your worst moment literally has the potential to be seen by millions of people. If you haven't addressed that fact already within the department, you are regrettably behind and need to act immediately. But don't treat this technology like an enemy. Get in front of it, utilize it, and embrace it.

Some departments are better than others in terms of educating the public, but the fact is that most people in the United States believe that all firefighters are paid and that all departments are well-funded, with the government handing out blank checks for new apparatuses and new equipment. We have to keep reaching out to our communities in every way we can. Continue the traditional avenues of communicating with your community, such as positive newspaper articles, open houses, radio/TV ads, and whatever else works for you. No matter how much time and effort you're already putting into it, however, chances are you'll need to step up your social media game. This is especially true in terms of recruiting, as the members you are looking for (i.e., younger people with spare time) use social media as their primary form of communication.

It's crucial that we begin at the local level and educate and communicate with the people in our community to help with our most immediate needs in terms of resources and personnel. It is also critical that we—as local and national organizations and as a brotherhood and sisterhood—start sharing these messages on the national level. Gone are the days where tough guys run into a burning building without SCBA. The culture has to change. We have to stop promoting the old, brazen, superhero image that worked with past generations but is falling on deaf ears with new generations. Change your culture locally, and push for a unified, national marketing campaign with whatever organization you can contact.

### Points to consider:

- Embrace social media and have a policy for use in place among department members.
- Bring in a skilled member to run your departments official social media accounts.
- Continue to find new ways to stay top of mind (positively) with your community.
- Have a plan for handling damage control if something goes wrong.
- Develop a positive relationship with local media.
- Develop a marketing plan and use all media available to disseminate it.

- Work with neighboring departments—as well as regional, state, and national organizations—to present a unified front and identical messages.
- Stop being the silent heroes and learn to promote/market ourselves.
- Be honest in marketing materials. Present your department as it exists, not as some glamorous ideal from the movies.
- Be realistic about what your fire department does on a regular basis. Most departments aid their communities in all times of need, from flooding to emergency medical support, not just when there is a fire.

## Conclusion

The leadership of the fire service has been talking about the need for a cultural change within our ranks for more than a decade, not because we were ashamed of our history but because we understand that we are going to need to adjust to an evolving world. Those of you who have tried to change the culture on even the smallest of local levels understand what a challenging undertaking that can be. However, we are at a critical point in our history, and we have no choice but to act now.

Our mission in creating this report was threefold. We wanted to fairly and truly illustrate the state of the volunteer fire service as it stands today; to paint an idealist picture of the volunteers of the future; and, most importantly, to map the path that will get us from where we are to where we want to be. Now is the time to start down that path.

We want to thank all the progressive leaders and departments out there that have been spearheading the changes in our beloved industry and encourage everyone to turn the thoughts we have presented into actions. The fact that you took the time to read this report means that you are aware that we all need to improve. In its totality, changing the entire volunteer fire service surely seems impossible, but as they say, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. By first changing the way you think and act, you will then be able to influence the rest of your department's leadership, which will then pass on to the rest of your membership and community, and ultimately to your neighbors. With strong leadership at the top and a groundswell from the masses, anything can be accomplished. The future of our fire service will be what you begin to make of it today.



# RECRUITING AND RETAINING THE VOLUNTEER OF THE FUTURE



## 10 Ways to Start:

1

**Set clear realistic expectations.** Ensure that you are letting potential members know how long the intake process is, what trainings to expect and weekly hours expected to be spent with the department.

2

**Clearly define Inclusivity and Diversity.** State what inclusion and diversity means for your department, and ensure current membership understands the importance of both in your firehouse.

3

**Have a mission, vision and values statement.** Having these statements provides a focus point to efficiently align your department to ensure that all members are working toward the same clear goals.

4

**Plan your marketing and recruitment strategies.** Crafting a plan allows for a more cohesive message from your department to the public and allows you to utilize all media available to disseminate seamlessly.

5

**Celebrate successes.** 60% of firefighters polled stated that a simple “Thank You” from a supervisor/ leadership would keep them motivated.

6

**Quality over Quantity.** Focus on ensuring that the right people with the right skillsets are in the right positions. Having a membership with more diverse skillsets allows more under-resourced community members to see themselves in your department because you are focused on the whole person.

7

**Have a clear path for member growth.** Accurately describing all roles within the department and having clear expectations on how to achieve the “next step” allows your membership to create and achieve goals within the department and supports retention efforts.

8

**Communication is key.** Effective communication can assist in fostering a productive working relationship between leadership and membership, as well as the community you serve.

9

**There is no “one size fits all” model of a fire department.** What works for one department, might not work for your department. Consider the needs of your department, then fill those needs, even if they don't fit the traditional model of other departments.

10

**Get to know your people.** Understanding your members' motivations, skills, and background allows for a better working relationship and longer retention of those members. Getting to know your community allows you to understand the needs of your community and allows the community to understand the needs of your department.

