

Leaders in Critical Thinking

ANNUAL REPORT



2025

Dear VCOS Members, Partners, and Friends,

As we close out 2025, I am honored to look back on a year defined by resilience, innovation, and steady commitment to the volunteer and combination fire service. Our section continues to stand at the crossroads of tradition and transformation, and this year demonstrated once again that our strength lies in the dedication of our members and the partnerships that support them.

Across the country, volunteer and combination departments faced challenges — recruitment and retention pressures, increasing call volumes, rising training demands, operating costs and delayed apparatus deliveries, and the continued need for mental and physical wellness support. Yet everywhere in our fire service community, I witnessed leaders stepping forward with creativity, compassion, and courage. VCOS remains proud to champion that leadership.

In 2025, we advanced several key initiatives that reflect our mission to support safe, effective, and sustainable volunteer and combination departments. None of this progress would be possible without the dedication of our board members, committee volunteers, instructors, and contributors. I am deeply grateful for your time, your expertise, and your belief in the mission of VCOS. To our sponsors and partners, thank you for investing in the future of the volunteer and combination fire service. Your support improves our reach and strengthens our impact.

As we look ahead to 2026, our focus remains clear: to empower leaders, support firefighters, and ensure that volunteer and combination departments continue to thrive. The challenges before us are real, but so is our capacity to meet them. Together, we will continue to build a fire service that is safer, stronger, and more resilient for the communities we serve.

With appreciation,



Rich Cowger
Chair, IAFC Volunteer & Combination Officers Section

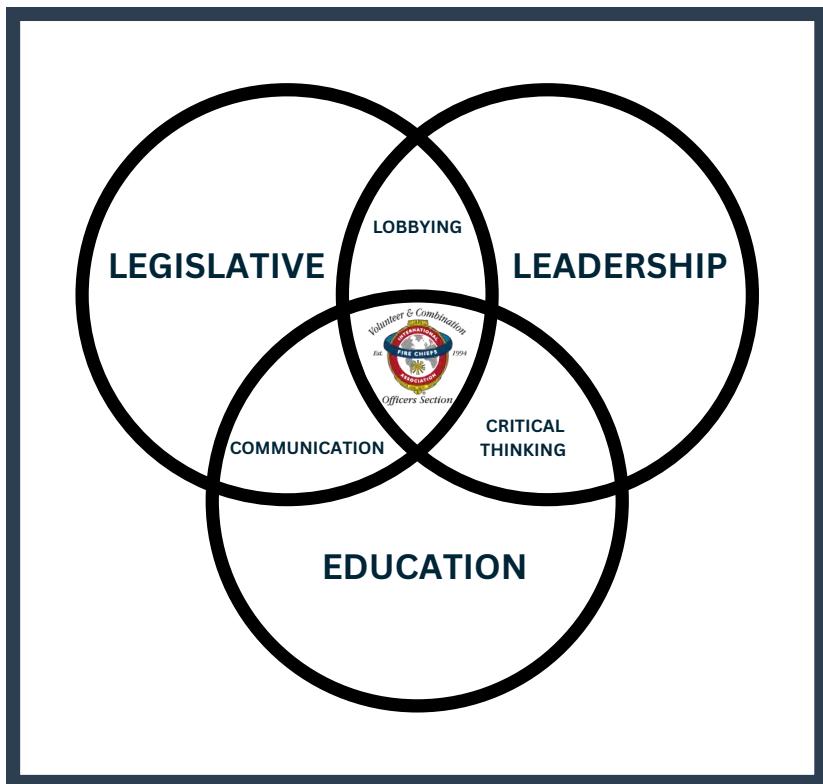


Strategic Initiatives

VCOS continues to stay firmly committed to advancing our strategic initiatives and strengthening the support we provide to volunteer and combination fire officers nationwide.

Our work is guided by three interconnected domains—**Leadership, Education, and Legislation**—represented by three intersecting circles. Each circle overlaps with the others, creating a central point where all three converge. That center point symbolizes the **Volunteer and Combination Officers Section**, which is both influenced by and actively engaged in all three domains.

[Read the full
2025 Strategic
Direction](#)



Financial Stability

VCOS continues to be financially secure. Funding for the section comes from membership dues, conference registration fees, fees from the education we offer, and foundational and supporting Partners

Symposium in the Sun

25th Anniversary

This year marked a major milestone as we celebrated the 25th anniversary of Symposium in the Sun. The 2025 Symposium, held in November in Clearwater, Florida, was once again a complete sellout.

Attendees and exhibitors shared overwhelmingly positive feedback, reinforcing the event's reputation as one of the premier learning and networking experiences in the fire service. This year was the first year we offered IAFC Officer Development Program Chier Officer One.



Our Board

Our Board of Directors played a significant role throughout the program, lending their expertise to several high-impact sessions, including:

- **What Are the Coming Issues Critical to the Fire Service?**
- **Fire Chiefs Forum**
- **Effectively Managing Volunteer/Career Section Interactions**
- **Wildland Urban Interface Issues**
- **Critical Thinking Academy Workshops**



2025 Awards



John M. Buckman III Leadership Award

- **Jason Caughey, Fire Chief, Laramie County Fire Authority**



Retention and Recruitment Achievement Award

- **Upper Merion Township Fire & EMS Department, King of Prussia, PA**



William F. Jenaway Illness & Injury Prevention Award

- **Cranberry Township Fire & Rescue, Cranberry Township, PA**

NFFF Board's Advisory Committee

- **Chief Kevin Cooney, South Windsor Fire Department, recognized for serving on committee for 12 years.**



VCOS Chair Award

- **Fred Windisch, Fire Chief, Ponderosa Fire Department, Texas**
- **National Fire Sprinkler Association**



Scholarships

We recognize emerging and established leaders through our annual scholarship program.

Sponsored by Gasaway Consulting Group, LLC

Emerging Leader Scholarship

- **Ryan Will, Fire Lieutenant, South Windsor Fire Department (CT)**

Emerging Leader Alumni Scholarship

- **Jacob Dunn, 2nd Assistant Fire Chief, Blair Volunteer Fire Department (NE)**

Sponsored by VCOS

Chief James P. Seavey, Sr. Scholarship

- **James S Williams, Fire Chief, Loudoun County Combined Fire & Rescue System**

Chief Robert T. Bettenhausen Scholarship

- **Matthew Bright, Deputy Chief, Monroe Fire Protection District**



Sponsored by Pat Lynch, PhD.

Frank Byrne Memorial Scholarship

- **Joseph Falaschetti Jr., CFO, Fire Chief, Beecher Fire Protection District**
- **Suzette B. Dismuke, Volunteer Coordinator/Recruiter, Chesterfield Fire & EMS**
- **Amber Stewart Edington, Volunteer Firefighter/EMT, Riley Fire Department**

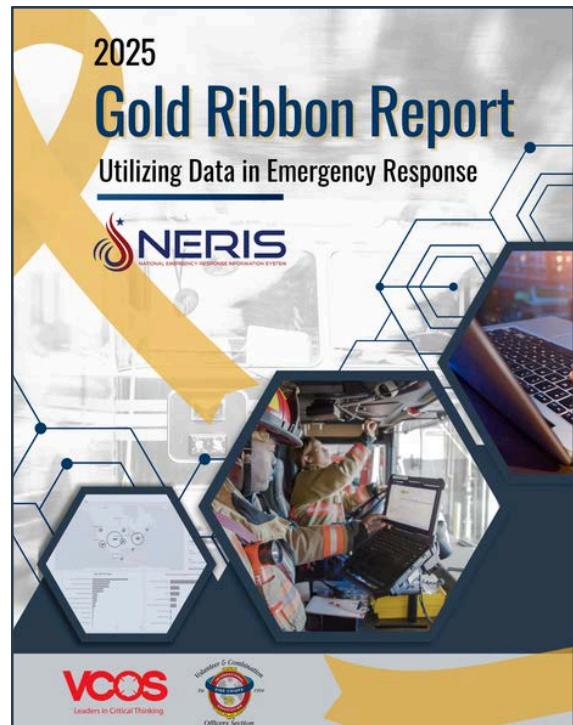
Gold Ribbon Report on Data

This year, we released the Gold Ribbon Report on Data: Utilizing Data in Emergency Response, a comprehensive roadmap designed to support departments as they transition to the National Emergency Response Information System (NERIS). The report provides clear guidance, best practices, and practical considerations to help agencies understand and leverage the critical role data plays in today's fire and emergency services environment.

This pivotal document reflects our collective commitment to advancing emergency response capabilities through the strategic, informed use of data. It reinforces the importance of data-driven decision-making and positions our members to meet the evolving demands of modern emergency response.



[Download Full Report](#)



Member Survey

In July we launched a survey of our membership, here is a Summary of **Key Challenges and Priorities for Volunteer & Combination Fire Departments** identified by our members.

72%

Rated our communications
4 to 5 stars

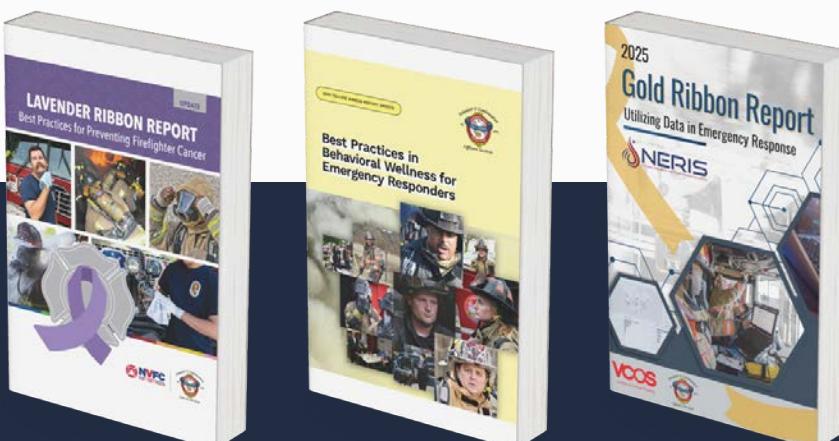


- RECRUITMENT & RETENTION (R&R)**
- LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND SUCCESSION PLANNING**
- IMPROVING VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**
- FUNDING CHALLENGES AND FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**
- EVOLVING THE VOLUNTEER SYSTEM**

In the survey, 72% of you rated our communication 4 or 5 stars — and while we're grateful for that, we're aiming for nothing less than 100. Your feedback made it clear that you want more frequent updates, so we're launching this VCOS Connection to keep everyone better informed and connected.

It was also clear that our Ribbon Reports are valued and utilized regularly. We will continue to share our reports and explore topics for new reports.

The VCOS Ribbon Reports are a series of documents published by the IAFC Volunteer and Combination Officers Section (VCOS). These reports provide best practices and guidelines on various topics relevant to the fire service. These reports are valuable resources for improving safety, health, and operational effectiveness within fire departments.



Fire-Rescue International (FRI)

At FRI in Orlando this August, VCOS hosted its Annual General Meeting, where board members were officially sworn in for their next term. The event provided an important opportunity to connect with our membership, celebrate progress, and reaffirm our commitment to advancing the volunteer and combination fire service.

VCOS also maintained a strong presence on the trade show floor. Our booth saw steady engagement from current members and prospective members alike, all eager to learn more about the benefits, resources, and leadership development opportunities offered through VCOS.



Our Board

Our board contributed to the educational program with two well-received presentations:

- **Let's Get Real About Combination Fire Department Challenges**
- **Critical Thinking Academy Workshop**

These sessions highlighted the real-world issues facing combination departments and reinforced the importance of thoughtful, informed leadership.



Training Officer of the Year



In partnership with Vector Solutions, we were proud to present the Training Officer of the Year Award to **Deputy Fire Chief Paul J. Wilson of the Shelton (CT) Fire Department**. His dedication to training excellence and commitment to advancing firefighter readiness exemplifies the values of this award.



Critical Thinking Academy

This year marked the launch of the inaugural VCOS Critical Thinking Academy Cohort, and we extend our sincere congratulations to all participants. Your commitment to growth, leadership, and thoughtful decision-making was on full display during the program in Canonsburg, PA.



We are grateful to our exceptional CTA faculty—Kate Marquis, Landon Churchill, Al Yancey, Jordan Cramer, and Kevin McGee—for their expertise, mentorship, and dedication to shaping the next generation of fire service leaders. Special thanks to Range Resources for generously hosting and supporting this important initiative.

With the success of our first cohort, we are excited to share that Cohort Two launches in 2026. We encourage emerging and established leaders alike to take part in this transformative experience.



Strengthening Partnerships

In June, Chief Al Yancey, Vice Chair of the IAFC Volunteer and Combination Officers Section (VCOS), met with the Executive Committee of the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) during the NVFC Training Summit in Salt Lake City, UT. The conversation focused on how both organizations can work together to advance shared priorities and strengthen support for the volunteer and combination fire service.



 [**READ JOINT PRESS RELEASE**](#)

Each year, the VCOS Board meets in different places around the country, where they incorporate a gathering with a local volunteer fire department.

In March, the VCOS board and partners met in Canonsburg, PA. Range Resources hosted the board meeting at their corporate office. Chief Jordan Cramer's department, South Strabane Fire and Emergency Services hosted the board for dinner.



In May, the VCOS board and partners met in Texas. Chief Catrabone's department, Klein Fire Department, hosted the board meeting. Members of Klein FD and Ponderosa Fire Department hosted the board for a delicious Texas BBQ.



We extend our gratitude to all our supporters, including our five Foundational Partners.



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Leaders in Critical Thinking

And as we look ahead to 2026—don't forget to renew your membership with VCOS!

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