



PRESERVING THE TRADITION OF  
**NEIGHBORS HELPING NEIGHBORS:**  
*steps toward success*





## ABOUT IAFC

The International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) is an association with 145 years of experience that is highly-regarded with a strong and credible reputation. Our members are the world's leading experts in firefighting, emergency medical services, terrorism response, hazmat response, natural disasters, search and rescue and public safety policy.



## ABOUT VOLUNTEER WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS

Volunteer Workforce Solutions (VWS) offers fire departments turnkey solutions focused on volunteer and combination systems' recruitment and retention efforts. Through partnerships on the local, state and national level, VWS works directly with you to address department recruitment and retention challenges by providing marketing materials, training and staff support.



## ABOUT VOLUNTEER COMBINATION OFFICERS SECTION

Providing chief officers who manage volunteer and combination departments within the fire/rescue/EMS delivery system with information, education, services, and representation to enhance their professionalism and capabilities.

# THE CALL TO ACTION

*“Volunteers are crucial to emergency service response and community safety”*

The volunteer fire service needs a life net to preserve the tradition of neighbors helping neighbors.

Our nation is facing a crisis as the decades-long struggle of emergency service organizations (ESOs) retaining qualified members and maintaining organizational unity has now reached its breaking point. Qualified volunteers have always been the lifeblood of the American fire service with more than 90 percent of ESOs relying on their service, but today these volunteers are becoming increasingly difficult to retain and recruit. The inability of organizations to maintain experienced staff not only increases risks to residents of the community, but also to department members themselves.

Volunteers are crucial to emergency service response and community safety. It is up to the fire service to energize its retention and recruitment efforts of these volunteers by instilling positive changes. Traditional methods of retention and recruitment require adaption and enhancement. Successful organizations must implement a dedicated plan to match the specific needs of their own community, while using proven strategies to preserve the tradition of neighbors helping neighbors.

## **BACKGROUND**

The International Association of Fire Chiefs' (IAFC) Volunteer Workforce Solutions (VWS), in collaboration with Connecticut Fire Chiefs Association, North Carolina Association of Fire Chiefs, Tennessee Fire Chiefs Association, and Virginia Fire Chiefs Association, has been implementing FEMA SAFER grants to enhance the ability of individual departments to successfully recruit and keep qualified volunteers. Key members of those state associations and IAFC staff formed a Volunteer Retention & Recruitment (R&R) work group to share results and discuss potential improvements that can be shared nationally.

While there is not a single plan that can meet the unique needs of every department, members of the Volunteer R&R work group used their experience to identify problems inherent in the current system, their experience in overcoming recruitment/retention issues, and to produce potential solutions to assist communities and emergency service leaders as they strive to create and maintain dynamic organizations. The result of the meeting was a series of documents and tools intended to provide ESOs with proven retention and recruitment methods and resources designed to promote a more diverse and inclusive workforce. Throughout these documents, the common phrase “recruitment and retention” was intentionally reversed to reiterate the importance of keeping qualified volunteers rather than solely expending efforts on recruiting new members.

## IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

Qualified people are becoming increasingly difficult to retain and recruit as volunteer firefighters. Due to demographic, cultural, and economic influences, the number of available, qualified individuals continues to decline. Volunteers have increased demands on their personal time including time commitments from other nonprofit and/or volunteer-supported organizations. The substantial training and call requirements exacerbate the problem, thus reducing the number of people willing to consider volunteering for emergency organizations. The combination of these realities is leaving our communities vulnerable.

## RETENTION

*“Old school firefighter attitudes are no longer conducive to volunteer retention”*

Member retention involves the volunteer’s motivation to stay a volunteer and the agency’s engagement to keep the volunteer. Old school firefighter attitudes at the station are no longer conducive to volunteer retention. Gone are the days of “If you don’t like it, there’s the door.” Those outdated attitudes will most certainly negatively impact the number of volunteers in your ranks. Volunteers must feel welcome, needed, and respected. As a leader your actions impact your members’ desire to stay.

Leadership action to keep members in the department:

- **Display effective leadership where expectations are clear, and the environment is welcoming.**

People quit jobs where leadership is weak and morale is toxic, so leaving a similar volunteer position would be even easier. Strong leadership encourages member participation. Send clear, concise, and consistent messages and set attainable, yet challenging goals.

- **Demand an environment of respect, acceptance, diversity, and inclusion from everyone in the organization.**

People want to feel good about the organization that they are part of. Be welcoming and make people feel comfortable. Your organization should mirror your community to better serve those in need.

- **Be flexible with regard to training and administrative requirements.**

Joining an emergency service organization comes with a substantial commitment. If the members are not willing to be flexible and make some sacrifices, meeting requirements will never work. However, the same can be said for the organization. Being flexible and finding alternative ways for recruits and members to train and earn certifications will go a long way toward keeping members engaged.

- **Have plans to gain necessary resources (i.e. PPE, funding, equipment, etc.).**

Members of an emergency service organization have an innate sense of pride. They are going to wear their uniforms, clean the apparatus, and keep the stations organized. No one wants to be part of a subpar organization that is not adequately equipped. Completing a needs assessment helps leaders focus on specific steps necessary to achieve short- and long-term objectives that impact retention. Once a plan is developed, leadership must take action to achieve and gain resources critical to the success

of the members and the department. Following through on a resource plan is important for retention because it ensures members have the appropriate resources to do their jobs safely and gives members a department, they can take pride in.

- **Earn support from internal and external stakeholders for the organization's needs and efforts and ensure community appreciation of the department.**

The success of an emergency service organization is dependent on support and investment with common expectations among all stakeholders in the community that includes businesses, residents, elected officials, community groups, and organization members. This message cannot be overstated. It's the leader's responsibility to make sure the community knows you exist, to provide education on the services you provide, and to gain public support for the value of the organization in your community. Every member of the department is a walking billboard of your organization. If members are properly educated and well-versed in important talking points, they can help carry the department's message throughout their community. Many of the problems faced by the fire service (especially in smaller communities) are directly related to a lack of understanding from the community in terms of what the department does and how it operates.

## RECRUITMENT

*“Without question, current members are the best recruiting tools”*

Organizations with strong retention have less recruitment issues and need.

Organizations working to build their membership or maintain a steady flow of volunteers in their recruitment onboarding benefit from having a strong recruitment plan to bring qualified candidates into the organization.

Leadership action to recruit new members:

- **Ensure leaders remain motivated and have the foresight to develop and maintain an effective recruitment process.**

The organization looks to its leaders to guide and set the course for action. Without this guidance, the recruitment process fails because the organization will take on the attitude of its leadership. If the leadership remains invested and truly believes recruiting is important, so will the rest of the department.

- **Have a recruitment plan and the necessary resources to implement it.**

Have a plan that is clear, realistic, and concise in order to track progress. Identify follow-up steps to maintain or improve the plan as needed.

- **Designate qualified people to spearhead recruiting.**

Having the right person in this position is critical, as he or she will become the face of the organization for potential recruits. The designated point of contact needs to be knowledgeable, personable, organized,

and efficient. A person considering joining the department is making a big decision. New recruits need to see commitment reflected back by the organization at all times.

- **Keep the onboarding process short and simple.**

An efficient onboarding process with committed personnel who respond in a professional and timely manner will help keep potential members engaged. There are still procedures and requirements, but the organization should aim to keep the process as short and painless as possible.

- **Engage interested recruits in a timely and consistent manner throughout the process.**

Potential recruits are considering a significant commitment. Going long periods of time without hearing back will make the department look unorganized and uninterested. If potential recruits start to have second thoughts, someone from the organization must help address any concerns before they become insurmountable.

- **Develop an organizational needs assessment and subsequent goals.**

An organization should identify what its present and future needs will be in all phases of the operation. Including a recruitment plan will keep personnel present in the coming years.

- **Present realistic expectations to recruits and their families.**

There are real challenges in this profession that must be addressed from the beginning. New recruits are set up for failure if they do not have clearly defined expectations from the start.

- **Keep internal motivation and support for recruitment efforts high.**

Without the commitment and support of organizational members, recruitment efforts will fail. Without question, current members are the best recruiting tools. If they are positive and speak well of the organization, they will actively recruit with every person they meet. If they are unmotivated or speaking negatively, every contact they have will be toxic.

## CONCLUSION

*“The life net does exist!”*

Recognizing the challenges of retention and recruitment and their effects on service delivery to our communities is the first step in identifying successful strategies for change. The Volunteer Retention and Recruitment work group revealed common pitfalls and identified practical solutions to address our challenges and enhance volunteer retention and recruitment in the fire service. The life net does exist! There are potential solutions that can preserve the volunteer fire service tradition of neighbors helping neighbors.

## RESOURCES

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The Volunteer Retention and Recruitment workgroup have identified resources that have and can benefit volunteer retention and recruitment in agencies.

<b>International Association of Fire Chiefs</b>	<b>Volunteer Workforce Solutions</b>	<a href="http://www.iafc.org/vws">www.iafc.org/vws</a>
	<b>Chief's Administrative Rapid Information Tool</b>	<a href="http://www.iafc.org/topics-and-tools/volunteer/vws/chiefs-a-rit">www.iafc.org/topics-and-tools/volunteer/vws/chiefs-a-rit</a>
	<b>Volunteer Administrative Leadership Series (VALS)</b>	<a href="http://www.iafc.org/VALS">www.iafc.org/VALS</a>
	<b>Volunteer and Combination Officers</b>	<a href="http://www.vcos.org">www.vcos.org</a>
	<b>Topics and tools - free resources</b>	<a href="http://www.iafc.org/topics-and-tools">www.iafc.org/topics-and-tools</a>
	<b>IAFC Academy - free R&amp;R online courses and more</b>	<a href="http://www.iafcacademy.org">www.iafcacademy.org</a>
	<b>Learn &amp; Develop - free resources</b>	<a href="http://www.iafc.org/learn-and-develop">www.iafc.org/learn-and-develop</a>
<b>FEMA SAFER Grants</b>	<a href="http://www.fema.gov/staffing-adequate-fire-emergency-response-grants">www.fema.gov/staffing-adequate-fire-emergency-response-grants</a>	
<b>National Fire Academy</b>	<a href="http://www.usfa.fema.gov/training/nfa">www.usfa.fema.gov/training/nfa</a>	
<b>National Fire Protection Association</b>	<a href="http://www.nfpa.org">www.nfpa.org</a>	
<b>National Volunteer Fire Council</b>	<b>Cost Calculator</b>	<a href="http://www.nvfc.org/cost-saving-calculators">www.nvfc.org/cost-saving-calculators</a>
<b>Public Service Announcement - VIRGINIA</b>	<a href="http://www.everydayherova.org/resources">www.everydayherova.org/resources</a>	
<b>Public Service Announcement - CONNECTICUT</b>	<a href="http://www.iafc.org/topics-and-tools/resources/resource/connecticut-vws-recruitment-psas">www.iafc.org/topics-and-tools/resources/resource/connecticut-vws-recruitment-psas</a>	
<b>Public Service Announcement - NORTH CAROLINA</b>	<a href="http://www.iafc.org/topics-and-tools/resources/resource/north-carolina-recruitment-psas">www.iafc.org/topics-and-tools/resources/resource/north-carolina-recruitment-psas</a>	
<b>Public Service Announcement - TENNESSEE</b>	<a href="http://www.iafc.org/topics-and-tools/resources/resource/tennessee-vws-recruitment-psas">www.iafc.org/topics-and-tools/resources/resource/tennessee-vws-recruitment-psas</a>	
<b>VWS Recruitment Site - TENNESSEE</b>	<a href="http://www.volunteerfiretn.org">www.volunteerfiretn.org</a>	
<b>VWS Recruitment Site - CONNECTICUT</b>	<a href="http://www.everydayheroct.org">www.everydayheroct.org</a>	
<b>VWS Recruitment Site - NORTH CAROLINA</b>	<a href="http://www.volunteerfirenc.org">www.volunteerfirenc.org</a>	
<b>VWS Recruitment Site - VIRGINIA</b>	<a href="http://www.everydayherova.org">www.everydayherova.org</a>	

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