



*Volunteer Firefighter*  
Recruitment and Retention  
in Rural Pennsylvania



*THE CENTER FOR*

*Rural Pennsylvania*

*A Legislative Agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly*





# Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention in Rural Pennsylvania

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## **Project Summary**

Thanks to Benjamin Franklin, who organized the nation's first volunteer fire company (VFC) in Philadelphia in 1736, volunteer firefighters continue to respond to fire and other emergencies in Pennsylvania and the nation. This 270-year-old tradition, however, may be in jeopardy as increasing job demands, family commitments and other factors hinder volunteerism.

Since rural Pennsylvania relies heavily on volunteers, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania sponsored research in 2003-2004 to better understand firefighter recruitment and retention issues and identify strategies that may help increase firefighter volunteerism in rural areas.

Using qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the researcher conducted a literature review, surveyed senior-level fire officials in 32 states and fire chiefs in rural Pennsylvania, and surveyed rural Pennsylvania firefighters.

After analyzing the research results, the researcher concluded that recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters is a national problem and not unique to rural Pennsylvania. The results indicated that rural volunteer firefighters are more likely to join their local fire company because of their commitment to community and because of their families' connection to the fire company. The results also showed that financial benefits may play only a small role in motivating people to volunteer and remain active.

# Introduction

Across the nation and in Pennsylvania, the number of volunteer firefighters has been declining for more than 30 years. While state and local governments have recognized the decreasing numbers of volunteers, they have been hard pressed to identify specific measures to control the decline and recruit new volunteers.

In rural Pennsylvania, volunteer firefighters are typically the first responders to fires and other emergencies. Without sufficient active volunteers, rural fire companies may not be able to continue to provide fire service and rural Pennsylvania may need to consider paid service as the only viable option for fire services.

## Methodology

In 2003-2004, the researcher conducted the project to identify and evaluate the most effective strategies for increasing recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters. The research included both quantitative and qualitative methods as follows:

**Literature Review:** Using library and Internet sources, along with personal contacts with fire service officials in Pennsylvania and other states, the researcher collected published and unpublished reports on volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention. The overall literature review helped put historic patterns of recruitment and retention in perspective and identify successful recruitment and retention models.

**Interviews with top fire service officials in other states:** The researcher contacted 41 state fire officials in 32 states to discuss recruitment and retention policies. The names and telephone numbers of officials came from Internet searches and personal recommendations. The interviews were conducted by telephone and were semi-structured using open-ended questions. Officials were asked about the number and types of fire companies in their state and state policies and programs for volunteer fire companies (VFCs). In addition, officials were questioned about training, recognition, financial benefits for volunteers, female volunteer firefighters, and recruitment and retention issues. They were also asked for any studies or reports on volunteer firefighters that had been completed in their state. The interviews were used to identify successful practices to recruit and retain volunteers and to develop a national perspective on the issues.

**Field interviews with Pennsylvania rural fire chiefs and active firefighters:** Using the Pennsylvania State Fire Commissioner's list of volunteer fire companies, the researcher interviewed 35 rural Pennsylvania fire chiefs in person or by phone. Using a similar process, the researcher also conducted interviews with 41 rural volunteer firefighters.

The 35 chiefs were asked open-ended questions about their service areas, fire calls, recruitment and

### Defining Rural

To identify rural volunteer fire companies, the researchers used the Center for Rural Pennsylvania's 1990 definition. A VFC was considered rural if it was located in a county where more than 50 percent of the population was defined as rural by the 1990 Census. In 2004, there were approximately 957 rural fire companies, or 39 percent of the statewide total of 2,448 VFCs.

retention issues, recognition programs, female firefighters, firefighter training, and relationships with other local fire companies and EMS responders. The chiefs were also asked to identify and explain policy changes they would recommend to assist volunteer firefighters. The interviews included additional questions on what the chiefs considered to be their department's best practices in terms of recruitment, retention, training and leadership.

The 41 volunteer firefighters answered open-ended questions about why they became firefighters and what their expectations were as volunteers. They also answered questions about volunteer recruitment, retention, fire company leadership and training, and the financial benefits volunteers should receive. The interviews helped the researcher to gather qualitative information on firefighter recruitment and retention.

**Survey of volunteer firefighters:** The researcher administered a six-page survey to 707 firefighters statewide. Of those surveyed, 701 firefighters from 225 rural VFCs responded to the survey, for a response rate of 99 percent.

The survey, which used a Likert scale for responses, asked respondents how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements concerning recruitment, retention, leadership, and recognition. Respondents were also asked to complete a demographic profile to include, age, gender, education, fire company rank and years of service.

# Results

## Literature Review

### A Brief History of Volunteer Firefighting

Contemporary concerns about volunteer firefighter staffing problems began with the President's National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control, established in 1968. As a result of the commission's 1973 report, *America Burning*, the National Fire Prevention and Control Administration (NFPCA) was created in 1974. The NFPCA provided federal leadership to the states to help them create state programs for fire education, training and research.

In 1974, Pennsylvania Governor Milton Shapp established a Governor's Commission on Fire Prevention and Control. The commission published its final report, *Pennsylvania Burning*, in 1976. The report recommended establishing the Office of the State Fire Commissioner to provide command and coordination for Pennsylvania's then 3,000 fire companies; a central state fire data collection system; a state master plan for fire prevention and control; a cohesive fire education and training program for firefighters and fire officers; and regional firefighting schools to support firefighter training. Some of the recommendations proposed in *Pennsylvania Burning* were implemented over time, and, to this day, serve as the organizational structure for the commonwealth's paid and volunteer fire services.

### Declining Volunteers

Since the early 1970s, state and local governments have been concerned with the decline in volunteer firefighters. A 1993 study published by the National Association of State Foresters reported a national drop in active volunteer firefighters from 884,600 in 1983 to 815,500 in 1993, an 8 percent decline in 10 years. Explanations for declines in volunteer firefighters have been attributed to national social changes, difficulties in finding new volunteers, and problems with retaining existing volunteers.

According to a 1998 National Volunteer Fire Council and U.S. Fire Administration report, *Retention and Recruitment: Problems and Solutions*, 11 factors have contributed to reductions in the number of men and women joining and remaining in the volunteer fire service. These 11 factors included time demands, training requirements, increasing call volume, changes in the 'nature of the business' of firefighting, changes in urban and suburban populations, changes in socio-logical conditions (two-income families and time demands), leadership problems, federal legislation and regulations, increasing use of combination departments,

higher cost of housing (in affluent communities), and aging communities.

The impact of these and other factors has made it more difficult for VFCs to recruit and retain members. A 1992 survey by the Pennsylvania Department of Community Affairs (now the Department of Community and Economic Development) found that 79 percent of the responding VFCs reported problems with recruiting, 51 percent reported active membership declines in the prior decade, and 37 percent reported no growth in membership over the prior decade. One implication of this decline was that 61 percent reported problems with insufficient volunteers responding to Monday-to-Friday daytime emergencies. The study concluded: "...requirements on volunteer time have increased. If there are no more or even fewer volunteers, then there are fewer people bearing a larger share of the workload. Prolonged situations like this lead to disenchantment and burn-out."

The 1998 National Volunteer Fire Council and U.S. Fire Administration report, mentioned previously, also found that volunteer fire service is a tradition in many generations of firefighting families, but that, "unfortunately, it is also a tradition in danger of weakening and possibly even dying out." The report also says: "Fire departments can no longer count on the children of current members following in their parents' footsteps. Nor can they count on a continuous stream of local people eager to donate their time and energy to their volunteer fire department. Departments cannot even rely on members staying active in the volunteer fire service for long periods of time."

Recognizing that many VFCs are facing a recruitment problem, the council noted that recruitment solutions must begin with an assessment of VFCs staffing needs and the volunteer skills and abilities most needed to maintain VFC performance. The report found that person-to-person recruiting by active volunteer firefighters was the most successful recruiting method and that many retention problems could be traced to the following sources: demands on volunteer time and the need for increasing firefighter training requirements, additional call volume, changes in economic and social conditions in suburban and rural areas, and VFC leadership problems and internal conflicts within the fire company. Participants targeted leadership issues as the most important problem for retention across the country. This sentiment was echoed in numerous other studies that pointed to poor leadership and management practices as one of the



main reasons volunteers left the fire service.

An unpublished State University of New York at Buffalo Ph.D. dissertation (Sargent, 1992) on satisfaction and retention of volunteer firefighters found that altruism ranked first as the most satisfying reason for volunteering. The eight top reasons for active firefighters to stay on the job were altruism, skills, thrills, work environment, management, social relations, material issues, and recognition. Retention policies identified as important by the active volunteers were management quality and skill development, quality of the work environment, and altruism. The researcher also noted that the lack of VFC leadership and management skills might be retention issues worthy of further investigation.

Fire service reports written over the past 30 years indicate Pennsylvania VFCs were experiencing increased difficulties in recruiting and retaining sufficient active fire company members. Furthermore, there is a distinct risk that some rural VFCs lack sufficient active firefighters to adequately respond to all emergency service calls. The Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute's 2001 report, *Funding for Pennsylvania Emergency Services ... Beyond 2001*, stated a concern that VFCs were experiencing "a steep and steady decline in the number of volunteers attracted to these vital services in Pennsylvania."

The continuing decline in the number of active rural volunteer firefighters may eventually force Pennsylvanians to pay directly for fire protection. In July 1999, DCED reported that the average wage and benefit compensation for a paid firefighter was \$55,000. The Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency

***Fire service reports written over the past 30 years indicate Pennsylvania VFCs are experiencing increased difficulties in recruiting and retaining sufficient active fire company members.***

Services Institute (2001) calculated that staffing 2,000 fire companies would cost municipalities about \$2.2 billion.

Fire service studies suggest the most serious fire company problems involve recruitment, retention and volunteer availability to respond to calls, followed by a lack of funding sources, absence of community support, issues involving insurance costs, training requirements, and government regulations. Rural VFCs vary greatly in their ability to recruit and retain volunteer staff.

To encourage recruitment and retention, most published reports suggest financial benefits be used to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters. While volunteer fire chiefs and firefighters encourage public and private financial incentives to support their firefighting mission, financial benefits represent only one part of a complex story. Although money may assist and encourage volunteer firefighters to join and remain active members in their VFC, financial benefits are not the primary reasons why individuals choose to become and remain volunteer firefighters.

While many fire service reports reviewed provided policy suggestions, these reports did not prioritize their suggestions. Furthermore, no field tests were conducted to discover which recruitment and

retention policies were most effective in influencing individuals to become volunteers and remain active. Therefore, little empirical data concerning volunteer firefighter motivation exists.

### ***Today's Volunteer Fire Companies***

According to the U.S. Fire Administration, in 2005, there were 17,438 all-volunteer fire companies in the U.S., or 72 percent of the nation's 24,294 fire companies.

The states with the most VFC's were Pennsylvania, New York, and Texas, each with more than 950 VFCs. On a per capita basis, however, the states with the most VFCs were North Dakota, South Dakota, and Vermont, each with more than 25 VFCs per 100,000 residents. Nationally, Pennsylvania ranked 17th in the number of VFCs per capita.

U.S. Fire Administration data showed there were nearly 431,500 volunteer firefighters nationwide. Forty percent of these volunteers were found in Pennsylvania and the six surrounding states of Maryland, West Virginia, Ohio, New York, New Jersey, and Delaware. On a per capita basis, the most volunteers were in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Vermont, each with more than 450 volunteers for every 100,000 residents. Nationally, Pennsylvania ranked 8th in the number of active volunteer firefighters per capita.

Throughout the U.S., the average VFC had 25 active members. The states with the most active firefighters per VFC were Delaware, New York and Maryland, each with more than 50 active members per VFC. Among the 50 states, Pennsylvania had 33 active members per VFC, or the 8<sup>th</sup> highest number in the nation.





## Firefighter Training

According to the interviews, most states required little or no formal training or qualifications to serve as a volunteer firefighter. Officials explained that since most states do not fund firefighting training, they have no power to enforce any training requirements. VFCs are community-based and do not pay much attention to state training requirements unless there are financial incentives.

Most states had a formal state fire academy that provided free or discounted training and certification for volunteer firefighters. State fire academy courses were offered free in 18 states, including Pennsylvania. Other states offered training at low or reduced costs.

One of the more innovative education programs was in Kentucky, where a fleet of trucks delivers free comprehensive firefighter training to local VFCs. This mobile fire academy provides local training without the expenses of travel, food, and lodging. Pennsylvania has an “Academy on the Road” program that has proved quite popular with rural VFCs.

## Recognition

All of the state fire officials said VFCs and firefighters desire public recognition and appreciation. Most states listed various recognition programs, but little is known about their impact on volunteer recruitment and retention.

## Volunteer Firefighter Incentive Benefits

Officials said they believe non-financial incentives are more effective at motivating and retaining volunteer firefighters than financial benefits. A common opinion was that financial benefits do not motivate volunteers; however, constant fire service related expenses

## Firefighter Benefits by State

	BENEFIT TYPE				
	Workers Compensation	Health Benefits	Death Benefits	Retirement Pension	Property or Income Tax Rebate
Alabama	Yes	--	Yes	--	--
Alaska	Yes	--	--	--	Yes
Arizona	Yes	--	--	Yes	--
Arkansas	--	--	Yes	Yes	--
California	Yes	--	--	Yes	--
Colorado	Yes	--	--	Yes	--
Connecticut	Yes	--	--	Yes	Yes
Delaware	Yes	--	Yes	Yes	Yes
Florida	Yes	--	Yes	Yes	--
Georgia	Yes	--	Yes	Yes	--
Hawaii	Yes	--	--	--	--
Idaho	Yes	--	--	--	--
Illinois	--	--	Yes	--	--
Indiana	Yes	--	Yes	--	--
Iowa	Yes	--	--	--	--
Kansas	Yes	--	--	--	--
Kentucky	Yes	--	Yes	--	--
Louisiana	Yes	Yes	Yes	--	--
Maine	Yes	--	Yes	--	--
Maryland	Yes	--	Yes	--	Yes
Massachusetts	Yes	--	Yes	--	--
Michigan	Yes	--	--	--	--
Minnesota	Yes	--	Yes	--	Yes
Mississippi	Yes	--	Yes	--	--
Missouri	--	--	--	--	--
Montana	Yes	--	Yes	Yes	--
Nebraska	Yes	--	--	--	--
Nevada	Yes	--	--	--	--
New Hampshire	Yes	--	--	--	--
New Jersey	Yes	--	--	--	--
New Mexico	Yes	--	--	Yes	--
New York	Yes	--	Yes	Yes	Yes
North Carolina	--	--	Yes	Yes	--
North Dakota	Yes	--	--	Yes	--
Ohio	Yes	--	Yes	Yes	--
Oklahoma	--	--	Yes	Yes	--
Oregon	Yes	--	Yes	--	--
Pennsylvania	Yes	--	Yes	--	--
Rhode Island	Yes	--	Yes	--	--
South Carolina	Yes	--	--	Yes	Yes
South Dakota	Yes	--	--	--	--
Tennessee	--	--	--	--	--
Texas	Yes	--	Yes	Yes	--
Utah	Yes	--	--	--	--
Vermont	Yes	--	Yes	--	--
Virginia	Yes	--	Yes	--	--
Washington	Yes	--	Yes	Yes	--
West Virginia	Yes	--	--	--	--
Wisconsin	Yes	--	Yes	Yes	--
Wyoming	Yes	--	--	Yes	--

Data sources: Fire service reports, the National Volunteer Fire Council, state fire commissioner and fire agency web sites, and interviews with state fire officials

made it difficult for volunteers, especially those with lower incomes, to continue their volunteer service.

## Retention

State officials are concerned about retention of volunteer

firefighters. In the opinion of these officials, conflicts among VFC members or officers were a common reason why members left. State officials also talked about local residents either moving away for jobs or commuting long distances. Successful retention policies, according to state officials, included helping volunteers feel appreciated by their communities, sponsoring public awareness campaigns for new volunteers, providing medical insurance and retirement plans, allowing volunteers to specialize rather than being responsible for all firefighting duties, and providing local training.

### Recruitment

Recruitment in rural areas was a problem, according to all state officials interviewed. There were, however, recruiting success stories. Minnesota, for example, found

retirement benefits helped recruitment. Other states, like Texas, found high school recruitment very effective.

Some officials thought it was easier today for women to become volunteer firefighters. A Massachusetts official suggested better marketing campaigns to recruit more women volunteers. A Michigan official also suggested the need to actively communicate that women are welcome to join the volunteer fire service. A Minnesota official said 80 percent of his state's VFCs have women firefighters.

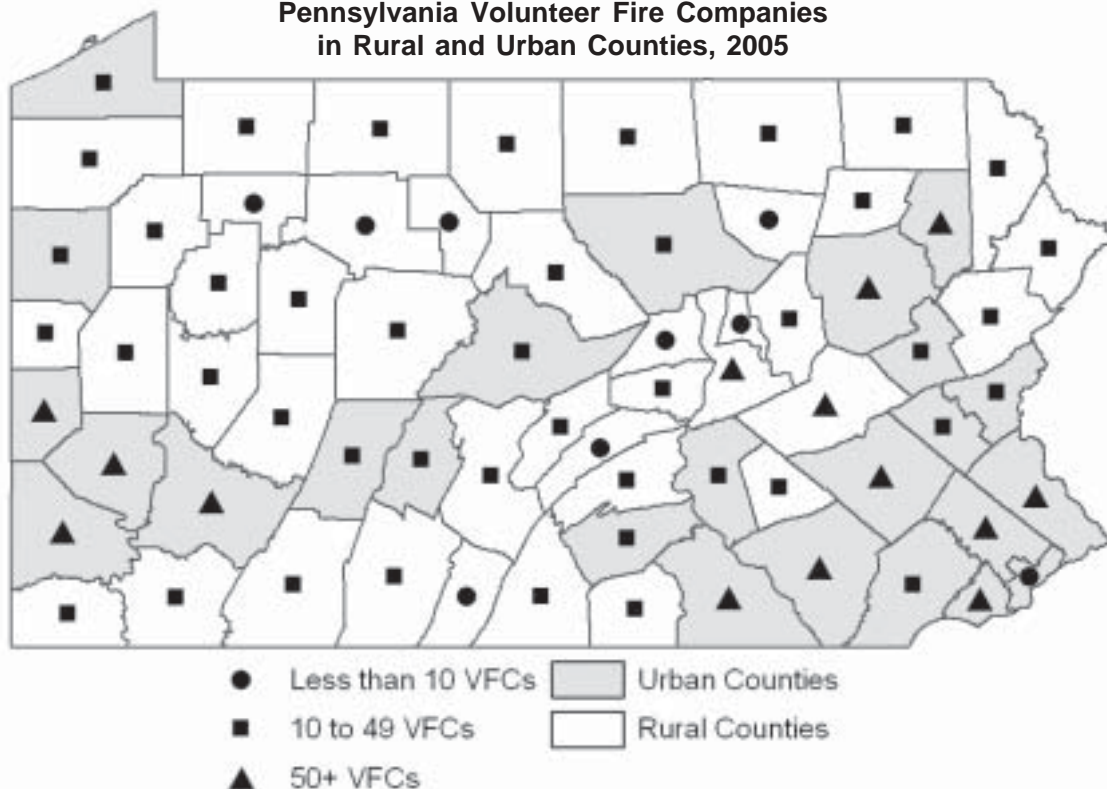
### Conclusion

The state fire officials agreed that volunteer firefighters spent most of their time on fundraising instead of training. If more financial resources were available for VFCs, recruiting and retention efforts

would be more successful. Officials' also strongly emphasized that firefighters, and not apparatus and equipment, are the most important assets of the volunteer fire service.

The interviews with state fire officials illustrated how much information was unavailable at the state level, particularly about rural VFCs. Many states had no fire call reporting system, or if the state did have a program, only some VFCs participated. While state fire officials communicated with their VFCs, some rural fire companies were operating below the radar of their state fire agencies. Most state officials possess only a general estimate of their number of volunteer firefighters. In general, the discussions with state officials helped confirm information from the literature review rather than accumulate innovative ideas or policies.

**Pennsylvania Volunteer Fire Companies in Rural and Urban Counties, 2005**



Source: Pennsylvania Legislative Budget and Finance Committee, (2005) *The Feasibility of Regionalizing Pennsylvania Volunteer Fire Companies*.

Note: Rural counties were identified by using the Center for Rural Pennsylvania's 1990 rural definition.

## Pennsylvania Volunteer Fire Companies

According to a 2005 report by the Pennsylvania Legislative Budget and Finance Committee, there are 2,354 VFCs in Pennsylvania; 40 percent are located in rural counties.

### Fire Chief Interviews

The researcher interviewed 35 fire chiefs from across rural Pennsylvania. The chiefs were asked to comment on volunteer firefighter retention, recruitment, training, certification, leadership, female firefighters, financial support, and municipal relationships, and to offer recommendations for fire company best practices.

The chiefs identified career requirements as the main factor affecting the retention of volunteers. Firefighters who move away for job pursuits or who must commute long distances for work affect volunteer turnover the most. Adding to the turnover rate is the realization of how much time is required to obtain training and assist with fundraising. These requirements put too many time constraints on firefighters and keep them away from their families. Several chiefs offered that both good and poor leadership would affect retention of volunteers.

Successful recruitment often stems from a new volunteer having a family member or friend already involved in the fire company. The chiefs offered that active firefighters must make a concerted effort to recruit new community residents and not simply rely on existing residents. Some also noted their success in recruiting college students.

The chiefs expressed some skepticism about recruitment programs that rely too heavily on

newspaper ads, open houses, or apparatus demonstrations. A personal one-on-one approach was cited as the best recruitment method.

A wide variety of perspectives were offered with regard to female firefighters. Some chiefs expressed concerns about the physical demands of the job, while others were confident of a woman's ability, citing active and successful recruitment of women.

Many volunteer fire companies recruit members in the 14-to-18-year-old age bracket as a result of visiting local schools and youth groups, such as the Scouts. Some chiefs also mentioned that a number of volunteers referenced presentations made while they were in elementary school as having a lasting impact.

For many VFCs, part of the recruitment screening effort involves an interview, a criminal background check and, for some VFCs, a drug test. The degree of screening varies among fire companies from a written process to a personal interview. Oftentimes, members vote to accept or reject new recruits. Chiefs said that during the selection process, it is imperative to present a realistic description of the demands of volunteer fire service, including the need to complete the 88-hour training requirement. All chiefs cited the need for physical conditioning and many did not view age as an issue.

The cost of maintaining a fire company is of great concern to the chiefs participating in the interview. They said volunteers understand that active service costs money, since many must purchase their own safety gear. This prompted statements about the need for financial support to cover the cost of firefighter training. Chiefs said that while most volunteers do not

want to be paid for their services, they would like to have funding for new apparatus and equipment. Some chiefs suggested state income tax credits, educational tuition assistance, a pension program, and free license plates as legitimate incentives and rewards for people to serve as volunteer firefighters.

It was evident from the interviews that some rural VFCs have mixed relationships with municipal officials. Some chiefs enjoyed strong working relationships that included significant financial support. Others stated that municipalities within the VFC service area do not accept any responsibility for funding.

The chiefs discussed conflicts over how municipalities distribute Foreign Fire Insurance Tax (FFIT) revenues. In the commonwealth, every out-of-state insurance company must pay 2 percent of the property/casualty insurance premiums it writes in the state into the FFIT. In 2005, this fund received more than \$74.4 million. Funds are distributed to municipalities based on population and real estate market values. The municipality then gets to decide how to distribute these funds; when more than one VFC serves a municipality, funding conflicts may arise.

Most of the chiefs said their municipalities paid the workers' compensation insurance, and/or provided free municipal water service. Some VFCs receive municipal funding through property tax revenue, funded from the 0.5 to 3 mills of fire tax assessment on property. However, these practices are inconsistent statewide and many VFCs receive less than 10 percent of their annual operating budget from local municipalities.

As a final part of the interview, fire chiefs were asked to offer a leadership or management recommendation to help other VFC fire chiefs. The chiefs said that leaders



***The chiefs said that while financial incentives of some kind are most helpful, they alone are not the reason volunteers come to or stay with a fire company. The sense of giving back to a community, the camaraderie, and the feeling that their work is appreciated are all factors contributing to successful recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters.***

need to be selected for ability and not popularity. Competent fire fighting skills are critical, but strong administrative and people skills are also critical. Chiefs must lead by example and that includes their active participation in recruitment and training. Chiefs must know the needs of members in terms of training and personal demands so that the right training is offered at the right time. Weekend training over a 16-hour period will not work for people who have jobs and families. Smaller courses offered in modules work best.

The chiefs said that while financial incentives of some kind are helpful, they alone are not the reason volunteers come to or stay with a fire company. The sense of giving back to a community, the camaraderie, and the feeling that their work is appreciated are all factors contributing to successful recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters.

### ***Survey of Volunteer Firefighters***

To get another perspective on recruitment and retention, the researcher surveyed 701 active volunteer firefighters. The researcher also interviewed an additional 41 firefighters. Below are the survey results and, where appropriate, comments from the interviews.

#### ***Descriptive Profile***

The average firefighter that responded to the survey was 31 years old and had been a firefighter for 11 years. Ninety-one percent of

the respondents were male and 29 percent had two or more years of college education.

When the respondents first joined the VFC, they had, on average, five friends and two family members who were already firefighters. Sixty-nine percent were part of a family firefighter tradition.

On average, the respondents had volunteered 64 hours for the VFC in the 30 days prior to the survey. In addition, the average firefighter responded to 124 calls over the past 12 months, or one call every three days.

Fifty-nine percent of the respondents were firefighters or apparatus drivers, and the remaining 41 percent were officers, such as captains, lieutenants and fire police officers.

The average VFC in the survey had 90 members; however, only 28 were considered active. Among the active members, on average, three were female and 25 were male.

#### ***Being a Volunteer Firefighter***

Survey respondents had high levels of satisfaction and motivation as volunteers. Ninety-seven percent of the respondents were proud to be volunteer firefighters, 96 percent enjoyed participating as a volunteer firefighter and 93 percent enjoyed the excitement of firefighting. Eighty-three percent said that volunteering broadened their perspectives and allowed them to explore their strengths. Seventy-three percent said volunteering made them feel needed.

The majority of respondents also

indicated selfless reasons for being a volunteer firefighter. According to the survey, 95 percent of respondents said being a volunteer firefighter enabled them to “give something back” to their community. An equally high percentage said it was important for them to protect their community as a firefighter. In another question, 88 percent of the respondents said it was important to serve their community.

During the firefighter interviews, many firefighters talked about their families’ tradition of firefighting, some going back generations. Sons and daughters of fire chiefs (and sons-in law and daughters-in-law) appeared to be especially likely to be volunteer fire officers. Many joined in their early teens and the fire service has been a part of their life since that time. In addition, many noted the friends they have gained and the positive atmosphere in their firehouse. They also discussed the excitement and adrenalin rush associated with fire calls as a major motivator. Firefighters talked about the satisfaction of helping people in their time of need or how they felt when someone in their community says, “You saved my life.”

#### ***Firefighter Retention***

More than 90 percent of survey respondents indicated their commitment to their VFC and planned to continue volunteering. This commitment may be partially based on the support of family and satisfaction with the fire companies’ leaders. According to the survey, 89 percent of respondents had family who supported their volunteer efforts and another 77 percent said their family commitments allowed them enough time to be a volunteer. According to the individual interviews, many firefighters noted that successful VFCs must focus on

strong family involvement. Without family involvement and support, many active volunteers would not have a safe environment in which to leave their children when responding to emergencies.

On leadership satisfaction, 81 percent of respondents were very satisfied with their company's officers and leaders. During the interviews, firefighters said they wanted competent officers who led by example and were constantly involved in training. They defined a good leader as a person who kept an eye on everything in the VFC and was careful with the company's money, in addition to being a good communicator and willing to try out new ideas. Firefighters also said they want to be proud of the officers who lead them. Comments supported the idea that leadership is very important for creating a positive view of VFC service.

There were, however, some negative aspects to being a volunteer. For example, 69 percent of the respondents said fundraising requires too much time and effort. In addition, 74 percent said they would like to receive some financial benefits for their time and efforts. However, only 40 percent said financial benefits would be a major reason to continue volunteering. Many firefighters interviewed said there were no incentives for inactive members to become active firefighters. However, some said the way to retain members was to provide opportunities to be productive and take pride in the fire company.

During the individual interviews, a prominent theme was the difficulty of retaining new recruits. Many respondents observed that while their VFC was not losing many firefighters, it was not gaining any either. In general, the respondents noted that a VFC must recruit at least 10 new members to

retain two for the next two or three years. The reasons for losing members focused on the time demands of VFC fundraising and training. Suggestions for retaining volunteer firefighters included reducing the cost burdens of training, improving understanding of what VFCs do for their community, providing officers with additional management training, and providing financial benefits, such as pension plans, income tax credits, and higher education tuition.

### *Responding to Calls*

According to the survey, 44 percent of respondents could answer fire calls during their paid working hours. In addition, 66 percent said their job allowed them the flexibility to do work as a volunteer firefighter.

Some participants said their VFC was able to respond to all emergency calls during the weekday because it usually had members who worked near the fire station and who could leave work. Others said their VFCs had members who worked second- or third-shift jobs and were able to staff daytime emergency calls.

### *Safety*

Sixty-four percent of respondents had concerns for their personal safety when responding to fire calls. However, when asked about their equipment, 85 percent said their current safety equipment would protect them in a fire emergency. Similarly, 75 percent said their VFC had enough engines, trucks and rescue equipment to get the job done.

***Suggestions for retaining volunteer firefighters included reducing the cost burdens of training, improving understanding of what VFCs do for their community, providing officers with additional management training, and providing financial benefits, such as pension plans, income tax credits, and higher education tuition.***

### *Recruitment*

Survey respondents would encourage friends (91 percent) and family members (88 percent) to become active volunteers. When asked about women firefighters, 88 percent said they should be accepted as active VFC members and another 86 percent said women volunteers could do an excellent job.

Less than one-half of respondents said that current VFC recruitment methods attract enough new members. In addition, less than two-fifths of the respondents said that financial benefits are a major reason to become volunteers.

To increase the number of recruits, the interviewed firefighters suggested more active recruitment in their community, especially at local colleges, vocational and technical schools, high schools, elementary schools, and scout meetings. They also suggested reaching out to retired persons and producing videos to show what firefighters actually do during an emergency call.

### *Recruitment and Retention Incentives*

Based on fire service reports and individual firefighter interviews, the researcher identified 15 incentives that could be used to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters. To assess the effectiveness of these incentives, respondents were asked to rank how strongly they agreed or

## Impact of Potential Incentives to Recruit and Retain Volunteer Firefighters

	% Who strongly agreed that the incentive would encourage them to:		
	Initially join the VFC (n=701)	Become more active (n=701)	Continue to volunteer (n=701)
Recognition awards for years of volunteer fire service	63%	74%	78%
Recognition awards for completing fire training programs or achieving firefighter certification	67%	77%	79%
State and municipal financial support for firefighter training	76%	76%	86%
Recognition for firefighter performance and valor with medals and awards	66%	66%	76%
Pension benefits based on years of volunteer firefighter service	75%	75%	85%
Provide fire service health insurance	78%	78%	87%
Pennsylvania college tuition for volunteer firefighters and their families	82%*	82%*	89% <sup>TM</sup>
Fund media campaigns for public awareness of volunteer firefighters	72%	72%	78%
State-of-the art firefighting apparatus and equipment	81%*	81%*	91%*
State-of-the art radio communication	78%	78%	89% <sup>TM</sup>
State-of-the art personal protective clothing	82%*	82%*	92%*
State income tax credits for volunteer firefighters	82%*	82%*	91%*
Provide stress reduction programs to help volunteer firefighters and their families	71%	71%	81%
State and municipal hiring preferences for volunteer firefighters	77%	77%	84%
Incentives for state and municipal employees to join their local VFCs	74%	74%	79%

\* Top four incentives

disagreed with each incentive from three different perspectives: encouragement to join, encouragement to become more active, and encouragement to continue to be a volunteer firefighter in the future.

As the table above shows, each of the potential incentives was seen as having a positive impact on recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters. In each instance, more than 60 percent of the respondents

strongly agreed the incentive would encourage firefighters to join and remain active in the VFC.

For recruitment, the top four proposed incentives were ranked very closely: providing college tuition for volunteer firefighters and their families; providing state-of-the-art personal protective clothing; providing state income tax credits for volunteer firefighters; and providing state-of-

the art firefighting apparatus and equipment. Ranked fifth and sixth were the proposed incentive to provide fire service health insurance and the incentive to provide volunteer firefighters with state-of-the art radio communication.

For the incentives regarding encouragement to be a more active firefighter, the most popular incentive was again a state program to provide Pennsylvania college



tuition for volunteer firefighters and their families. The volunteer firefighters scored the proposed incentives to be more active firefighters almost exactly the same as they scored the incentives to initially join a VFC. The scores were the same for 13 of the 15 proposed incentives.

The top incentive to continue being an active volunteer firefighter was the proposal to provide volunteer firefighters with state-of-the-

art personal protective clothing. Tied for second place were the proposals to provide state-of-the-art firefighting apparatus and equipment, and state income tax credits for volunteers.

During the individual interviews, volunteer firefighter participants stated very clearly that, as volunteers, they don't want or need financial support. Nevertheless, many firefighters said some financial help would be appreciated for

all of the time, effort and personal expenses they invested to become a trained firefighter and to keep their VFC operating. The firefighters also discussed the relationship between their municipality and their VFC. Some of the participants said they openly communicated with their municipality, while others did not. The focus of these discussions revolved around having enough financial resources for fire protection to serve their community.

## Conclusions

Since the publication of *Pennsylvania Burning* in 1976, state fire officials have expressed concerns about a steady decrease in the number of volunteer firefighters serving in the commonwealth. Information collected from fire service literature and interviews with other state and Pennsylvania fire officials indicate that volunteer firefighters are dedicated to community service and work hard to support the tradition of volunteer firefighting. Nevertheless, rural VFCs reported difficulties in obtaining sufficient funds and staff for their fire emergency operations. For example, 36 percent of the rural Pennsylvania fire chiefs interviewed reported their VFC had been unable to respond to one or more fire emergency calls over the past two years.

From the perspective of state fire officials around the nation, there was agreement that volunteer firefighters spend most of their time fundraising and should be spending more time training. The key issues for these officials were funding, new apparatus and equipment, personal safety equipment, training, leadership and management, recruiting and retention, and state and municipal incentives for volunteer firefighters.

Rural fire chiefs agreed that VFCs must be managed as businesses if they are to survive. Other issues of importance for fire chiefs were maintaining fire emergency operations; funding new apparatus and equipment; providing adequate personal safety equipment; training; leadership and management; recruiting and retaining volunteers; and offering adequate state and municipal incentives for volunteer firefighters. Communication with municipal officials ranged from excellent to nonexistent. Most fire chiefs wanted more opportunities for leadership and management training. When asked to identify their most important concerns, the majority of chiefs cited fundraising, retaining

current members and recruiting new members, and providing mandatory training for all members.

Interviews with rural volunteer firefighters found individuals were proud to serve their communities as volunteers. They were knowledgeable about the operations and administration of their own VFC. Many had positive comments about their own firefighter training and wanted additional training. Comments about leaders in their VFC ranged from very positive to very negative. Many firefighters suggested that additional fire officer leadership and management training would help firefighters be more effective. While some of the firefighters interviewed did not want or expect financial benefits, others would accept some financial support for training, travel expenses, new personal fire protective gear, line of duty death benefits, life insurance, medical insurance, state income tax credits, college tuition assistance, or a pension plan. However, while many of the respondents would appreciate financial incentives as a thank you for their time and efforts, they indicated that financial incentives were not primary motivators to serving their community.

The four highest ranked incentives to encourage individuals to join or be more active volunteer firefighters were proposals to provide Pennsylvania college tuition, improved personal protective clothing, state income tax credits, and new firefighting apparatus and equipment.

For retention incentives, the volunteer firefighters selected two distinct sets of top ranked preferences: one set consisted of better personal protective clothing, better firefighting equipment, and better radio equipment, while the other set consisted of financial benefits for state income tax credits, college education tuition, and fire service health insurance.

# Policy Considerations

The researcher offered the following policy considerations to improve recruitment and retention of rural Pennsylvania volunteer firefighters.

## **1. Establish and support a statewide fire service information management system administered by the Office of the State Fire Commissioner.**

Interviews with rural fire chiefs and firefighters highlighted many examples of perceived inefficient uses of federal or state VFC grant funds. A statewide fire service information system would help to align required emergency service. This can be accomplished by a comprehensive fire service information management system that would both document current VFC apparatus, equipment, and staffing resources and provide baseline information to more effectively evaluate future state and federal VFC funding.

This program could be implemented through the Office of the State Fire Commissioner, which employs the Pennsylvania Fire Information Reporting System (PennFIRS.)

## **2. Review the recommendations of the Pennsylvania Legislative Budget and Finance Committee's report, *The Feasibility of Regionalizing Pennsylvania's Volunteer Fire Companies.***

In June 2005, the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee released a report on VFC regionalization. The report states that regionalization cannot be mandated or occur in isolation. It also stated that promotion of regionalization efforts is just one of several steps that need to be implemented to preserve and enhance volunteer fire services in Pennsylvania.

Recommendations in the report included the following:

- Develop a comprehensive statute to plan, guide and coordinate the commonwealth's fire services system, as was done in 1985 for the state's emergency medical services system.
- Under the Office of the State Fire Commissioner, initiate an ongoing program to streamline the state's VFC structure. This effort should focus on the systematic promotion of regional partnerships and cooperative service arrangements between and among the state's individual VFCs.

## **3. Establish state government coordination and support to improve communication between rural VFCs and the municipalities they serve.**

One of the issues frequently mentioned by the rural fire chiefs and volunteer firefighters was the perceived

unfairness between the funding municipalities give to VFCs and the number of calls VFCs respond to within municipalities. Poor communication between VFCs and their local municipal governments can result in misunderstandings about financial responsibilities. Some chiefs and volunteers also said some municipalities do not provide funds if the VFCs are not located within their municipalities. The critical issue to highlight was the broader observation that VFC response areas do not always conform to municipal boundaries. But funding appears to more closely conform to government boundaries rather than service performance activities. This provides a justification for considering broader countywide or statewide funding sources to better match funding with the provision of services. The rural fire service can only function through extensive use of mutual aid agreements and, thus, municipal funding should support this.

## **4. Establish a VFC grant assistance program managed by the Office of the State Fire Commissioner that would employ fire service grant application writers to help rural VFCs receive more federal and state grant funding.**

Retired volunteer fire chiefs or fire officers may be hired as private contractors to travel an assigned regional circuit to assist rural VFCs with fire service grant applications. Contractors should be geographically located to serve the various rural regions of the commonwealth. Assistance in grant writing and application preparation would be cost-effective because some rural VFCs simply do not have the expertise or experience to successfully complete federal grant applications.

## **5. Provide funding for Act 100 of 1990, which reimburses fire and emergency companies that respond to emergencies along limited access highways, excluding the Pennsylvania Turnpike.**

Fire chiefs and volunteers noted inconsistent and inequitable reimbursements for vehicle emergency and fire calls on limited access highways. In 1990, the state legislature established a program to reimburse fire and emergency companies that respond to accidents along limited access highways, excluding the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Governor Robert Casey, however, eliminated funding for this program when he signed the bill into law. Funding should be restored to this program.

**6. Additional firefighter and fire officer training courses should be taught to volunteers at their local fire stations or county fire schools.**

One of the most innovative ideas learned from the state fire official interviews was Kentucky's decision to operate a mobile state-of-the-art fire academy. The mobile fire academy provides local training and saves volunteer firefighters' time and financial expenses for travel, food, and lodging. The Pennsylvania State Fire Academy's mobile Academy on the Road was extremely popular with chiefs and firefighters.

**7. Produce and implement a professional quality volunteer firefighter recruitment campaign, administered by the Office of the State Fire Commissioner, to include a variety of media marketing tools that may be distributed to all 2,400-plus VFCs.**

A statewide volunteer firefighter recruitment program would help communicate to the general public the numerous services provided by volunteer firefighters and may encourage more volunteers to join the rural fire service. This recruitment program should coordinate with the 1-800-Fire Line national recruitment campaign as a public entry point for learning about volunteer service opportunities.

More than 90 percent of rural VFCs are staffed by men aged 18 to 50. Innovative recruitment policies and programs must continue to target and recruit this demographic group, but must also be expanded to encourage new volunteers including women, youth, and retired people.

**8. Recruitment and retention motivation incentives should focus on the specific incentives that rural volunteer firefighters reported were most important to them.**

Interviews with state fire officials found recruitment and retention to be a national problem, especially in rural areas. Success stories included recruiting high school students and women. According to the Pennsylvania fire chief interviews, recruitment success was generally based on personal contacts that often involved family members or friends. Many of the interviewed chiefs were skeptical about previous recruitment programs because they often involved so much time and effort with little positive return.

Some of the most influential recruitment and retention incentives mentioned by the volunteer firefighters included college education tuition, state income tax credits, health insurance and the provision of better personal protective clothing, firefighting apparatus and equipment, and more effective radio communication equipment.

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