

Volunteer Fire Departments and Rescue Squads
Comments before the HJR Subcommittee 743
August 23, 2007

Good Morning.

I am honored to address this subcommittee. My name is Ken Perkins. I have been at Longwood University for over 20 years as a faculty member in sociology. My research has mainly been in the area of fire and rescue organizations—focusing heavily on volunteer, and then later, combination volunteer and paid services. I have been a member of a small volunteer department in Prince Edward County since 1985.

It is likely that you already know much about what I will say. The individuals that have spoken already today and at your last meeting are some of the most knowledgeable in the Commonwealth about these organizations and their needs.

My remarks will be organized around several questions that often come up in discussions of volunteer emergency services.

Aren't volunteer fire departments and rescue squads really alike because they both use volunteers?

I don't think so. And, I think it would be unwise to treat them as if they were. Yes, most are non-profit organizations that are community based—grassroots so to speak. All of them, most of the time, have a committed core of members. Both fire and EMS organizations have retention and recruitment concerns. This is particularly true today as the level of demand and the complexity of missions have increased.

But they are different in fundamental and consequential ways. Their missions are different and their cultures are different.

Because of this mission difference, rescue squads have significant regulation and mandatory training.

The most important difference in the two services is, of course, the quantity and quality of calls.

Rescue squads have far more calls than fire departments. And, often a large proportion of these calls are what are referred to as “sick calls” (there are other names for these kinds of calls). As I suspect others have told you, sick calls are calls that really don't qualify as an emergency; but the lure of 911, among other things, causes an over dependence on the rescue squad by people who really ought to find other means of getting to the hospital.

The results are fatigue and burnout from the call volume. Fire departments have their own issues with recruitment, retention, and leadership. But rescue squads are under the greatest pressure.

Aren't these organizations dying...how could they possibly continue in today's society?

Well, the answer is not a simple yes or no.

Rarely does one read about a fire department or a rescue squad going out of business. We do hear about fire and rescue squads in suburbanizing areas having to adapt to some configuration of paid personnel running calls. But, my experience is that there is probably a small net growth of these organizations, especially in rural areas.

Americans love to form voluntary associations. Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* told us this. So, the urge to take care of a community need without asking government for too much help is pretty strong. This is one reason I am guardedly optimistic about the future of particularly the rural volunteer fire service. I am not as optimistic about the future of the volunteer rescue service in any area, especially in light of our aging population and the excessive sick calls most of these organizations receive.

The Loudon counties of America...with a rich history of volunteer services but with staggering population and business growth...sometimes must transition to something beyond a completely volunteer service in fire and EMS. To me, this is a natural adaptation that the volunteer service and local government have to make. And this kind of change does not, in my mind, symbolize a dying service.

What does worry me are the Buckingham counties of this world. Rural, quiet, slow growth, but having trouble making a duty crew on a "chest pain" call...but can usually make a crew fairly quickly in a serious vehicle accident.

So, is the volunteer service dying? I don't think so in the case of fire, with volunteer EMS I am not so sure. The demands on the time of EMS volunteers are too great for me to tell you these organizations are healthy.

What about Recruitment and Retention?

The volunteer service, I suspect, has never had a time when recruitment and retention problems could be ignored. In fact, no organization that is populated with humans is immune to these problems. What makes recruitment and retention so interesting for observers of volunteer fire and rescue organizations is that many people cannot believe anyone would do either of these things for free. So, there is a tendency for much of the

public to think of them in terms of anomalies, rather than the norm. (But they are the norm for most of the country.) And, as a result, there can be an assumption that fewer and fewer people really want to volunteer for them. I think this is a dangerous assumption because public officials can create their own self-fulfilling prophesy.

Of all the kinds of volunteer service there is out there to which people can donate their time, what is more rewarding and exciting than fire and EMS work? So, why wouldn't people think highly of them as places to volunteer?

This is not to say that there are bountiful numbers of potential recruits everywhere. There is evidence that volunteerism is on the decline as more and more people have less time to volunteer. Certainly this is the case in suburbanizing areas where many people work outside their local communities. And, this is true where property values preclude children of historically local families from residing where they were born.

A large part of the recruitment problem that I have seen is organizations not knowing how to attract into these services newcomers who are often different from the locals. So, I think there is ground to gain here. This point is not lost on several of the agencies from which you have already heard.

Additionally, in my research, one big problem that most of these groups have is not in just attracting people...but it is in keeping them. The fire service has a better track record than rescue squads, for some of the reasons I mentioned.

I would add another related issue here...and that is leadership. In both fire and rescue, there has to be someone with fairly developed administrative and conflict resolution skills. I have found that too often leaders underestimate the complexity of these organizations, particularly in terms of the internal politics—a crippling problem.

Are these organizations valuable in any way beyond their response to fire and medical emergencies?

Absolutely. Of course these organizations represent one of the most valuable national, state, local resources our nation has. They are underappreciated, no doubt. (I should add here that many times both volunteer fire and EMS are often mistaken for paid services.)

I can say as a sociologist that these organizations are extremely valuable because they provide a significant arena for civic participation. They allow members to move beyond their homes and television sets and into what sociologists and political scientists call civil society. Civil society is that web of voluntary associations that exist between the family level of society and government. This civil society, of which volunteer fire and EMS are vital parts, empower individuals to invest in their communities and to build up these communities. These organizations enable citizens to trust each other; and when people trust each other there are many benefits for individual and communities. Civil society is something we would like to build in Iraq and Afghanistan.

What could this subcommittee propose to do to help sustain these organizations?

The Commonwealth could try to figure out how to legislate or at least educate people not to abuse volunteer EMS. This concern is tricky to legislate, I know. But sick calls are killing (no pun intended) many EMS organizations in areas that cannot afford a paid service.

On the education issue, *the Commonwealth could help local governments mount a public awareness campaign stressing the volunteer nature of these services.* Many newcomers to rural areas have no idea that these services are volunteer. What could be accomplished by promoting the value of civic participation in local areas? Greater appreciation and understanding of these services would result as well as an environment that would be conducive for recruitment.

A good public relations firm could design some compelling education programs. I can see some good outcomes from this regarding unintentional abuse of EMS. When I studied Loudoun County's fire and EMS several years ago, the government there was very intentional with public education about their volunteer system and it worked.

The Commonwealth could continue efforts at providing leadership seminars and training for fire chiefs, captains, and presidents. In these leadership programs, basic leadership skills should be stressed, including conflict resolution, recruitment, and retention. Additionally strategic planning could be stressed. Strategic planning is not something these organizations do well...but they could do it better. The now familiar ideas of mission, vision, and planning would be useful in volunteer organizations. The leadership in these organizations is more stable than one would think so any initiative in leadership development would not be wasted.

Related to leadership and planning, **The Commonwealth could redouble its effort to provide these organizations with resources that would help them respond to disasters, not just terrorism, but natural and man-made disasters as well.** Disaster planning is something that many of these organizations have not done enough of. As a side benefit, when organizations take on new missions, like disaster response planning, they are often invigorated and become healthier.

The Commonwealth could help stimulate training in both services by compensating members for the sacrifices of time for training. Training is essential to the effective performance of these services. But, training has a secondary and positive effect for retention. It allows personal investment and personal development of human capital which strengthens commitment to these organizations. In no way do I think the existing agencies charged with providing training are lacking. Great efforts are made every year to provide ample and convenient training.

The Commonwealth could commit to providing a modest stipend or retirement program for fire and EMS members. Of course, the devil is in the details of any program, but there are models that could be adopted. Such a program could be a

powerful recruitment and retention tool. Any retirement program would not have to be costly. Whatever funds were committed would be an investment in a service that saves literally millions of dollars every year.

Conclusion

Volunteers in fire and EMS do this work because they care for their local communities. No one doubts this. This care springs from powerful American values that in many ways make us unique as a nation.

The volunteer service in fire and EMS is a resource that can be strengthened. With the Commonwealth's continued commitment not to neglect this resource, I can envision Virginia having the most enviable volunteer fire and rescue system in America. I agree wholeheartedly with this subcommittee's initiative. To allow this economically priceless system to suffer because of benign neglect would be a travesty in government policy. A little investment is definitely worth it.

The fact that this subcommittee exists is indicative of the care and concern members of the legislature have for these services. And, as a volunteer firefighter, I deeply appreciate the time and energy put toward your task. As a taxpayer, I greatly appreciate the economic benefits of volunteer services. And as a sociologist, I know that volunteer fire and EMS strengthen our nation's civil society as well as its safety and health.

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you.