

Does your county have problems recruiting and/or retaining volunteer firefighters and rescue squad personnel? If so, why? [Responses Edited; Emphasis Added.]

Recruitment - family needs, dual income families, single head of household families, commuting time (many are employed in the Northern VA/DC area), training requirements, competition from other volunteer organizations who require fewer hours and make less demands, etc. Volunteers may quit because of time demands, training requirements, poor leadership, organizational politics, family needs, career conflicts, etc.

We are starting to see a drop in volunteers during the weekday, daylight hours. It seems that as current members get older and either move away after school age or members in the 20's – 30's get other jobs and move away. Many people are commuting to Richmond, and this leaves little extra time after the commute to work and back plus the family life. Some newcomers also have no interest in volunteering and almost expect the same service they were getting from a paid department where they moved from.

Our several local organizations don't typically have problems recruiting volunteer fire and rescue squad personnel, but the interest in rescue squad membership is beginning to wane – not as glamorous as fire fighting. The problem seems to be with getting those same folks to be “active” members, i.e. responding to calls on a regular basis. Again, this is getting to be more of a problem with rescue squad personnel vs. fire personnel.

We are having a growing problem, but mainly an aging problem. Our average age of volunteer is going up; and up; we see a crisis in about 5-7 years. The major problems I see all revolve around the continuing escalation in training requirements that are symptomatic of the increased professionalism required of Volunteer Fire & Rescue services.

We face a significant recruitment and retention problem because of limited incentives for volunteers, family and work obligations, time required for training, and cost of training.

Our problem is primarily in retaining volunteer EMS personnel due to the rigorous initial EMS certification/re-certification requirements and advanced training requirements imposed by the Commonwealth act as a kind of built-in disincentive for volunteers to stay in service within EMS units. The advent of paid private ambulance services in rural but developing counties have also provided job options for highly-trained volunteers to 'jump ship' from serving volunteer units to working for paid ambulance services. Further, volunteer fire departments and rescue squads no longer function as social centers

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within rural communities as they did in generations past, further leading to continuing deterioration in the level of commitment people within rural communities are willing to make to volunteer service.

We do have problems with retaining volunteer rescue squad personnel, but not so much of a problem with fire fighters. I attribute to training requirements and family commitments. Another factor is just we are so far away from a hospital that it does consume so much of the squad personnel's time to make one call.

I think the key problem of recruitment and retention of volunteer rescue squad personnel is that people are working multiple jobs to give their family's a comfortable living environment. This leaves little time to attend the training sessions and the various duties that are required by their squad. As the population ages, more medical problems have increased the call load to the point that volunteer agencies cannot keep up with the call volume.

To my knowledge, there are no major problems with respect to recruitment and retention at time. However, our rescue squad personnel are being affected by increasing training requirements. For example, we just had another layer of training requirements placed on us with the implementation of the National Incident Management System.

Our bigger problems with recruitment and retention seem to concentrate on the EMS/Rescue side of things as our Fire Departments do pretty well. It is because of the limited amount of time people in today's world. Many families are at least two income family's and/or single parent households. I have not heard of any one in our local area say that they can not volunteer because of the training hours but I am sure that could be a reason for some. However, I do not believe that the minimum hours required to become an EMT should not be reduced as we would then be substituting quantity for quality. I believe too that increased call volumes that many EMS agencies face are a deterrent to volunteers as well. It is not uncommon for a volunteer to be up all night running 3 to 6 ambulance calls which ultimately creates "burn out" for many volunteers.

We do not follow through with new recruits once they learn of duty requirements, possible risks they may face, station politics (present everywhere), etc. by providing a mentor who follows up on inquiries, and working to make sure we don't "lose" anyone through the cracks. Volunteer agencies should work towards more creative scheduling, flexibility, and internal incentives as well...like letting a member earn vacation leave (1 or 2 hours) for every so many hours served (12) on duty, that they then could cash in for

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“time off” one month. Also, keep in mind that many applicants are disqualified due to criminal histories, driving records, etc. Ultimately I believe that a person either wants to volunteer or doesn’t and incentives may be nice but have to be true “incentives” in order to assure that a member maintains a pre-determined activity level.

State certification is more intensive and requires more training time. Additional training time requires more time away from family. Costs to participate as a volunteer have increased (e.g., from gasoline to babysitting).

Like many localities that rely on volunteers, we are challenged to recruit and retain volunteers primarily due to the time demands associated with training, response readiness, and administrative tasks. It is not unusual to see some volunteer as much as 30-40 hour/week in our busier stations. Based on the challenges, our Board has adopted a strategy to fund the operational and capital costs for the volunteer departments as well as to provide distributed fire and EMS training for all volunteers. The funding strategy allows the volunteers to focus their time on training and response and less time on raising funds to continue operations.

My biggest concern is that we have volunteers that are also paid Firefighter/EMT’s for other jurisdictions. Training requirements and time to serve as volunteers can be a huge factor in our volunteers being able to maintain an active status. When you add up all of the personal time that it takes for an individual to be a Firefighter/EMT especially as a volunteer, you have to ask the question how they do it.

We seem to do pretty well recruiting new members at an average of 70 volunteers per year. However, we are losing about the same number or more per year. I have read many of the national R&R summaries that speak to lack of leadership, guidance, mentoring, etc as culprits to keeping good, qualified volunteers. We seem to have the same challenges here. Many of our volunteer officers do not attend leadership training, and do not have management experience. We do host local and regional training sessions here at our Training Center and have some attendance, but not as much on going comprehensive training as I would like to see. The training and commitment are sometimes an issue but not as much as you would think. We do have several well run organizations that are text book examples of how a good volunteer organization should be run.

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In the past several years we have had a bigger problem recruiting and retaining members in the volunteer rescue squads than we have in the fire company's. However that is starting to change there are several fire companies that are beginning to struggle just as much as the rescue squads. The following are some of the comments that I have received from the County volunteers:

- There is not enough time to commit to a volunteer fire or rescue squad because of work and family commitments;
- Years ago both the husband and wife would volunteer primarily because only the husband worked. Today both have to work in order to pay the bills, so only one of the individuals volunteers;
- Fundraising is burning out more people than training or responding to calls. With the amount of funds volunteers must raise to maintain/purchase equipment, pay utilities, insurance etc. they burn out really quickly;
- The training requirements implemented by VA Office of Emergency Medical Services and Department of Fire Programs have made it difficult for volunteers to obtain and maintain certifications; and
- As agency response population increases and call volume increases agency are having problem maintaining staffing levels to answer the emergency calls.

I feel as though we are able to find the people to volunteer in most areas of the county. However, the issue for us is the amount of available time that people have to volunteer. Fire and EMS is a time intensive volunteer activity. Today's volunteer firefighter or rescue squad EMT is pulled in many directions with first and many times, second jobs, kids that are involved in a host of activities that were just not available years ago. Yesterday's volunteer did not have to be soccer mom, tee ball coach, two income family mom or dad. All this translates into people that only have a limited amount of time to give. The challenge for us is to figure out how to work with this limited time volunteer, and that's difficult with the training requirements and demand for duty hours. Also, in our county, the rural areas present the biggest challenge to finding people to volunteer. The population is smaller, and in many cases the people that are of volunteer age live in the rural area to provide a better climate for their families, and then commute a long distance to work, leaving less time to volunteer.