

Community Engagement

Effectively engaging community leaders is a key part of volunteer recruitment and retention. Some helpful tips are:

- 1) Build relationships with elected officials and influential community groups before you need to ask for their help. Ways to do this include offering department tours and ride-alongs.
- 2) Reach out to community members for non-firefighting volunteers to do accounting, fundraising, grantwriting, and other activities. Post specific volunteer opportunities available in your department.
- 3) Get your “fiscal house” in order before approaching elected officials about funding. Be prepared to talk about the gap between the funds you receive from the community and what you need to provide an acceptable level of service.



“This fire service has changed tremendously and has changed right before our eyes. Volunteering has increased across the nation but volunteering for fire and rescue services has decreased. We have to adapt the basic model. We tend to apply those same models that we did in 1978 to today and it’s just not working.”

-Chief Dan Eggleston, Albemarle Fire Department, speaking at the Institute of Politics forum on best practices in volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention, held in April 2011.

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Best Practices in Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention



A Brief Guide for Fire Departments

Prepared by the
University of
Pittsburgh
Institute of Politics
Public Safety and
Emergency
Preparedness
Committee

Legislative Remedies

Recruitment Tips

- Create partnerships with school districts and other fire departments to offer firefighter and EMS programming to high school students (Highlands Emergency Services Alliance)
- Market to the “millennials” - they want to help, but they want their experience to be meaningful, they want to feel valued, and they want a friendly and non-bureaucratic work environment
- Be aware of and advertise programs like CCAC’s FireVEST, which offers two years of community college free to volunteer firefighters, regardless of their majors
- Make joining the fire department “user-friendly” by shortening applications and following up with applicants within hours after they apply
- Start a “Citizens Fire Academy” to increase interest and awareness in the community

In 2004, the Senate requested a report on legislation that could be passed at the state level that would benefit volunteer fire departments. The report contained several recommendations for legislative changes relating to recruitment and retention. While some have been passed into law, others are still awaiting action. They include:

- Legislation that would authorize “cradle to grave” financial incentives to volunteers in the form of tax and tuition breaks, student loan forgiveness, health insurance and/or retirement benefits
- Establishing a regional support network to address information technology needs, administration and accounting
- Raising the tax on foreign fire insurance by half a percent to help cover training costs
- Restructuring the Volunteer Loan Assistance Program, which provides low-interest loans to fire departments for equipment and capital expenditures



Retention Tips

- Use selective paging to reduce unnecessary runs
- Administer climate and exit surveys to determine the needs of current members and explain why others leave service
- Create a rewards system for years of service, hours of training attended, or responses to calls, where volunteers get recognized at an awards ceremony, receive a pin, or gift cards at Christmas
- Offer online training, and customize all training to individual departments
- Encourage the development of leadership by supporting or financing volunteers who attend leadership training
- Reduce “bureaucracy” as much as possible: this could include unnecessary paperwork, procedures, or processes; make being a volunteer less time-consuming