

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Over the last decade, New York's volunteer fire departments and emergency squads have been experiencing a major decline in personnel, both men and women. While there were 100,000 to 110,000 active volunteers a decade ago, recent reports show only 85,000 to 88,000 today.

Volunteer fire, rescue and emergency medical services have a long-standing tradition in the U.S. often spanning generations of families. In fact, approximately 85% of all fire and rescue personnel in the U.S. are volunteers. Historically speaking, all fire and rescue agencies began as volunteer services. It was common practice for neighbors to pitch in and help whenever a fire or other emergency threatened anyone in the community.

However, volunteerism in general has been declining in recent years, and the trend has had a direct impact on New York State. The reasons are many: more demands on people's time, more stringent training requirements and population shifts to name a few. Despite these challenges, there is reason for optimism. While the job of recruitment may be more difficult today than it was in the past, research suggests that fire departments and communities that make a concerted and systematic effort to attract new volunteers have achieved considerable success and that some departments have seen a resurgence in volunteerism. Departments and communities that have failed to address the problems and challenges of volunteering in today's world have been forced to go to paid departments, which further strains scarce resources and raises taxes.

Today, there are more benefits to volunteering—both material and emotional—than there have been in the past. Property and income tax reductions and college tuition reimbursements are a few of the incentives available for volunteers. Patriotism has also become a factor in post-9/11 America, with firefighters and other emergency responders being recognized as the first line of defense against natural or man-made disasters. Volunteer firefighters and emergency personnel do make a difference in their communities. Think about it.

Is there a FIRE in you?

Do you have what it takes?

Many factors contribute to the problems experienced in recruiting and retaining volunteers in the fire and emergency service. Each of these factors affect every fire department differently, and to a lesser or greater extent, and solutions must be developed on an individual basis. Some of these factors are:

Time demands: Studies show that a lack of available time is the number one barrier to volunteering. This “time crunch” comes at volunteers from two directions—increased pressure from home and work and greater demands on the part of the volunteer services. Still, people find the time to support what they think is important. Training is typically tailored to your available time and any cost is paid by the department or district. EMT training is a valuable skill for your own personal use and protection in family situations.

Perceived danger: Popular perception about firefighting is that it's dangerous. When you join, you are issued equipment and trained to be safe. You are given the tools and knowledge to

address emergency situations in the safest way possible, and the education you receive is constantly updated to cover the latest technology and newest information available.

Increased training requirements: The number of hours of training required for fire service volunteers has grown along with the increased knowledge and skill sets necessary to receive certification. The public expects a broader range of services to be provided by their volunteer fire and emergency squad departments. Beyond fighting fires, volunteers may be called upon to respond to medical emergencies, carbon monoxide alarms, natural gas leaks, vehicle accidents, hazardous material spills, building collapses, water rescues, bomb threats and even incidents of terrorism.

Increasing call volume: A growing population necessarily means more emergency calls. Also, as more homes and businesses rely on automated alarm systems, the volume of false alarms due to malfunctions has risen as well.

Changes to the nature of emergency calls: Exacerbating the effects of increased call volume is the growing tendency on the part of the public to abuse emergency services, e.g. neglecting to repair malfunctioning alarm systems and calls for an ambulance for relatively minor injuries or illnesses.

Lack of recognition: Often the only recognition you will receive is the personal pride and honor in helping your community when no one else will but you will also gain the respect of your peers for performing the ultimate community service.

Do you have what it takes?

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