

Critical Need for Volunteer Incentive Programs

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Attracting and retaining good volunteer firefighters is one of the most critical problems facing fire departments today. Volunteers are one of the most cost-effective solutions to the ever-increasing cost of providing quality fire protection to communities. Effective community fire protection depends on the ability of fire departments to recruit, train and keep these key individuals.

Advances in technology and legal implications require today's firefighters to devote far more time to training than ever before. When one of these well-trained volunteers leaves the department, the loss of capability and the cost of training a replacement even to minimal levels can have a significant financial impact on the city. At the same time, economic conditions force many people to work longer hours or two or more jobs, leaving far less time to do volunteer duty. This factor alone multiplies the value of a person who is willing to devote the time to being a volunteer firefighter. It is no surprise that fire chiefs are finding it more and more difficult to attract and retain good volunteer members of their departments.

Many solutions to the high cost of full-time personnel are available. One trend is to using limited budget resources to fund skeleton staffing. This may provide a false sense of security by having the appearance of a career fire department with one or two firefighters per shift on duty, but in an actual emergency would not prove adequate. Skeleton staffing compromises community protection, endangering both life and property. Adequate staffing of fire apparatus is critical to the safety of the citizens as well as to the firefighters. The combination approach, of having some career firefighters and a large pool of well-trained volunteers available is the safest and most cost effective solution. You cannot fight fire without well-trained firefighters.

Trained firefighters, whether volunteer, career or a combination of both must be available to insure the safety of the community. Having a reliable pool of volunteers to supplement the career staff or in smaller communities to provide the entire firefighting force is a solution to an on-going problem.

Whatever status a fire department finds itself in, not many have the luxury of having a fully paid, on duty complement of firefighters. Therefore, it becomes imperative to search for new and innovative ways to recruit and retain this key individual – the volunteer. A fire department volunteer incentive program helps reduce the dropout rate to the lowest level possible.

A blend of solutions, custom tailored for each community, will insure that an adequate pool of volunteers is always available to handle emergencies as they occur within the jurisdiction of the municipality. Incentives must be in place from the very moment a volunteer is recruited, as interest levels may begin to decline as soon as the new recruits' basic training ends.

The leaders of every fire department should review carefully their current staffing pattern. Many cities may find that they are woefully understaffed to handle even a moderate working fire or other emergency within the community. The most common response to the statement "we need more firefighters" is "we can't afford to hire more firefighters." If that is true, the fire department leadership must look at other solutions. When the current staffing levels are not able to handle the emergency, will that be a defense in court? Will that restore lives lost or property destroyed? Will records of the number of firefighters responding to alarms prevent your community from obtaining a better ISO rating and correspondingly reduce insurance premiums for your citizens? Fire department leaders must answer these questions before discounting the need for volunteers and the establishment of a volunteer incentive program for the community.

In summary, volunteer firefighters are a very valuable resource. The cost of recruiting and training a new volunteer is the most expensive component of their longevity. Once this investment has been made, it is imperative that the fire department provide incentives to prevent this volunteer from leaving the department. A fire department really cannot afford to lose a highly skilled volunteer. Volunteer incentive programs are an investment, not an expense.

Volunteer Incentive Programs:

Volunteer Monthly Allowance

Monthly allowances for volunteer firefighters are not compensation for the work that they perform. The financial incentives provided to the volunteers encourage them to donate their time to the fire department and to compensate them for the out-of-pocket expenses that they incur in responding to alarms, attending training, and other activities in which they may engage on behalf of the city and the fire department. The financial incentives provided to the volunteers are nominal in relation to the service that they provide and do not in any way to reflect the actual value of the time or service provided by these individuals. Monthly allowances to each volunteer are provided in the table below.

Before the volunteer can receive their monthly allowance, they would have to be in "good standing" in the fire department as determined by the fire chief. The following is an example of the criteria a volunteer would need to meet *each month* to be considered "in good standing" with the department.

1. Attend a reasonable number of emergency calls (40% or better)
2. Attend 4 hours of approved training per month or be current on total training hours.
3. Conducted their monthly sleep-over duty or shift (12 hours)
4. Performed all assignments outlined in their individual job description

Make the disbursements semi-annually on June 1st and December 1st of each year. By making only two payments per year, there is less administrative work and the volunteer firefighter will realize more money at one time that could be used for personal or family purposes such as vacation or holiday expenses.

Volunteer Position	Number of Budgeted Positions	Monthly Incentive Pay (Paid Semi-annually)	Months Per Year	Annual Cost
Probationary Firefighter	*	\$50.00	12	0
Firefighter	*	\$50.00	12	0
Firefighter 1	5	\$75.00	12	\$4,500
Firefighter 2	5	\$85.00	12	\$5,100
Master Firefighter	4	\$100.00	12	\$4,800
Lieutenant	1	\$125.00	12	\$1,500
Total Positions	15	Total Volunteer Incentive Pay		\$15,900

** All positions budgeted as at least Firefighter 1.*

Examples of other Volunteer Incentives Programs include:

1. EDUCATION AND TRAINING REIMBURSEMENTS
2. FIREFIGHTER CERTIFICATION
3. FIREFIGHTER OF THE YEAR AWARD
4. ANNUAL FAMILY PICNIC
5. LEADERSHIP RETREATS
6. COLOR CODING ON HELMETS AND TURNOUTS
7. SERVICE AWARDS: 5, 10, 15 YEAR ETC.
8. JACKETS, T-SHIRTS ETC.
9. DISABILITY INSURANCE
10. INCOME REPLACEMENT INSURANCE
11. VOLUNTEER RETIREMENT PROGRAM
12. MONTHLY ALLOWANCE TIED TO RANK, PARTICIPATION, TRAINING
13. ESTABLISHED RANK SYSTEM NOT ELECTION
14. SMOKE EATER OF THE MONTH, YEAR
15. ESTABLISH FIRE EXPLORER POST
16. EXPLORER SCOUT POST SPONSOR

17. SLEEPOVER AND/OR STATION RESPONSIBILITIES
18. LIFE INSURANCE
19. RECRUITING DRIVE W/ GIFTS FOR MEMBER
20. MUTUAL AID ASSOCIATIONS
21. TRIPS TO NATIONAL FIRE ACADEMY AND NATIONAL FIRE
CONFERENCES AND EXPOS
22. MEMBERSHIPS PAID TO FIRE ORGANIZATIONS
23. PERSONNEL BOARD WITH PICTURES
24. PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSIGNMENTS: FAIRS, SCHOOLS, ETC.