



Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention

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Volunteer Recruitment and Retention Challenges

According to the National Volunteer Fire Council (<https://www.nvfc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/NVFC-Fact-Sheet-2021.pdf>), volunteers make up 67% of our nation's fire service. In Tennessee, volunteers account for 69% of all firefighters, but the number of volunteer firefighters in Tennessee is decreasing. There were 17,122 volunteer firefighters in Tennessee in 2013, and that number dropped to 15,833 in 2015. Many communities today face volunteer recruitment and retention issues, as volunteers strive to balance work, home, personal time needs, and the fire department in a depressed economy when many people have more than one job or manage a single-parent household. Many people do not have a lot of free time, and if they spend their free time helping their community, they want to know that their time and effort has value. Here are some examples of volunteer recruitment and retention efforts that have proven successful in communities across Tennessee. Not every idea will work in every community or situation, but these resources may provide ideas for programs that will work in your community.

Recruitment

Recruiting is a year-round job, and there are several ways to recruit, such as a media campaign, an open house, job fairs, and visiting church and civic organizations and asking interested people to volunteer. Simply asking someone to join is the most effective method of recruiting new members. Here are some recruitment examples.

- Ask someone to join the fire department
- Advertise in community association newsletters and local newspapers
- Place articles about local volunteer firefighters in the newspaper
- Post recruitment announcements on the department's website or Facebook page
- Hosting community events
- Participate in community events (parades, races, etc.)
- Affix posters in area businesses

- Answer requests for information about the department promptly
- Visit events on invitation from civic groups such as Kiwanis, Rotary, Civitan, etc.
- Actively seeking opportunities to speak about the fire department to civic groups such as Kiwanis, Rotary, Civitan, etc.
- Annual volunteer firefighter week
- Promotions attached to community events/holidays
- Open house at the fire station(s), and rotating the open house among the different stations for fire department with multiple stations
- Presentations to homeowner's associations with an invitation for residents to join fire department
- Conduct a citizen's fire academy
- Place recruitment ads on billboards and on a sign in front of the fire station
- Place recruitment notices in newspapers and consider radio and TV ads
- Setup information/recruitment tables and displays at public events and sporting events, such as high school football and basketball games
- For volunteer fire departments located near career fire departments, ask the career fire department to provide contact information for the volunteer fire department to candidates that the career fire department cannot take at the current time

An effective recruitment method is a volunteer recruitment handbook. The handbook provides an overview of the fire department and helps the prospective volunteer decide if he or she wants to be a volunteer firefighter. The handbook should include the following items:

- Forward
- Letter from the chief
- Letter from the mayor
- Overview of the fire service
- Fire department profile
- Mission and vision statements

- Organizational overview and organizational chart
- List of stations and apparatus
- Levels of participation
- Job descriptions
- List of membership requirements
- Training and participation requirements
- FAQs
- An application

Having a designated volunteer coordinator is a great advantage. The volunteer coordinator does the following:

- Plans and schedules activities
- Coordinates recruitment efforts
- Follows up with potential recruits and “lapsed” members
- Recruits in the community
- Conducts orientation programs
- Keeps records
- Writes/updates job descriptions
- Assists with interviewing/screening new volunteers
- Conducts exit interviews when volunteers leave
- Public relations
- Assists with budget development

Another option is recruiting outside the immediate area, but this does not work well unless the fire department has a formal ride-out program where the person works a set number of hours, or a shift, at the fire station. Without a ride-out program, a volunteer who lives 20 miles away is useless for an emergency fire or EMS response, and a liability if they respond by speeding for 20 miles to get to the scene to help, and cause an accident on the way. However, that same volunteer is invaluable, and counts as an on-duty firefighter under the ISO Fire Suppression Rating Schedule, when riding out at the fire station on a scheduled shift.

The use of older residents is an option for tasks that do not require active firefighting. Older volunteers are generally capable, make sound decisions, act appropriately, have an established work ethic, and have life experiences to contribute to the organization. Older volunteers may not want to “run into burning buildings,” but they can provide staffing for certain functions that free up other volunteers for interior firefighting and similar IDLH tasks. Examples of emergency scene, non-entry operational tasks include driving and operating fire apparatus, refilling air bottles on the scene, assisting the incident commander in the command post, and providing rehab services on the scene. Examples of essential, non-operational tasks include teaching fire safety classes to the public, teaching classes to firefighters, performing fire inspection duties, performing fire prevention duties, maintaining and repairing facilities, tools, and equipment, providing accounting services, developing marketing programs and materials, assisting with reports and paperwork, etc. The Fire Corp program (<http://www.firecorps.org/>) provides resources to help recruit and retain members for non-operational tasks such as administration, fundraising, equipment repair and maintenance, public education, marketing, and other essential tasks.

The Tennessee Fire Chiefs Association (TFCA), as part of the Volunteer Workforce Solutions (VWS) program, provides free marketing material, training, and support to participating departments to assure the success of their recruitment and retention campaigns. For more information visit <http://www.volunteerfiretn.org/>.

Retention

There are options for rewards and benefits a fire department can provide to the volunteer. Examples include:

- Nominal fee for their services that reward responders based on their activity level on emergency responses, at training classes, shifts worked at the fire station (ride-outs), monthly allowance tied to rank or position, etc. (see *Compensation and Employee Status of Volunteer Firefighters* <https://www.mtas.tennessee.edu/reference/compensation-and-employee->

[status-volunteer-firefighters](#) for detailed information on compensation)

- A sense of pride and satisfaction from serving with fire department uniforms, t-shirts, hats, sweatshirts, jackets, challenge coins, etc.
- Tuition reimbursement for college level courses related to the fire department's mission, which can include fire and business courses
- Pay expenses to attend fire service conferences
- Pay expenses to attend training programs at the state fire academy
- Pay expenses to attend classes at the National Fire Academy
- Cover the costs associated with training and education to achieve state certification as firefighters, drivers, instructors, and officers
- Volunteer retirement program/length of service award program (LOSAP)
- Free equipment and training
- Family pass to local recreational facility
- Points/credit towards consideration for a full-time position
- Letters to volunteer's full-time employer commending the volunteer for his/her community service
- Inclusion in city's health insurance plan (it may be difficult to find a company to insure volunteers)
- Disability insurance
- Income replacement insurance
- Life insurance
- Free health checkups
- Free immunizations for firefighters and their families
- Annual awards picnic/BBQ/dinner for the volunteers and their families
- Annual awards for Firefighter of the Year, participation, life-saving actions, years of service awards, etc.
- Pay the dues for membership in professional associations
- Have desirable giveaways or door prizes at training drills
- Honest thanks, praise, and recognition of their service goes a long way
- Install or add more bunks and living quarters and encourage overnight shifts
- Authorizing members to apply for the Tennessee firefighter license plate

An often-overlooked retention tool is the exit interview. When a person leaves the fire department for any reason, the department should conduct an exit interview. The exit interview provides an opportunity for management to receive feedback on what the department is doing well and what the department needs to do to improve. To encourage honest feedback the ideal person to conduct the exit interview would be the person responsible for human resources in the municipality and not someone directly associated with the fire department. The volunteer must be assured that no negative consequences will result from honest discussion during the exit interview. The exit interview should cover the following questions.

- What is your primary reason for leaving? If multiple, please specify.
- Would you consider returning to work for this department in the future?
- What did you find most satisfying about your job?
- What did you find the most frustrating about your job?
- Were there any department/city/town procedures or policies that made your job more difficult?
- Would you recommend this department to a colleague or friend as a good place to volunteer/work?
- Is there anything that the department or your supervisor could have done to prevent you from leaving?
- Do you have any suggestions for how the department can improve satisfaction in your position?

The interviewer should give the volunteer the chance to share any other comments, and the interviewer should record any comments or impressions the interviewer may have about the interview on the interview form. Finally, the interviewer should indicate on the form if they think the volunteer is eligible for membership should the volunteer wish to reapply in the future.

The Value of Volunteers

Volunteers provide a valuable service to the community and their service has

tremendous financial value. See the MTAS publication *The Value of Volunteer Firefighters* (<https://www.mtas.tennessee.edu/reference/value-volunteer-firefighters>) for a method to determine the monetary value of the volunteer's service to the community.

Marketing the Fire Department

Fire officers may not realize the value of marketing the fire department, in the same manner that companies market the products they sell, can serve as a recruitment method. A common definition of marketing is the process of communicating the value of a product or service to customers to promote and sell that product or service. A fire department is in the business of providing emergency and essential services to a community and the fire chief needs to make sure the community knows about these services.

It is important to market the fire department by describing the services the department provides in a manner that touches the "what's in it for me (or WIIFM)" of all stakeholders. In other words, the fire chief needs to know the fire department's market and tailor the presentation of those services accordingly. For example, the fire department responds to fires. For a business owner, this provides peace of mind that his investment in his store or business is protected and that his customers may feel safe and secure while patronizing his business. For a homeowner, this means his family and loved ones are safe from fire and his worldly possessions are protected. For elected officials, it means the tax base is protected from a devastating fire that may close a business or destroy a home, and a good ISO rating may serve as a recruitment incentive for businesses to move to the community.

The fire chief should produce an annual report that highlights both the workload or output (i.e., number of calls, number of fires, response time, dollar loss, etc.) and the outcome (i.e. fire loss per capita, percent of calls where the first unit arrived in X number of minutes, percent of fires confined to the area of origin, etc.). The annual report should highlight accomplishments during the year, describe different programs the fire department provides and the results of those programs, provide a

roster of fire apparatus, highlight training programs and training hours, etc. The chief should provide a copy of the report to all elected officials, place copies in the local library, and make the report available for download on the fire department website. The chief should issue a press release with a few highlights from the report, as the news media may do a story on the fire department. The report provides a positive view of the fire department and describes an organization that some in the community may want to be a part of.

Marketing Through Social Media – Facebook

Many people have a Facebook page, and the fire department can market itself to the community while providing lifesaving tips by maintaining an active Facebook page. Start by designating or appointing a **Facebook administrator** for the fire department. This should be one person dedicated to posting information for the fire department. The administrator reviews and approves all content posted on the fire department's page. This prevents unauthorized photos and other information from being published, which *prevents* potential liability issues and protects the fire department's reputation.

Consider using a content team of those members who want to be involved in what is posted. Each member of the team must provide two to three pieces of content per week to the administrator for review/editing and publishing.

Here are some suggested objectives of an active Facebook page:

- Community building
 - Communicate fire prevention and safety information
 - Communicate fire department events
 - Serve as a hub for the community
- Fire Department value
 - Communicate the value to the community
 - Tell your story...
 - Did you know that the XXXX Fire Department has XX members with XX being certified?

- Did you know that we respond to structure fires, motor vehicle accidents, brush fires, search and rescue....?
 - Did you know that we train XX times/hours per month to make sure we're ready when our community calls?
 - Member achievements and certifications
- Show training photos - this illustrates your commitment to the community
- Show photos of the department and trucks out in the community
 - ***Never** violate HIPPA or the confidentiality of persons at scenes. Be sensitive when posting photos of car accidents, structure fires, etc. out of sensitivity to the victims, friends, and families.*
- Recruitment & Fundraising
 - Recruitment - post information on how to join, invite them to a training session, etc.
 - Fundraising - what would a tax-exempt (if you are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit) donation go towards?
 - Communicate school closings and traffic/weather advisories
 - Fire department open house
 - As an example, see the Lone Oak Volunteer Fire Department's open house video (a local college student helped them create the video) - www.facebook.com/LOVFD/videos/2518212918292214
 - Sample content
 - Cost to operate trucks annually/monthly
 - Cost to keep the lights on and fuel in the trucks
 - Cost to outfit a firefighter (SCBA and turnout gear)
 - Cost to provide each firefighter with a radio/pager
 - Each month, highlight a service, tool, or piece of equipment, talk about its capabilities, its use, benefits to the community, and the initial purchase cost, maintenance costs, and replacement cost when the tool or piece of equipment reaches the end of its useful life.
 - Seasonal safety tips (water your tree at Christmas, holiday

cooking, electrical safety, open burning, outdoor grilling, etc.)

- Photos/videos of training activities (make sure all firefighters are following all safety practices and wearing PPE properly)
- Visit the Lone Oak Volunteer Fire department's Facebook page as an example of the type of content and information a fire department can provide - www.facebook.com/lovfd

Posting strategies

- Post content 5-7 times per week (content can also be scheduled in advance)
- Post content that is relevant and of interest to your community or that would help with recruitment, fundraising and overall objectives of your department
- Use content provided on the Tennessee state fire marshal's website (<https://www.tn.gov/commerce/fire-prevention.html>), NVFC (<https://www.nvfc.org/>), FEMA (<https://www.fema.gov/>), the US Fire Administration (<https://www.usfa.fema.gov/>), NFPA (<https://www.nfpa.org/Public-Education/Teaching-tools/Safety-tip-sheets>), and other websites
- Watch your Facebook Insights for trends of what are the most popular posts

Volunteer Firefighters Week

Tennessee Code Annotated § 15-2-121 requires that the governor proclaim first full week in March of each year "Volunteer Firefighters Week" to honor and recognize volunteer firefighters in this state for their courageous and dedicated service. While this week is not a legal holiday, it is an opportunity for the volunteer department to use the proclamation and the week to assist with recruitment, public relations, and marketing the fire department.

Volunteer Firefighters Protected Against Termination

Some people may be reluctant to volunteer for a fire department out of concern they may lose their job if they are fighting a fire and are late for their regular job.

Tennessee Code Annotated § 50-1-307 prohibits an employer from firing a volunteer firefighter solely because the employee was late or absent from his job due to an emergency response prior to the time the employee was supposed to report for work. The volunteer firefighter must make a reasonable effort to inform his/her supervisor that the employee will be late or absent due to an emergency response. The employer may deduct the employee's time away from work for the emergency response from the employee's pay. The employer may require that the employee present written documentation from the fire department confirming that the employee responded to an emergency at the time the employee was supposed to report to work. If the volunteer firefighter is fired under this section of state law, the firefighter has one year to bring a civil suit against the employer for reinstatement, back pay, benefits, and lost seniority.

13 Things You Can Do to Kill a Volunteer Fire Department

1. Don't attend training or meetings, but if you do, arrive late.
2. Be sure to leave before the meeting is over.
3. When at a business meeting, vote yes to everything and then do nothing to help.
4. The next day (or right after the meeting) find fault with your board of directors and officers.
5. Take no part in fire department business.
6. Do not pay attention at training classes. Stay in the back and talk to another member or play games on your iPhone.
7. Show up for the fires, but nothing else.
8. Talk cooperation. Don't cooperate.
9. If you are asked to help, always say you are too busy.
10. Never read anything pertaining to the fire department or the fire service in general. You might learn too much.
11. Never accept an office: it is much easier to criticize than to actually do anything.
12. If appointed to a committee, never give it any time. Let the chairman do all the work.

13. Don't do anything more than the bare minimum. Then, when others willingly and unselfishly use their ability to help the fire department, scream and yell that the fire department is run by a clique.

16 Things You Can Do to Help a Volunteer Fire Department Succeed

1. Attend meetings, training sessions, and fundraisers: arrive early and stay late.
2. At meetings, when voting yes for something, make sure you will be available to commit to helping. Otherwise, vote no or abstain.
3. After meetings or the next day, say thank you to your directors and officers for their continued service: they are not getting paid to be there, either.
4. Take part in company business. Be pro-active instead of re-active.
5. Pay attention at meetings and training sessions and ask lots of questions.
6. Show up for all types of calls, even the "routine" ones and the 3:00 am lift assist.
7. Cooperate: TEAM players are always required.
8. Help when someone asks and offer help even when they do not.
9. Educate yourself not only in fire department business but in all aspects of business.
10. Accept an officer position. Your ideas are important.
11. If appointed to a committee, make it a priority, and give it your best. Do something with it.
12. Give more than just what is minimally required.
13. Take pride in your commitment and your accomplishments.
14. Give others their moment to shine.
15. Acknowledge all those who support the department, both financially and personally.
16. Never give up. If something is not working, then find a new approach.

Summary

Many communities rely on volunteer firefighters for fire, EMS, rescue, and other emergency and essential services. Volunteers provide a way for a smaller

community to have these services without the cost of paid employees. A successful volunteer fire department requires many trained and dedicated members willing to respond to calls at all hours. A volunteer firefighter program will not be successful without proper leadership, management, and financial support from the community. A comprehensive volunteer recruitment and retention program will assist a community in having a successful program.



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