



CHAPTER SEVEN

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

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CHAPTER SEVEN

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Case Study

The Donnelly Rural Fire Protection District (DRFPD) in Idaho serves 156 square miles, with a handful of grassroots, year-round residents and a population of roughly 2,800. The majority of the fire district's residents do not live in the area full time, but instead are owners of second or third homes in the four-season resort community. Over the years, it became increasingly difficult to find potential firefighters and emergency medical technicians (EMTs)—a reality that encouraged the department's administrators to change the way of approaching how they recruit volunteers. The main challenge for DRFPD has been the generational and traditional gap within the ranks. They have found that the biggest obstacle in recruiting new members is the fear of change and tradition of the veteran volunteers.

Over the past few decades, the number of volunteers has declined, and the average age of the volunteer has increased. There are many reasons for these trends, including increased time demands placed on firefighters and EMTs; more rigorous training requirements; the proliferation of two-income families, whose members have less available time; and the fact that many younger people are moving out of the small community. Like many rural departments, DRFPD relies on the younger demographic to fill the volunteer membership ranks within the department, but many young people are leaving rural communities to pursue better job opportunities in larger cities. Living in a resort community where business owners have adopted a “feast or famine” mentality, many employers are reluctant to allow volunteers to leave their posts to attend an emergency incident or training. Likewise, employees and volunteers are reluctant to leave their jobs when every missed hour takes a considerable chunk out of their paychecks.

DRFPD's administrators have addressed these obstacles by understanding the needs of the volunteers as well as raising awareness among community members that volunteers are needed and valued. In addition, they made community members aware that volunteering can include more than donning turnout gear and responding to fires or EMS incidents. For those members of the community who expressed interest in helping DRFPD in a less hands-on way, the administrators suggested positions for volunteers in nonoperational support roles, such as fundraising, public safety education, reporting, bookkeeping, and maintenance.

The administration also took the following additional steps to counteract recruitment and retention problems:

- Helped their veteran volunteers recognize the importance of succession planning;
- Became more assertive in communicating the department's need for volunteers to the community; and
- Determined that the department needed to become more diversified and started to proactively include women and minorities in recruitment efforts.

This type of planning allowed for a more diversified department with a current combined staff and volunteer force consisting of 49 percent women and minorities. DRFPD currently recruits anywhere from 4 to 10 members a year, with the ages of new volunteers ranging from 18 to 35.

To recruit and retain new volunteers, DRFPD found that a cultural shift within their mentoring, leadership, and training needed to take place. DRFPD began its cultural shift with administration, working from the chief through the ranks to the recruit candidate to ensure continued growth and buy-in into the new strategic planning for recruitment and retention. As the process moved forward, it became apparent that a cultural shift within the leadership ranks would be a difficult transition. With tradition weighing heavily on how day-to-day business was con-

ducted within the fire department, the veteran volunteers had to be retrained and educated to encourage them to find and recruit potential volunteers, as well as to accept new candidates into their ranks. The veteran volunteers found themselves having to adjust their mentoring, leadership, and training tactics. In the past, mentoring had always been a laid out plan for furthering someone's fire service career. However, in the present climate and with the culture shift, mentoring not only addresses aspects of the fire service but also incorporates aspects of the individual's personal and paid work life.

Introduction

Recruitment and retention are directly related to health and safety. A department needs to have an adequate number of properly trained firefighters and emergency responders in order to successfully fulfill its mission of service to the community as well as to ensure that personnel can effectively and safely do their jobs. In addition, if a member of the department is taken out of service due to an injury or illness, then there are fewer responders available to serve the department and community.

Department culture plays a critical factor when it comes to recruitment and retention. Departments need to make recruitment and retention a priority in all aspects of their operations. This includes creating a culture that welcomes new members, that embraces the differences in its members, that appropriately trains and mentors its members, that listens to the needs of its members, and that values its members. People want to belong to organizations in and of which they can be proud and feel a vital part.

Part of making sure each member feels valued is by placing an emphasis on health and safety. Leaders who care about members want them to avoid injury, illness, and harmful interactions. Another component of valuing members is to create a diverse and inclusive environment that respects each member.

This chapter will look at key concepts needed to successfully recruit and retain volunteers and the impact a department's culture has on recruitment and retention.

Diversity and Inclusion in the Volunteer Fire Service

Any discussion about recruitment and retention should include a strong focus on diversity and inclusion. Diversity and inclusion are simply about being fair to everyone. To quote Orville Wright, "If we all worked on the assumption that what is accepted as true is really true, there would be little hope for advancement" (Khamhaeng, n.d.). Although many people think there is a certain type of person that is best suited to be a volunteer firefighter, this limits the field of potential recruits tremendously and erroneously assumes

that those who do not meet this stereotype are uninterested or incapable of volunteering. Imposing such limitations on recruitment and retention initiatives does a major disservice to the department and the fire service as a whole, as it immediately discounts qualified people and closes the door on new ideas and fresh perspective. Stereotyping different groups—whether based on culture, ethnicity, race, gender, or other factors—is based on assumptions; but, assumptions often turn out to be wrong or misleading. It is important not to assume.

To be successful in recruiting and retaining personnel, it is important to create a culture in the department that takes into account the different backgrounds, goals, and strengths of its members. This chapter examines the significant impact of a department's culture, including its attitudes toward diversity and inclusion, on recruitment and retention.

Culture, Race, and Ethnicity

To better understand why diversity and inclusion are essential to successful recruitment and retention, a few key words will be defined as they are used in this chapter.

Culture: A set of values, practices, traditions, or beliefs that a specific group shares, whether due to age, race or ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. Culture is who people are because of their family make-up and the lives they have lived. People are constantly shaped by everything around them (good and bad), and this contributes to their culture.

Race: A person's physical characteristics.

Ethnicity: Belonging to a group tied together by cultural factors such as nationality, ancestry, and language.

Race and ethnicity are often mistaken for culture. Culture is molded by an individual's surroundings and life experiences, and race and ethnicity are what a person is born with or into.

Diversity and Inclusion

Whereas culture defines whom people become, the concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect of different

cultures. Being diverse means operating with the understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing and valuing everyone's individual differences. Practicing a diverse way of thinking allows people to acknowledge and accept those differences in people while continuing to work productively as an effective team. Being diverse requires acknowledging differences in others, and inclusion is defined as an environment in which all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully, have equal access to opportunities and resources, and contribute fully to the organization's success.

Diversity and inclusion in the volunteer fire service are important for many reasons. They bring different personality types, attributes, traits, skills, and experience to the department team dynamic.

When building a recruitment and retention plan, the volunteer leadership must understand, educate, and train the membership and themselves to accept a cultural shift that values diversity and inclusion. The first step is to make sure the membership understands what is meant by “diversity and inclusion,” the positive impact incorporating these concepts will have on the department, and that a plan incorporating diversity and inclusion will allow for enhancement of membership and viability in the department's programs.

It is important for the department to develop a personnel policy that includes a diversity and inclusion statement (see Appendix G for a sample statement), which must be consistently and actively followed and not just acknowledged or included in training once a year. It is something that every member of the department must continually practice, every hour of every day.

Within the Donnelly Fire Department membership, being entirely inclusive has provided for a diverse group of individuals participating in the services the department provides. The department's diversity and inclusion statement laid the groundwork to practice what they preached. By following through on these practices, it made potential volunteers feel at ease and accepted and gave them buy-in as members. In addition, it created ambassadors for future recruitment who could attest to the efficacy of the department's diversity and inclusion policy.

It is often the case that people are stereotyped into different categories or classifications with other individuals based on a common culture, ethnicity, or race, but forming preconceptions or assumptions about a person often turns out to be wrong or misleading. To truly understand and appreciate each person's similarities and differences, including the strengths and perspectives they can provide to the fire service, it is vital to not make conclusions based on assumptions. This



holds true regardless of the person's race, ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, or sexual orientation.

The next sections further discuss some of these factors. Also see Chapter 1 for additional information.

Generational and Age Differences. Generational and age differences can often lead to misunderstandings that can interfere with a diverse and inclusive membership. In the fire and emergency medical services industry, age has always been a contributing factor that can inhibit recruitment and retention efforts. Older generations may discount or disregard the input, value, or ideas of the younger generations. However, reaching the next generation of firefighters is especially important in today's fire service because volunteers are getting older and the number of younger recruits entering the volunteer fire service is getting smaller. Many small and rural departments are struggling to find enough younger volunteers to fill the ranks as the older generation nears retirement.

In most departments, members range in age from the decades-long veteran to the brand-new rookie who just signed up at age 18. Rather than being a detriment to the department, the age and generational differences should be seen as an asset. While the older members provide expertise, tradition, and experience, the younger members bring new ideas and technologies, fresh perspectives, and new enthusiasm. The different traits and characteristics each demographic brings to the table—whether it be hardworking, innovative thinking, or adaptability—are all beneficial to the fire and emergency services.

Millennials are a key demographic for the volunteer fire service and EMS as there are more than 80 million people in this generation. That is a lot of potential volunteers and future successors of the fire and EMS sector. This generation has received a lot of bad press as having a “NOW” attitude and feelings of entitlement, yet these are stereotypes that do not delve further into the qualities and attributes of most people of this generation. This particular demographic wasn’t raised to automatically respect an individual simply because the person is their elder. Fire service leaders have to prove themselves to millennials and earn their respect. Once that respect is earned, millennials are loyal and will give credit where credit is due. Looking beyond the stereotypes and understanding the perspective millennials have benefits the entire department and will help in the recruitment and retention of this demographic.

Volunteer fire officers may find themselves in a training environment with millennials and feel as if no one is listening. More likely, it is not because the trainees are not paying attention—it is because they have already looked up everything pertaining to the training and have watched a video on YouTube that explains the content much faster and in more detail than an instructor is able to actually teach it.

Millennials are looking for a more streamlined approach to becoming a member of a fire department and getting the education needed to understand what the job entails. Training is one area in which younger volunteers and veteran volunteers may be at odds. Veterans are used to traditional methods of training and expect a certain amount of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and even years to train and participate fully as a member of their department. Conversely, when asked where they would like to be career-wise in five years, many recruits responded that they see themselves in the position of an officer or even chief officer. This sort of confident admission can be surprising to veteran volunteers, whose training took years as they worked their way up.

It is important to note that departments should always look forward to the next generations coming down the pike. They are the future of the fire service, and it is incumbent on current generations of fire service volunteers to generate interest in volunteering, welcome new volunteers into the fold, and recognize and value the strengths and talents they bring with them.

Gender. While the fire service is traditionally a male-dominated field, women are just as capable of serving. They comprise half the population, which is a significant source of new recruits for many departments. By creating a culture that accepts women and values the different strengths each gen-



der brings, the volunteer service will more successfully engage this key volunteer demographic.

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation. To further understand the differences in people, it is important to understand the concepts of gender identity and sexual orientation. Western culture generally recognizes two basic gender biological roles: a masculine and feminine type. When addressing gender identity, it can be the same or different from the sex assigned at birth. Studies have found that individuals are conscious of gender identity between the ages of 18 months and three years. Gender expression also works the other way, as people tend to assign gender to others based on their appearance, mannerisms, and other gendered characteristics. The gender and sex role played as a boy or a girl, as a man or a woman, in response to the conventional norms vary from culture to culture.

One’s sexual orientation determines one’s primary emotional, physical, and sexual attraction. Not everyone engages in sexual behavior, and people sometimes engage in behaviors that are not consistent with their sexual orientation, for reasons ranging from experimentation to social pressure or obligation.

Personnel should be conscious of the differences a diverse membership may have and be accepting of these differences,

including those relating to gender identity and sexual orientation. Devaluing, bullying, or otherwise discriminating against a member based on any physical, biological, social, or other difference cannot be tolerated.

Impact of Inclusion on Retention

Being inclusive means making everyone feel part of the team, regardless of his or her differences. Every recruit, new member, and veteran volunteer is a vital part of the department and must work together to fulfill the department's mission as well as their own need to contribute to their community. That sense of fulfillment needs to be remembered and reinforced. At the same time, it is important to allow for each person's individual differences and let members be their own person. This kind of inclusivity results in a better team dynamic, better leaders, and more involvement in all aspects of the department's service requirements.

Diversity and inclusion create a win-win situation. Departments that are diverse and inclusive create an environment that potential recruits want to join and existing members want to continue to be a part of. A culture of diversity and inclusion also encourages members from different backgrounds and perspectives to learn from each other and work together more effectively to get the job done. In addition, these practices enhance how volunteers treat constituents in diverse communities and raise the reputation of the department.

When setting up shifts and events and in the everyday business atmosphere, fire departments need to show how diverse and inclusive they are. For instance, pair people on shifts with different backgrounds and encourage teamwork among members of different generations. The more members that feel included, the more productive they will be, and in turn they will be more eager to promote the department to other potential volunteers. The volunteer fire service is beginning to realize that diversity is needed in daily operations to ensure retention of skilled, experienced staff and to prepare for succession planning for the future. The fire and EMS sector needs to create and promote a welcoming, inclusive environment in which to conduct business. To quote a phrase from Chief Kenneth W. Richards of Old Mystic, Connecticut, "When those we want to keep leave, we have failed" (Richards, 2014).

Unfortunately many departments lose members or new recruits because they have not felt included, accepted, or respected. Many of these recruits would have stayed to become seasoned veterans if the department had created a culture of diversity and inclusion through policies, statements, trainings, and actions. Establishing a mentoring program is also beneficial so that new members have someone to guide them as they acclimate to the department. Listen to

what new volunteers have to say and make sure they realize that they are assets to the community and to the department. Show appreciation for the diverse team dynamic and the values and skills these new volunteers bring to the table. Judge people by who they actually are—their actions, attitudes, and dedication—rather than by preconceived notions based on stereotypes. Embracing individuality while working toward common goals will create an environment where people feel they belong and that they are just as much part of the team as everyone else.

Having discussions, creating policies, conducting trainings, and practicing diversity and inclusivity every day are the best ways to take recruits and volunteers where they need to be. It sets the tone for team building and creates cohesiveness within departments. Leaders in the fire service need to lead volunteers by example and show respect for people and the differences in departments. The veteran volunteers need to show a posture that continually demonstrates executive commitment to diversity and inclusiveness on an ongoing and regular basis. This is an every-hour-of-every-day commitment. For leaders, body language, facial expressions, and voices need to be positive. A positive attitude and acceptance of others allows for all members to have the same positive attitude and acceptance. This also allows for regular, effective, and open communication. In a sense, the practice of being diverse and inclusive will help to empower volunteer membership. Department leaders need to be mentors, teachers, and friends. They need to practice what they preach because everyone is watching them, watching not only what they do, how they speak, and how accepting they are, but also how they become allies to the other members of the department and stand up for their individualism.

Every member of the department should be able to ask him- or herself, the administration, and each other a simple question: Do I bring my full self to the station? Additional thoughts to ponder include: Do I bring my ideas, my personality, my opinions, my uniqueness, and my background? Those who can answer yes are bringing their full selves. This positive affirmation is the desired outcome. If every member can answer those questions honestly and without fear of rebuff or disdain, then the department is allowing for a truly diverse and inclusive atmosphere. In the long run, this will create a better team dynamic, solid cohesiveness, and a more productive membership.

Putting Diversity and Inclusion into Practice

Creating a culture that embraces diversity and inclusion starts with leadership. As covered above, diversity and inclusion are about more than just being nice. They are about fairness, acceptance, respect, and recognizing and valuing individual differences. They are about seeing a person as just that, a per-

son. Officers must lead by example, which can be as simple as demonstrating respect for the people within the station and acceptance of their differences. Leaders need to set the tone because everyone else in the department watches their actions, attitudes, and behaviors. More times than not, a person's actions, demeanor, posturing, and facial expressions speak louder than words. Leaders who present themselves as accepting and treat everyone as though they are equally important can make an immediate and positive impact.

Department growth toward diversity requires creating a welcoming environment in which to work. Leaders should spend time with the members and listen to what they have to say, which can help the members realize that they are valuable assets and that their efforts and skills are appreciated. When members feel as though they belong to a department unit, not because they are the same as everyone else but because of their worth as unique individuals, the result is a safe work environment with a highly productive team.

Leadership also establishes and enforces the policies and expectations that all members are required to follow, and it is up to leadership to make diversity and inclusion a part of everyday business. In addition to having a diversity and inclusion statement, it is important to incorporate diversity practices into policies, strategic planning, and guidelines. Creating change through education and practice and demonstrating this commitment on an ongoing and regular basis will empower the department membership to embrace the changes. It will create a better recruitment outreach, promote career development, and help with coaching and mentoring skills. A department that has embraced diversity and inclusion and integrated them into the culture will find it has much more success in recruiting and retaining volunteers.

Diversity and inclusion are areas in which people need to practice what they preach.

Recruitment

Once the foundation has been set for a diverse and inclusive membership of which people want to be a part, the focus can shift to developing a full recruitment and retention strategy. It is critical that a department has enough members to fulfill its mission in a safe and effective way. Maintaining department cohesion and retaining trained and knowledgeable members are additional key components to a healthy and safe department.

When building a recruitment plan, it is important to consider the following: how to actively recruit, barriers to recruitment, keeping members once they join, assessing why members join, and addressing how important it is to have the right leaders in place.

With many volunteer departments across the country struggling to meet staffing needs, fire departments must practice good recruitment and retention efforts every day.

There are several steps departments should take to develop an effective recruitment plan. These steps do not need to be complicated or difficult, but it is important to place thought and effort into the recruitment process. By following these steps, departments can be more effective in meeting their needs and successfully recruiting more volunteers.

Step 1: Analyze and Review Department Needs

The process of building a recruitment plan begins with a departmental review and analysis. When reviewing the individual department's needs, look at the activities the members will participate in. That includes all activities, operational and nonoperational. Establish the types and numbers of individuals needed to carry out departmental activities and consider developing position descriptions that define the roles and expectations of each position (see Appendix H for a sample volunteer firefighter job description). It is important to truly understand the needs of the department in order to most effectively implement a recruitment plan.

This first step in the recruitment planning process is similar to an incident resource needs assessment. The process ensures that the department has the right equipment and personnel to carry out the department's activities throughout the year. This will allow for targeting specific volunteers and more productive recruitment methods.

Step 2: Review the Challenges to Recruitment

The second step is to review the department's past, present, and future recruitment challenges. In the case study, DRFPD identified the following challenges, which are similar to what many rural volunteer departments experience:

- Increased time demands placed on firefighters and EMTs, including more rigorous training requirements;
- The proliferation of two-income families, whose members have less available time;
- The emigration of many younger people out of small communities to pursue better job opportunities available in larger cities;
- The need for younger volunteers as many older members age and head toward retirement;
- Living in a resort community where many employers are reluctant to allow volunteers to leave their posts to attend an emergency incident or training;



- Volunteers who are reluctant to leave their paid jobs for fire department duties when every missed hour takes money out of their paychecks; and
- Leadership who are initially hesitant to adapt to changing circumstances, such as the need to promote recruitment and adjusting to different mentoring and training tactics.

There are probably many more challenges to review within each individual department. Bringing these challenges to light may make recruitment seem impossible, but do not fight the challenges. Accept them for what they are and look for solutions. Use the challenges to move forward in a positive direction to obtain the desired outcome of the recruitment and retention plan.

Remember that there are civic-minded individuals within demographics that a department may be inadvertently overlooking as a recruitment target. For instance, is there a college nearby whose students need to fulfill volunteer requirements or may volunteer in exchange for housing at the department? Is there a church or community group whose members may be looking to give back to the community? Are there “empty nesters” (both men and women) whose children have just moved away and so they have more time on their hands? Is there a way to reach out to people who have just moved to the area and are looking for a way to connect to the new com-

munity? Are there opportunities for flexible training schedules or supplemental online training that makes meeting training requirements easier for individuals with less time? Are there opportunities to include the family in department activities, such as junior firefighter programs or support/auxiliary programs? There are many people who see the value of volunteering but may not know what opportunities (both operational and nonoperational) exist in the department. In order to recruit these potential volunteers, a personal invitation to become a volunteer and a willingness to work within that person’s availability might be all that is needed.

Step 3: Raise Community Awareness

In 2014, the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) conducted a national study as part of its Make Me A Firefighter recruitment campaign. One key finding of this research is that community members are largely unaware of their local fire department’s need for volunteers. Furthermore, many people do not even know that volunteers comprise their fire department. Departments need to make the community aware of the continual need for fully committed individuals to serve as volunteer fire and EMS members.

Typically, awareness of the need for fire service volunteers is extremely low. The NVFC study showed that 79 percent of respondents did not know if their department was seeking volunteers (NVFC, 2015). Departments throughout the country have failed to portray their continual need for new volunteers. Because of volunteers’ ability to adapt to, overcome, and tackle adversity, departments might have portrayed themselves as having a solid membership base that does not need new volunteers. Potential volunteers may make the assumption that their services are not needed by their local fire departments, or they may not even realize that volunteering with their local department is even an option.

Another misconception is that departments are only looking for volunteers who are or want to be a firefighter or EMT. Many departments need help with activities and positions that are nonoperational. There is a portion of the population in every community that does not want to be on the front lines but that would be willing to participate in other ways, even on emergency incidents, in some type of support function.

It is important to impress on community members and current staff that support roles are of just as much value and as necessary to the department as that of firefighters.

Departments have to look at all of their activity functions, the types and skillsets of individuals needed for those functions, and at what levels those individuals can fill the ranks. These

individuals can help the department with mission-critical activities such as administration, fundraising, rehab, and fire prevention education without overextending operational volunteers to do these tasks.

To be successful at recruitment, it is important that a department raises awareness in the community that they need volunteers, what it takes to become a volunteer, and the different types of volunteers that are needed.

A simple information flyer can have a huge impact. A successful informative flyer might describe who the department is, the types of services or activities it provides, what it takes to be a member, and some of the benefits for members, both tangible (like paid training and any tax or education benefit) and intangible (like camaraderie, skill building, and giving back to the community). Also use social networks and local media, such as Facebook, Twitter, web pages, and local newspapers and radio programs, to raise awareness of the need for volunteers.

Step 4: Employ the Marketing Funnel

NVFC research has identified a five-phase process for recruiting a potential volunteer. The process begins with raising awareness in the community of the need for volunteers. Once the community is aware of the need, departments need to move potential recruits down the marketing funnel to increase the likelihood that they will successfully become volunteers. The phases of the marketing funnel are:

- Interest,
- Invite,
- Sample,
- Commit, and
- Train.

This approach to reach and retain new audiences shows critical values to each stage of the recruitment process.

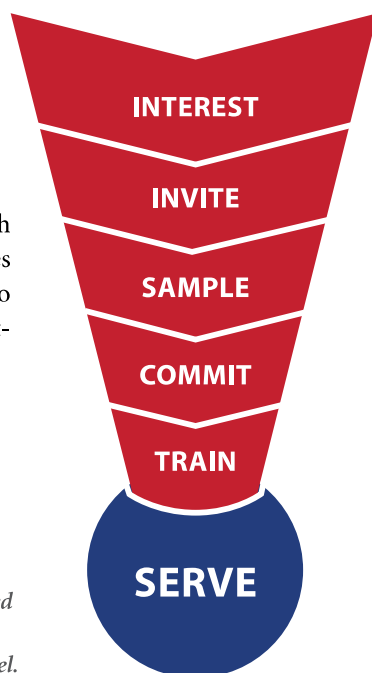


Figure 7.1. Departments need to move potential recruits through the marketing funnel.

Interest. During the interest phase, the department begins to market to those civic-minded individuals who may have an interest in becoming volunteers but are unaware that the department is in need. Many of these may be audiences the department has not tried to reach out to in the past. The 2015 NVFC research study referenced earlier showed high levels of fire service volunteer interest among 18-34 year olds, women, and minorities. These are all audiences underrepresented in the fire service and thus have the potential to serve as new target audiences for recruitment campaigns. A department should be representative of its community; look at the demographic make-up of the community (age, race, ethnicity, gender, etc.) and identify populations that are currently underrepresented in the department. These are potential growth areas for recruiting new volunteers.

Millennials

The millennial age group comprises more than 80 million people and makes up a key demographic for fire department outreach. These individuals will serve as the next generation of firefighters, EMTs, and leaders. This demographic has many qualities that are beneficial to the fire service. Traits that characterize the millennial generation include:

- Their ability to work hard and learn fast,
- Their desire to advance and become leaders,
- Working efficiently to meet their many time commitments and balance their busy lives, and
- Their hunger for education and skill building.

Millennials do not automatically give respect; they expect respect to be earned. They are looking for more streamlined training and education methods with set goals and a clear path to advancement through a climbing-the-ladder approach. This ladder approach gives them a sense of accomplishment and an idea of where they need to be moving to become a productive member of the department.

To reach millennials, outreach needs to be digital. The department's web site alone will not be enough; efforts must also include outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Women

The 2015 NVFC research study showed women are just as interested in volunteering in the fire and emergency services as men. However, a National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) study reported that this demographic represents only 11 percent of the volunteer fire service (NFPA, 2016), meaning there is significant room for growth. Women are often good multitaskers and problem solvers, and they excel at team dynamics, all traits that are assets for firefighters and EMTs. As with any demographic, women will want to be part of a department only if they feel accepted and that they belong there. As part of the department's diversity and inclusion efforts, it is important that the department facilities and membership are ready to welcome female members; that the physical facilities are appropriate, such as bathroom and living quarters; and that accommodations for the physical differences between men and women are made by having the proper personal protective equipment available. When women show interest in joining the department or enter as new recruits, they should be paired with welcoming staff. Getting and retaining female members requires a foundation of inclusivity from leadership as well as a welcoming atmosphere among all personnel.

Being unprepared for women recruits can impact the health and safety of members. DRFPD's training officer stated, "We were not prepared with their personal protective equipment needs. The turnout gear was not close enough to the sizes that they needed, and the SCBA masks inventory was predominantly medium and large." This deficiency left his recruits in tent-like clothing and with masks that could never get a proper seal because of the women's smaller faces. These are just some of the things that the department failed to consider. It is also important that the women recruits be accepted among the membership as all personnel need to be able to trust and rely on each other during emergency response in order to effectively and safely complete operations. In preparation for recruiting female members, prepare the department and make sure everyone is onboard. This may take some education and training, conversations with leadership, and implementing changes in the personnel policy.

Invitation to Become a Member. Many potential recruits simply need an invitation. A large percentage of recruits join because they were specifically asked, either by friends or family members or at a recruitment event or elsewhere. While a potential volunteer may be reluctant to make the initial contact with the department, receiving an invitation to join or learn more breaks down that barrier and opens the door to the individual

taking the next step. There are many opportunities to extend the invitation, whether through current members reaching out to their personal networks, at fundraising events or community activities, at department open houses, via email or mailing lists, through social media, and even at emergency scenes.

The more personal the invitation, the more success the department will have in recruitment efforts. The invitation should inspire potential recruits to serve.

Recruitment efforts and invitations should not be limited to current members' social circles or traditional demographics and target audiences. Look for ways to reach the untapped resources of individuals within the community. Recruiting to new demographics and audiences requires a necessary change in recruitment methods, but the potential for gaining possible new members is extremely high.

Look back at the DRFPD case study. Department members changed their focus with the recruitment plan to include individuals in previously untapped demographics, and the outcome has been successful. In addition to attaining a continual stream of new recruits, the department has created a more diverse and inclusive setting for a better team dynamic and productivity as a fire and EMS service for their community.

Sampling. Once people are interested in volunteer opportunities available with a department, they often want to learn more about the department, what it means to be a volunteer, and the types of responsibilities they will have before they make the commitment to join the department. Holding sampling events gives potential volunteers an opportunity to experience a little bit of what it is like to be a volunteer. These events help interested individuals connect with the department and build confidence and excitement about the possibility of joining. Some of these events include, but are not limited to:

- Community fundraisers held at the department,
- Booths at local community events and fairs,
- Department open houses,
- Educational events at local schools and colleges,
- Community education and training held at the department,
- Ride-along programs, and
- Presentations to community groups or at homeowner association meetings.

Junior firefighter or Explorer programs can also be considered as sampling activities because they can get youth interested in and connected to the department so that they may join as full members as adults. Try to involve the local community business owners in outreach efforts; many are willing to make a donation to support department events.

The NVFC's Make Me A Firefighter™ campaign's department portal at <http://portal.nvfc.org> has free, ready-to-use recruitment materials, including customizable outreach materials, public service announcements, sample social media posts, sample event ideas and tips, a recruit tracker, an online volunteer opportunity database, and more.

The Idaho Volunteer Fire and EMS Association used televised commercials showing everyday people of all work types and social backgrounds balancing their volunteerism within their lives. This not only raised awareness that volunteers were needed, but also showed that anyone can participate as a member of his or her community volunteer fire and EMS agencies.

Commitment. Once a volunteer is interested and has learned more about the department, the next step is to get him or her to commit. This phase requires that the department and the potential recruit agree on and commit to the terms of volunteering. The department commitment includes the responsibility of accepting the recruit; guiding the recruit; setting expectations for the recruit; and preparing the recruit to be a full, active member of the department. The recruit commitment includes agreement on the department's training and time commitment requirements, sacrifice from family and friends, a discussion with the recruit's employer, and an understanding of what the volunteer commitment entails. There should be in-depth discussions between leadership, veteran volunteers, and the individual recruit. These discussions should encompass the commitment requirements of the department and the individual recruit so that everyone understands each other's responsibilities and expectations from the beginning. It is an investment to take on a new recruit, so it is important everyone is on the same page to prevent losing the recruit further along in the process once time and resources have been spent.

The recruit needs to understand the full process of becoming a member. Recruits should be provided with a complete description of requirements, necessary training, member expectations (such as time commitment or costs not paid by the department), position responsibilities, and the timeline to complete the probationary period. During the commit phase, it is important to keep the line of communication open for continued follow-ups to retain the recruit's interest and assure the recruit of the department's interest in having him or her participate as a volunteer member. Many potential recruits slip through the cracks because the department forgets to follow up or keep the conversation going. Following the stated timeline is also important as prolonged recruitment processes

and probationary periods can sometimes be detrimental to keeping a recruit.

For leadership and recruit mentoring teams, the ongoing commitment process can be challenging and very time-consuming. However, the outcome from these efforts is seeing those potential recruits move forward to become fully committed and valuable members of the department.

Recruit Training. It is important for departments to put in place the right person for leadership in training efforts. Training can be a barrier for retaining new recruits. It is essential that the department explain very clearly the expectations and the timeline for achieving training requirements. The training leadership should understand the needs of a diverse recruit class, such as generational differences in learning styles and different techniques needed for those with varied physical attributes, such as height. Training schedules may need to be reviewed and revised to meet the needs of the recruit population.

The more flexible the department's training activities can be, the more inviting the commitment will be. The better recruits are treated from the start, the easier it will be to reach the ultimate goal of a recruitment plan: a diverse group of volunteers committed to the department.

Make training fun. Invite recruits' family and friends to observe their training, growth, and acceptance in the department. Including family and friends may also result in a few more family members and friends wanting to participate. Many rural departments have survived for years and have great membership because of family and friends participating together. Encourage it. This is an excellent example of sampling. That type of support and encouragement could extend a recruit's time and effort devoted to the department by years.

Retention

Retention is the act of keeping something or someone. This essential component of fulfilling staffing needs goes hand in hand with recruitment. Unfortunately, retention takes a back seat to recruitment in many fire department plans, and this is a mistake because retention is just as important. Without a good retention program, departments waste time, money, and resources training a revolving door of volunteers. They also risk losing the knowledge and expertise that their seasoned members provide. Creating a work environment people want to be a part of is a key component of successful recruiting. In addition, a good retention program raises the profile of a department and its perception in the community.

Rather than refer to “recruitment and retention,” a case can be made that it should actually be “retention and recruitment.” In many ways recruitment efforts are futile without a retention program to keep volunteers committed, involved, and active with the department.

An effective retention program is the best positive branding and marketing for the department. Members who are satisfied with their department participation become effective ambassadors for the department. With positive motivators and continual revision of the retention program, the department will see a positive outcome for its recruitment effort.

Part of successful retention is continuing to let volunteers know they are valued and that the department needs their participation. Understand why the volunteers joined in the first place, and nurture these objectives. Also recognize that volunteers have lives outside of the department, with their own personal obligations and commitments. Do not force too much responsibility onto volunteers who are already stretched to the limits. Helping members achieve their goals, such as moving up the department ladder or finding a better balance between work, family life, and serving the community through the department, is beneficial for all involved. Members will know they are valued, and departments will retain qualified people who may otherwise have felt the need to quit.

Motivation as a Retention Tool

There should be constant effort put towards motivating and engaging volunteers. They need to be treated as individuals. Give them praise whenever possible, continually review and revise the department’s teamwork efforts, and praise those who continually give above and beyond in their participation. Build their self-esteem and their confidence. Make volunteers feel secure as vital members of the department. Make sure the leadership respects all members. Solicit input and take suggestions and recommendations seriously. And likewise, ensure that the volunteer membership respects those in leadership roles. The leadership should be giving constant feedback to the members about what they are doing right and what needs improvement. This shows the volunteers that leadership is truly interested in their individual growth within the department. See Chapter 1 for more on this subject.

Team Building

A component of retention is to ensure a positive team dynamic and cooperation within the membership. Cliques are natural but can be detrimental to team building, for example, firefighter versus EMT, higher certification versus lower certification, or seasoned volunteers versus new recruits. Fragmenting the membership inhibits teamwork building and cooperative efforts in service of the department.

As part of the performance audit of the recruitment and retention plan, the department should periodically check the types of team-building issues experienced as well as the plans to resolve them. It is always better to resolve issues with discussion and an understanding of common courtesy and respect. Adopting department standards is common, but be mindful that sometimes they can be unnecessary and more can be achieved simply through open discussion and allowing for a cooperative of teamwork building. Working through a potential policy issue with discussion may alleviate the need for an actual written policy.

Individual Recognition

Continued support and recognition are important to the individual volunteer’s wants and needs. Leadership and peer group recognition aids in the volunteers’ reassurance of continued participation. In most cases, a simple pat on the back is all that is necessary, but when addressing efforts that are above and beyond the call of duty the recognition may need to be “stepped up.” Press releases, acknowledgments, awards banquets, an article in the department’s newsletter, a personal thank-you note from the chief, and a challenge coin or certificate of recognition are all ways to make volunteers feel important and their efforts acknowledged. Being mindful to give credit where credit is due with some of these simple recognition tools will go a long way to show the individual volunteer the department’s appreciation of his or her continued participation.

Need for Fun and Family

With the everyday struggles of the serious business of fire-fighting and providing EMS patient care, volunteer departments need to remember to make fire department activities fun and enjoyable when possible, for example, by including family and friends in appropriate activities. They, too, are essential to retaining volunteer participation. Volunteers who have the support of their loved ones are more likely to continue volunteering than those whose family and friends are pressuring them to leave the department. Essentially, the department becomes a home for its members and their family and friends.



Through the cultivation of a strong team dynamic, department members should have the sense that they, too, are a family. This sense of brotherhood and sisterhood is a traditional value of fire and EMS departments and creates ties and bonds that can last a lifetime, even outside the circle of department membership. It helps with growth and the productivity of department efforts and aids the recruitment and retention plan by creating a positive and motivated department direction for sustainability.

Help with a Volunteer's Challenges

Leadership should be flexible and understanding regarding the stresses and challenges its members face. This goes beyond the department to include the everyday life of the volunteer member. Individuals are often struggling to balance conflicting time demands, workload, family responsibilities, and department participation. Leadership should recognize these issues and work with volunteers to better balance all of these demands. Be respectful of volunteers' time, such as starting and ending trainings at the correct times and using volunteers' time at the station efficiently, and be cognizant of the department asking too much.

It is easy for the demands of the department to overwhelm a volunteer member. Make sure there is a support system for personnel who are feeling overwhelmed or are struggling with chronic stress or anxiety. The emotional weight of the job can take a toll on volunteers, so it is important to have resources available for those who have a rough call, experience post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, are burned out, or are struggling with other behavioral health issues.

In addition to emotional support, departments should provide support to personnel facing on-the-job challenges. Make sure to provide adequate training when expanding a volunteer's responsibilities. A mentor program is a great tool to help volunteers who are learning new skills or taking on new roles within the department.

Remember, volunteer members are very committed to serving and may have a hard time saying no to participation. This could easily allow for leadership to keep adding to the volunteers' plates until they are spread very thin. This can result in volunteers feeling overwhelmed and burned out, leading them to question their participation in the department. This is where constant feedback is important. Department leadership should create open door policies for volunteers and make sure volunteers know they can speak up if they are feeling overburdened or need help with challenges they are facing.



Leadership's Role in Retention Programs

Understanding, training, and mentoring by leadership are of high importance to retaining volunteers. The department's leaders set the tone, policies, expectations, and ultimately the culture under which the department operates. Many times the loss of a volunteer stems back to poor leadership. Poor leadership can create issues such as inconsistency, mismanagement, inability to perform, inability to accept individuals, and a culture that is unwelcoming or hostile to members or where members do not feel respected or valued. As the direct liaisons to the department membership, leaders aid in looking toward and setting the direction for the future of the organization.

Communication as a Retention Tool

Communication plays a huge role in a department's efforts to keep morale and participation high. The inability to clearly share information will lead to communication problems; therefore, information has to be disseminated openly and through multiple outgoing sources. Listening is an important factor to dissolving problems when they are small rather than waiting until they become department-wide issues. Fostering an atmosphere of openness and continued feedback among members and cultivating a team dynamic that allows for positive support, recognition, and healthy criticism are essential.

Department Image

In order to retain volunteers, gain new recruits, and foster community support, it is imperative that a department has and projects a positive image, including through its community outreach efforts. Let the public know the good things the department and its volunteers are doing. Participate in community events so people get to see the department members as vital parts of the community. Consistently practice good customer service, and always treat members of the public respectfully, even when dealing with frustrating onlookers at an emergency scene. Establish a social media policy and make

sure all members adhere to its requirements, because one negative post can tarnish the entire department's image. Step up in the community by opening the department for public meetings, providing education and training, and hosting homeowner association gatherings. The department's hospitality will provide an opportunity for membership to engage with community members. Continued interaction with community members outside the department gives them insight into the department makeup as well as operational and non-operational activities.

Tangible Benefits

Although many of the benefits people get from volunteering in the fire and emergency services are intangible, such as a sense of purpose, the feeling of belonging to a community, helping one's neighbors, and building lifesaving skills, many departments also offer specific tangible benefits that may provide incentive for volunteers to stay with the department. However, it is not likely that tangible benefits will keep someone in a department if the environment is hostile, leadership is ineffective, family members are not supportive, or the pathway to success is blocked.

When determining what tangible benefits to offer, the department should obtain input from current members and new recruits to reflect what the membership wants and values. There are many types of benefits that may be considered (keep in mind some of them have a tax implication), but some include the following:

- Education/tuition assistance;
- Live-in programs or housing assistance;
- Reimbursement for gas and food while on duty;
- Retirement, pension, or length of service plans;
- Pay per call;
- Health insurance;
- Annual reimbursement or bonus;
- Gym memberships; and
- Local business discounts.

No matter what benefits are provided, they should be reviewed and revised annually.

Nonoperational Roles

There are many reasons a firefighter or emergency responder may no longer be able to perform operational functions, including age, health, or time factors. However, if these individuals still want to volunteer with the department, there are other roles they can perform that are not directly related to emergency response. Engage these volunteers in nonoperational tasks that benefit the department but do not endanger the individual or other personnel. This is a great way to retain

experienced members to continue assisting the department in a variety of needed ways. Be sure to have ongoing tasks for nonoperational personnel and make them feel like a valued part of the team, or they may lose interest and, subsequently, the department may lose valuable volunteers.

Summary

Present recruitment and retention efforts are falling short, and many volunteer departments are struggling to maintain adequate staffing levels to fulfill their missions safely and effectively. Departments need to evolve and take the time to develop recruitment and retention plans that meet today's needs. A cultural shift in how volunteer departments execute their recruitment and retention plans is essential for future success. Making this shift is an exercise in which every member of the department has a part; this exercise is necessary to nurture and grow diversity and inclusion efforts and create an environment people want to join and remain part of.

Part of the cultural shift is building relationships within the community outside the normal circle of recruitment—women, young adults, and minorities are just as interested, and sometimes more interested, in becoming involved in the volunteer fire and emergency services as the stereotypical recruit. It is imperative that the department works toward a diverse and inclusive membership in order to fully succeed. Gaining a thorough understanding of the department's functions and activities will help in finding and fitting the right volunteers with the right roles and responsibilities.

Taking the time to build the right foundation will create a thriving department for the long run. With proper leadership and the right efforts to create positive change, success will come. Developing personal relationships and creating meaningful interaction with department members and members of the community will lead to strong retention and successful recruitment; a first step may take only a simple personal invite and informing the community of the department's constant need to add new recruits to the ranks. Constant dedication to and recognition of volunteers will keep them engaged and committed. The future of the volunteer fire service is tied to the creation of out-of-the-box thinking when it comes to recruitment and retention plans. Nonparticipation or inaction cannot be an option for the future of the department.