



## Recruiting and retaining township volunteer firefighters

President Obama has called for more and more Americans to volunteer their services to organizations across the United States. A decline in volunteerism has been of great concern to many civic and service groups, including the volunteer fire service in America. Many township fire departments in Michigan are seeing the same decrease. Gone are the days of a waiting list of residents who are willing and able to serve their community and provide life-saving protection to their fellow neighbors.

What has happened to that list? What solutions are available to renew residents' interest in serving the township fire department? What insights can help township officials and fire department personnel maintain a roster of volunteer firefighters?

Trying some new ideas and using innovative methods to attract and retain volunteers can help make a difference to keep your fire department roster full.

### WHY IS THERE A RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION PROBLEM?

There is no single reason why many township fire departments are facing a decline among volunteer firefighters (including part-paid or paid on-call personnel). Indeed, there are as many different issues regarding this problem as there

are fire departments. Roughly 70 percent of the 900-plus fire departments in the state of Michigan are served by volunteer, paid on-call or part-paid members. Frequently, their employment on the fire department is not their main livelihood, and in many cases, this service can actually cost a member when all expenses are tallied.

Why do residents volunteer to join the fire service? While each individual has his or her own personal reasons for volunteering, the most often-cited reason is service to one's community. The excitement of the job, as well as the sense of belonging that can result from being part of something important, are also big draws.

The **Mikado Township** (Alcona Co.) Volunteer Fire Department boasts 18 active members—and most of these paid on-call personnel are remaining with the department. The reason is simple, according to Chief **Wayne Odell**: "They are dedicated to the community, and they want to give back. They are needed, and they want to be available."

Adds Supervisor **Jesus "Yogi" Yruegas**, "While we tend to retain our volunteer firefighters, it is getting difficult to attract new recruits. We have attracted two additions within a two-year timespan. I believe our success in retaining personnel comes from being a rural area, the volunteers living and working within a close proximity to the township, and



their dedication to the profession. However, we’re finding it difficult to keep firefighters because they leave the area to find employment or get into farming.”

Today’s changing times offer numerous deterrents to joining—or staying with—a township fire department. Residents may not feel as strong of a connection to their community, as communities expand or become “bedroom communities” that residents commute from to go to work in the morning and return home in the evening. New residents may not feel close ties to their community, and often have little commitment to serve their fellow neighbors.

Migration from rural areas to urban locations—often in search of, or because of, employment—is an issue. While it is true that, once retired, many people return to their roots, retirement age is usually not ideal for becoming a volunteer firefighter!

The changing workplace also impacts residents’ availability in serving the local fire department. Fire Chief **Shawn Lutz**, a 24-year veteran of **Columbia Township** (Jackson Co.) Fire Department, has noticed changes in attracting and retaining personnel over the past decade.

“It’s becoming increasingly difficult,” Lutz said. “A main factor is that, with regular employment, people’s employers are less flexible. In fact, in today’s economy, serving as a firefighter can be a detriment. An employer might look at one candidate who is a firefighter and might miss three days of work a month while out on fire calls, and may hire someone else—even someone who is less qualified—who will be there every day.”

Lack of time is perhaps the single largest barrier to joining the township fire service. Because of hard economic times, many households are depending on two, and in some cases, three jobs to provide for the family’s needs and wants. This leaves very little time available to volunteer for any organization. One-parent households are becoming more common place, and therein lies another issue. A single parent may want to volunteer his or her time; however, with children of any age, it is very difficult to drop everything at the sound of an alarm and respond to an emergency. However, all of the new firefighting equipment will not extinguish one fire or save one life if there is no personnel to respond with it.

Additional training requirements also put an additional constraint on volunteers. Gone are the days of “learn as you go” training. The State of Michigan now requires that a volunteer firefighter receive 120 hours of state certified training within the first two years of joining a department. This promotes the firefighter to “Firefighter One.” After that has been achieved, another 120 hours of training is required to obtain the “Firefighter Two” certification. Along with this, there are requirements for hazardous material incidents, driver training, first aid, etc.

Said Lutz, “There are a lot more training requirements now, and that is often done in the evenings and on weekends. That’s a lot more time away from one’s family and friends.”

### Top 10 most stressful jobs

- |                                 |                            |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1) U.S. president               | 6) Astronaut               |
| <b>2) Firefighter</b>           | 7) Police officer          |
| 3) Race car driver (Indy class) | 8) Pro football player     |
| 4) Taxi cab driver              | 9) Air traffic controller  |
| 5) Surgeon                      | 10) Highway patrol officer |

Source: The Jobs Rated Almanac by Les Krantz (1995 edition)

Regardless of time constraints, increased training and other factors that may hinder fire service volunteerism, there remains a strong desire among many township residents to serve their community, and save lives, by becoming part of the fellowship of fire departments.

### NEW WAYS TO RECRUIT

What can a township do to recruit new fire personnel? With a little forethought and planning, outreach efforts can pay huge dividends in boosting the numbers of firefighters on the township roster. In addition to placing advertisements in local newspapers or other media seeking volunteers, additional “outside-the-box” ideas could include:

- Host an open house at the fire station
- Post a sign in front of the fire station or township hall
- Hit the local supermarket, etc.
  - Set out an empty pair of boots to show vacancies
  - Take pumper to parking lot
- Have a presence at the county fair, community day, etc.
  - Set up a display tent
  - Have equipment on display
- Attend service group meetings
- Attend career night at the local high school
- Work with local vocational schools and skill centers, and community colleges that offer fire services programs
- Reach out to new township residents by including information on the department in literature disseminated to newcomers by local Realtors, the Chamber of Commerce, welcome wagons, etc.
- Post a recruitment message on department apparatus. Messages can be permanently painted on, or temporarily displayed using magnetic signs. ▶



## Problems within the volunteer fire service

- Communication with officials
- Lack of daytime personnel
- Incentives
- Attitude
- Cliques
- Lack of interest in training
- Not enough young people
- Inadequate money to fund department
- Poor or inexperienced leadership
- Educating the public on what firefighters do
- Time
- One or two people doing everything

Dwindling personnel has **Napoleon Township** (Jackson Co.) planning to start a cadet program, in hopes of encouraging local youth to remain with and continue to serve the department.

"While the township is authorized for 30 paid on-call firefighters, over the years, we have declined from 30 to our present 15 firefighters," said Chief **Jay Hawley**. "Society has changed dramatically, and we have found it very hard to retain and recruit new members, and are hoping to start a cadet program by the first of the new year."

A revamped cadet program has helped bring recruits to the Columbia Township Fire Department, according to Lutz. The program, geared toward youth ages 14 to 18, offers "basic training and gets them into the fire service mindset," said Lutz. "That way, when they graduate from high school, we can put them to work." The program has paid off—some six of the department's current 25 paid on-call firefighters came from the cadet program.

### **A team effort**

Programs and outreach efforts can help your department, but they alone will not recruit new members. The township may wish to appoint a recruiting officer or coordinator, who can spearhead recruiting efforts, and also collect names and referrals of potential applicants and make personal contact to encourage participation. Current department personnel can also be involved in the process and serve as "ambassadors," helping bring new faces into the department. At a minimum, ensure

that current personnel are aware of recruitment efforts and are available to answer questions that potential recruits may have.

### **Involve the family**

When interviewing potential recruits, it may be beneficial to conduct the interview at the applicant's home, with his or her family members present. This can help alleviate any concerns or fears that family members may have, and also allows them to ask questions. The department may also wish to offer the family a tour of the fire station. Having the support of one's family can go a long way in encouraging a person to start—and continue—service as a volunteer firefighter.

### **Don't settle**

A word of caution: Although the need for volunteers is increasing, the township should not lower its selection standards and simply accept every prospect who walks through the door. In fact, allowing persons with questionable judgment or character to join the department can actually drive away excellent current and potential volunteers, thus exacerbating the personnel shortage.

### **Accept the challenge**

Recruitment efforts should be ongoing, not simply limited to when volunteers leave the department. All too often, township officials and fire personnel may bemoan the lack of volunteers while taking no action to remedy the situation. Challenge yourself to make efforts to recruit new members, and to try at least two new ideas over the next year. With some additional effort, your department just may find that its fabled "waiting list" has once again become a reality.

Although the **Northfield Township** (Washtenaw Co.) Fire Department finds itself with a fairly steady volunteer base of 24 paid on-call members, financial cutbacks have Chief **William Wagner** planning now to expand recruitment efforts in the near future.

"Probably the biggest reason that we retain paid on-call personnel currently is that we have a 'duty program,'" he explained. "This program, which ensures a firefighter is on duty 24/7, is a part-time position and is spread over half of the department members. A few of the members use this as a main source of income, and many utilize it to prepare themselves for a full-time career at other departments."

However, "we, like many others, face serious revenue declines in the next several years and maintaining this program will be a challenge," he continued. "My goal will be to try to recruit from within our community, to give those members a sense of hometown pride and to retain them within the community."

## **RETAINING VOLUNTEERS**

According to the National Volunteer Fire Council, 38 percent of volunteer fire personnel serve between one and five years. Meanwhile, 27 percent serve from six to 10 years, and that number decreases to just 10 percent serving more than 20 years.

Why do township volunteers leave the fire service? Often-cited reasons can range from a lack of time to health concerns, to personality conflicts within the department to a loss of interest. Some reasons—such as the volunteer and his or her family moving from the area—are out of the township’s control. There are steps that a township can take, however, to retain these valuable local volunteers.

### **Leadership makes the difference**

Many departments have a difficult time regarding personality conflicts, and this is where officers of the department and the township board must work together to keep such issues at a minimum. If conflicts are not handled in a professional manner, a department’s morale can be destroyed in a very short time, which can lead to empty membership rosters. Strong leadership—both on the part of the township board, which sets the department’s policies and goals, and the fire chief, who oversees the day-to-day department operations—is critical.

The fire chief, and other department officers, set the tone for the department and can influence the department’s morale more than any other factor. Providing officer training for individuals is a good beginning to solving this problem, and can provide knowledge to the current or potential officer on how to handle conflicts that arise.

The township board’s role in fire department morale and motivation is significant. Department personnel must know that the community and its leaders appreciate their efforts, and recognize the sacrifices that these individuals make to serve their community. The Mikado Township Board, for example, makes an effort to simply say “thank you” to the fire chief, at each board meeting following the chief’s report, for the department’s service. In addition, Yruegas visits structure fires, whenever possible, to bring firefighters water and to take pictures for review and training.

### **The fun factor**

Having a little fun also goes a long way to ensuring the volunteers continue to feel a connection to the department. It’s important for volunteers to enjoy their service, even amidst the pressure and time constraints. Events like family picnics, hayrides, golf outings, trips to major sporting events, annual dinners away from the fire station and combination parties with other emergency providers are just a few of the events that can be held. Departments that have a well-balanced program between actual responses, training and social activities are often the ones that have the least amount of trouble attracting and keeping members.

The Columbia Township Fire Department has a “family-friendly atmosphere,” said Lutz. “We have family night at the station, with dinner and a movie, cookouts, swimming parties in the summer. If the family is involved in the department, they are less likely to be bothered when the volunteer is away from home, doing business with the department.”

The township board should also be involved in these functions, as they are a very important part of the whole picture. Good

relationships between the board and the department will only add to the betterment of the department and the citizens served.

In Mikado Township, township officials and fire department personnel ring in the holidays together. “The clerk and I attend our fire department’s Christmas potluck,” said Yruegas. Quite simply, he said, “We attend because we are invited.”

### **Maintaining quality equipment**

If your department wants to attract and retain personnel, it is imperative that the department has good equipment—both personal protective equipment and apparatus. If the department has good equipment, members will be proud of what they have, and will remain dedicated to providing that life-saving service. The flip side of the coin, of course, is cost.

Northfield Township’s Wagner recognizes this dilemma. “An attraction to our department is that our headquarters station is a nice, new station and for the most part, our equipment is nice,” he said. “This is good and bad. While the equipment and station are nice, we pay about 25 percent of our budget in debt toward these things.”

While all departments may not be able to afford new equipment, the same pride can be achieved by keeping current equipment clean and in excellent working condition.

It is important to note that it is not the job of the members of the fire department to provide the necessary funds for its operation. It is the township board’s responsibility to decide how much money to spend on fire protection, establish the budget for the department, and monitor the department’s activities and finances. The township board may appropriate funds from the township general fund to defray the cost of housing, staffing and equipping the fire department. Allocated or charter millage, state-shared revenues and any other unrestricted revenues may be appropriated for department expenses.

Department fundraisers can be one source of revenue, but townships are cautioned not to overdo them. It is up to the township to determine whether or not to involve the firefighters when conducting fundraisers—after all, they joined to provide a life-saving service, not to sell raffle tickets.

### **Recognition**

Without a doubt, volunteering in the fire service is one of the most demanding types of volunteer activities, requiring time, dedication and training—while also posing a personal risk to the volunteers. The township and department must ensure that these dedicated individuals feel appreciated and recognized for the valuable service they provide.

In some communities, recognition plays a key role in personnel satisfaction and retention. From a simple pat on the back to more public recognitions, there are a myriad of ways to ensure your township’s fire department personnel receive the accolades they deserve. Consider:

- Spotlighting department/volunteer accomplishments in the township newsletter, complete with photos ▶

- Issuing press releases to the local media for years of service, training events, incidents, etc. (Be sure to include photos, and invite the media to attend certain events to take pictures.)
- Holding a graduation ceremony when new recruits complete their initial training
- Seeking out local, state or national awards
- Holding annual awards banquets

In 2008, Mikado Township organized an appreciation dinner for its fire department. “Money was donated for the meals of the fire department personnel, while any residents who attended paid for their own meal,” explained Yruegas, who also designed appreciation certificates, which denoted years of service, for each department member. Donations also covered the costs of printing and framing for the certificates.

Each person received individual recognition during the awards presentation, when township Clerk **Rita Sands** read the names of the fire personnel, one by one, starting with the person with the least number of years served. Yruegas took that opportunity to personally share his gratitude for their dedication. “As their name was called, I shook each firefighter’s hand, and thanked each for his or her service,” he said.

Perhaps the most effective—and least expensive—way to show appreciation is a simply the conveyance of “good job” from the chief and other township officials. Just a few words recognizing someone’s efforts and offering encouragement can be a great motivator and have a positive effect on department retention.



### Available resources

Township boards and fire chiefs can turn to the following organizations for resources, assistance and insights into volunteer retention and recruitment:

**Michigan Townships Association**

[www.michigantownships.org](http://www.michigantownships.org)

**Michigan State Firemen’s Association**

[www.msfassoc.org](http://www.msfassoc.org)

**National Volunteer Fire Council**

[www.nvfc.org](http://www.nvfc.org)

**U.S. Fire Administration**

[www.usfa.dhs.gov](http://www.usfa.dhs.gov)

### Additional incentives

Incentives and perks can also serve as an important retention tool. For instance, training evolutions and certification take a tremendous amount of time and pose a great threat especially to the recruitment effort of departments. It is best, by far, to be upfront with the potential candidate and let them know right from the start what is required of them. Reimbursement of some nature is almost required to attract new members. If the department and the State of Michigan require a minimum of 120 hours of certified training, the township may wish to compensate an individual for their time and travel expense, if necessary. The days of having people train many hours to perform an emergency service for nothing are gone.

Additional financial incentives can include:

- Pay per-call
- Annual reimbursements
- Pensions
- Scholarships
- Tuition reimbursement
- Health insurance
- Death benefits

Both Napoleon and Columbia Township Fire Departments offer additional insurance, including supplemental accident insurance, as well as additional training to keep personnel up-to-date on procedures and policies. “The big thing for us is retaining the firefighters that we have,” Lutz said, noting that

