

Managers and the Volunteer Fire Service: Sharing Common Ground

Franklin Clay

Of all the services that managers of small and medium-size communities oversee, few are as challenging as the ones that use volunteer fire and emergency service personnel. Most government administrators will agree that the volunteer fire service is a unique animal with its own peculiar problems and issues. These volunteers, because of their often-unusual organizational structure, ever-expanding mission, and varied personnel profiles, can be the source of sleepless nights for managers, who must incorporate and consolidate these individuals into the total service-delivery package.

The volunteer fire service, however, does not have to be as vexatious as many people think. An understanding of some basic strategies will assist the administrator in navigating the often-turbulent waters of volunteerism and in turn will support the volunteer service in improving its effectiveness and productivity.

Observers who try to identify the organizational makeup of volunteer fire services, how they operate and function, will find that there is little organizational commonality within this group, except that they all respond to emergencies in some very expensive vehicles.



Some volunteer departments are independent nonprofit organizations operating separately from—or on the fringe of—the local government unit. Some are part of a broader level of government delivery responsibility, part of a consolidated or regional approach sometimes extending as high as the county level. Volunteer systems sometimes offer supplementary support for the career-oriented fire protection services. Another volunteer system might be an arm of the local township, village, or city government, much like the local law enforcement service. Unfortunately, the system is sometimes a strange combination of some or all of the above. No matter which organizational format is used, many common threads run through the volunteer fire service.

Even though some of these threads might not be present in every volunteer system, there are many strategies that a local government manager can pursue that will assist in improving and strengthening the service provided by the volunteer fire departments in their communities. Before we can discuss these strategies, however, some basic understanding of the present state of the volunteer fire service must be gained.

Changing Mission

The first thing the manager must realize is that the volunteer services have undergone tremendous change in their fundamental mission. Thirty years ago, most volunteer fire departments were simply fire suppression forces. They saw themselves simply as neighbors helping neighbors, and that also was usually the way the community as a whole viewed them.

Mandated training requirements often were limited to 30 to 40 hours of initial training, augmented with a few monthly meetings and drills. The departments existed mostly due to their own fund-raising efforts, and there usually was an ample supply of individuals waiting to join. During this time, it was not uncommon for some departments to have waiting lists.

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Then, in the early 1970s, things began to change. The public began to demand different kinds of services from the local public fire department, and the volunteers were not exempt from this expectation. Communities wanted an increased effort toward special rescue capabilities, and in some localities these included paramedic services. Then, the social concerns of the times illustrated the need for a more organized approach to determining the causes of fires, especially to arson investigation. The increasing expansion of small towns brought with it the demand for fire prevention and for the implementation of inspection and code compliance programs. Advancements in technology brought the increased burden of hazardous materials response and mitigation.

Today, some volunteer departments choose to accept the challenges of all of these developing service demands, while some opt to pick and choose. Some decide to address rescue response but stop short of paramedic treatment. Some aggressively accept code compliance as a service but limit their hazardous materials effort to the bare minimum that is federally required. Sometimes, these decisions are driven by citizen wants and desires and sometimes by the available

talents of the individuals involved in the volunteer fire department.

Changing Volunteer Profile

Another area that has changed is the profile of the volunteer firefighter. No one is going to dispute the fact that traditionally the role of the volunteer firefighter was filled by males. In case of a fire, the butcher, baker, and candlestick maker would flip over signs on their doors stating, "Gone to fire, be back soon," and go fulfill what they felt to be their civic duty. The husband who was home from a busy workday would volunteer for service at night.

If an alarm was sounded, the husband would run down to the firehouse to staff the fire engine, while the wife attended to the children and the household needs. This scenario also has changed.

In today's economy, the butcher, baker, and candlestick maker cannot afford to shut down for a couple of hours without serious fiscal consequences. The wife is now working a full-time job and is not there to watch over the children if the husband has to leave; or, in many cases, she may want to volunteer herself. Also, arguably, the new generation of young adults simply does not have the commitment to civic pride and duty that was common in the previous generation. The once-established waiting list is long gone, and most departmental rosters are mere shadows of what they once were.

Increased Training Responsibilities and Expanded Workload

With these growing demands and the changing mission and safety implications that have come with them, the mandated certification requirements of state and local organizations have become massive for the volunteer firefighter. In one Mid-west state, for example, for a volunteer to become a certified firefighter, paramedic, hazardous materials technician, and inspector, the time commitment exceeds

1,500 classroom hours. This does not include the study time needed to pass the certification exams. After certification has been completed, time now must be committed to drills for skill refinement and for periodic recertification. This volunteer time crunch has become the rule rather than the exception.

With all of these changes has come an ever-increasing demand for the services that are being provided. Where 30 years ago a typical small volunteer force might respond to 30 or 40 fire incidents a year, now that same community could easily be juggling more than 2,000 yearly requests for fire, EMS, rescue, hazardous materials, and related services. Many of these requests are coming during the traditional workday (8 a.m. to 5 p.m.), when volunteer availability is at its lowest point.

Still today, in many parts of the country, volunteer organizations receive minimum public funding assistance and must provide the lion's share of their financial support through activities that run the full gamut from bingo dinners to fish fries. These activities greatly reduce the time available for training and drill.

All of these factors contribute to what many volunteer fire chiefs identify as their number-one concern, volunteer recruitment and retention. Where do we find volunteers who are willing to accept the challenge and undergo the training and education needed for the job? How do we convince them to stay after they have been trained and when the stresses of the job have begun to take their toll? In the current lean recruitment market, the volunteer service is competing against many clubs and organizations that need new members. The average civic club does not require 1,500 hours of training and a commitment to day and night availability, even on holidays.

Volunteer Motivation

Fire service volunteers are motivated in the same way as volunteers in any other civic or service organization. There has to be a positive benefit, or at least a bal-

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ance of some sort, that equals the effort that must be put forth by the volunteer to be a member. There must be tangible or intangible rewards that will justify the enormous effort and time commitment.

These rewards will vary from individual to individual and from community to community. Economic conditions, cultural differences, and personality types will all play parts in the reward system. A sense of reward, however, has to be felt by the volunteer. It must be noted that this value or benefit must be defined by the volunteer, not the community. Volunteering is almost always a personal decision.

Strategies for Improving Volunteer Services

What are some things that a manager can do to support and improve the services of the volunteer fire protection system? Because the financial commitment of a career force is out of the reach of many communities, we will present some initiatives that deserve the atten-

tion of the local government administrator and governing body.

Not every idea or representation listed under each subhead below will apply to every community, because of a variety of state and local rules, laws, legal contracts, and ordinances. These suggestions might, however, spur other creative ideas and ventures.

Address recruitment concerns.

Every government unit can identify the means at its disposal that could help in recruiting volunteers. Because it takes a long time to train an individual in the skills and certifications needed for the job of firefighter, recruitment has to be an extremely high priority for the community and might demand a total-community approach.

One community sent out a recruitment flyer in the monthly sewer and water bills. Another allowed a recruitment booth to be set up in the city hall lobby. Yet another town went so far as to allow town hall staff to "telemarket" potential volunteers. Regardless of the actual effort, all communities have some means at their disposal that can assist in the recruitment process.

Support the service through its ups and downs.

One key principle is that recruitment often depends on the reputation of the organization, which can be governed by public opinion and perception. Few people want to belong to an organization that is perceived as unorganized, ineffective, and unprofessional. The organization must have a positive image in order to recruit members successfully.

There will be serious emergency incidents that will not have the desired positive outcome. This happens to every fire department, whether volunteer or career. The local government needs to support the organization, make an incident a learning experience for the membership, and assist where it can in the advancement of the service.

Recently, one city in the Midwest suffered a major fire that caused multiple

deaths in a low-rent apartment building. Unfortunately, a councilmember, during a regularly scheduled open council meeting, labeled the volunteer firefighters cowards. He felt that they did not try to save the people because the tenants were migrant workers. The councilmember believed, and expressed the belief vocally, that the volunteers would have taken greater risks had the trapped individuals been white. The volunteers already were distraught from the incident, and these comments had a devastating effect.

There *will* be serious emergency incidents from time to time. The department will go through some tough emotional moments. Sometimes, a good cheerleader on the sidelines makes all the difference when the game is a tough one. An organization's public image often is influenced by who is willing to rally to its defense publicly.

Develop volunteer leaders. Most volunteer fire departments have volunteer fire chiefs. These individuals have all the same duties and responsibilities under the law as their career fire-chief counterparts. Their duties and responsibilities often are well defined in state and local law, but the volunteers have limited time to perform them.

Professional development programs play a key role in the chief's ability to perform the position's duties. The local government should support the professional development of fire department leadership staff through special workshops, seminars, tuition reimbursement programs at local colleges, and related endeavors.

Recognize that volunteer firefighters are truly part of government. Fire protection services are just as important to the stability of the community as the other public services. Most managers and administrators hold regularly scheduled staff meetings for the various department heads to keep them abreast of important activities and events and to assist them in making decisions and facing common concerns.

These meetings are usually held during normal working hours, however, when the volunteer fire leaders are away. Several communities now are scheduling staff meetings with consideration for the volunteer officers' schedules in order to include them in the governmental management team.

Whenever the community is represented at local, regional, or national seminars and conferences, often the volunteer chief is missing. Boards and commissions such as zoning and regional planning seldom have volunteer fire department representation. The existence of a new industrial park with thousands of gallons of hazardous materials will affect a locality in many ways. The greatest of these impacts often is on the fire protection and related emergency-response capabilities.

It is critical that the volunteer fire service believes that it is an integral and valid part of the governmental process and knows that its input is necessary for the community to fulfill its role of meeting citizen needs. Exclusion often results in an "us versus them" mind-set within the volunteer organization.

Ask the volunteers for their directional input. Unlike employees on the regular payroll, on whom management has more formalized control, volunteer firefighters as a rule have a stronger need to participate in the decisions being made. They feel that if they are going to make this major time and energy commitment, they should have input in the decision-making process. Their belief is: "If we are going to put our safety at risk, we at least should help determine the direction of the organization."

The formulation of personnel policies and procedures—the rules that they are going to play by—should include input from the rank-and-file volunteer. This group needs a sense of empowerment. Effective volunteer fire departments operate with a strong sense of organizational pride, often the result of some form of self-determination. Here, the basic tenet is: Anything that the ad-

ministration can do to enhance organizational pride will yield dividends.

Offer the volunteers incentives.

Because we are recruiting fewer volunteers and the training process is getting more complicated, retention is a critical issue. As in any volunteer organization, the needs and expectations that the volunteer has for the organization might change over time. Even if there still is a strong desire to meet the emergency response needs of the community, the newness of the adventure will diminish over time. The long hours of training and conflicts with family commitments do take their toll. The mental and emotional conflict over the personal rewards versus the energy spent gets tougher as the years go by.

There are many ways in which a community can support a volunteer's commitment to the fire service. These incentives can be as varied as the communities themselves.

One community provides active volunteers who maintain a certain training level and alarm turnout history with a yearly family pass to the city-owned swimming pool and golf course. Another town offers a suspension in some waste collection fees in return for volunteer fire services. Another town offers special child care arrangements in case one or both parents are called away on an emergency. Annual awards and recognition dinners are given by many communities to reward special efforts by individual members during the past year.

Some local governments offer special retirement programs if volunteers fulfill at least 20 years' service. Some localities that also employ career firefighters offer incentive points—much like veteran points—to the local volunteers in their examinations for career positions.

Many communities have a weekly feature in the local newspapers and in newsletters spotlighting a particular volunteer or departmental activity. One community even sent letters to the volunteer's full-time employer commending the firefighter and praising his self-

less public service. The letter brought to the employer's attention the individual's strong community contributions.

In one small town, an innovative approach was taken. The village administration was concerned that the village did not have a large enough employee base to acquire the desired health care package. Most of the volunteer firefighters in the village worked at the local mill, which offered a less-than-desirable insurance package. The village offered to include the volunteers in the village health insurance program, and, as expected, this arrangement proved greatly beneficial to everyone.

One community has even assisted with housing for young volunteers just starting families and looking to buy their first homes. This program is similar to many urban homestead efforts under way in larger cities.

It must be remembered that incentives themselves do not ensure retention. We all remember those readings from college that proclaimed that money and its pecuniary cousins are not motivators. However, incentives can be powerful signals that the community actually respects the commitment the volunteers are making and is willing to make it easier for them to volunteer. Showing that you care is a motivator.

Provide services support systems. For years, the volunteer fire services were self-supportive organizations. Someone in the organization usually had the expertise needed to provide the needed support to accomplish a task. When a piece of apparatus needed repair, for example, the volunteers would stay up all night, fix the equipment, go home, clean up, and go to work with little, if any, sleep. The realities of today's world are making that scenario less likely.

The volunteers of today need access to the community support systems. This includes access at all hours to the locality's maintenance facilities and personnel. Building maintenance operations and staff are another useful support system. In one town, the municipal custodial staff


performs routine firehouse work duties, freeing more of the volunteer firefighter's time for drills and other duties.

The modern volunteer department generates mountains of paperwork and related files. It is of great assistance if the fire department can be integrated into the community's records and data processing system. The human resource functions should support the personnel management needs of the volunteers. City purchasing departments, duplication services, and other functions can notably lighten the workload of the local volunteers.

Just like their career counterparts, volunteers frequently face the dangers within the community. Today, they are exposed to bloodborne pathogens and other personal health and safety risks that were not there a generation ago. They also witness their share of human tragedy. They can benefit profoundly from access to the employee assistance program of the governmental body.

Facing the Challenges

The volunteer fire service has been the service backbone in many communities for years. The strains of contemporary society, however, have placed new stresses and challenges in front of it. Effective delivery of service, once the responsibility of the few who were willing to accept the challenge, now must be shared by the larger community.

The local government body is in a prime position to help the volunteer service face the challenges present in today's community. By providing support and assistance, the local government manager will foster a stronger and more positive working relationship with the volunteer fire service and will see a welcome improvement in the service being provided by volunteers. 

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