

San Marcos Fire Department Enlists Senior Volunteers

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In an era of belt-tightening, fire departments across the country are being challenged to develop financially innovative methods of improving public safety. They are constantly being asked to "do more with less."

"It was clear to all of us within the fire management team that to continue providing quality emergency services, we needed to find a way to accomplish our 'non-emergency' administrative responsibilities in a more fiscally sound manner," said San Marcos Fire Chief Larry Webb.

Historically, the San Marcos Fire Department used on-duty personnel, on-duty engine companies and, in some cases, safety personnel on overtime to pick up supplies, deliver mail and perform miscellaneous routine tasks. In many cases, on-duty emergency response units were taken out of their first-in response areas to perform routine non-emergency support work.

A new challenge regarding fire station security emerged after 9/11. When emergency calls required personnel to leave the stations, vendors were often left in the fire stations by themselves or needed access to perform repairs and deliver supplies to the fire stations without supervision. School tours also were often cut short and students escorted out of the stations abruptly whenever an emergency call came in.

Calling All Seniors

Facing the prospect of reducing essential fire services due to considerable budget and staffing constraints along with the need to increase fire station security, the San Marcos Fire Department developed a Senior Fire Volunteer Program. Patterned after the successful senior patrols used by law enforcement agencies, the Fire Department Senior Volunteer Program is designed to draw upon the expertise of the senior citizens within the community and improve the fire, rescue and emergency medical services provided by the San Marcos Fire Department.

Middle-aged and older adults are an especially valuable asset because they have many years of life experience and wisdom to share. In his book *How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America*, Marc Freedman regards older adults as America's "only increasing natural resource." The key, according to Freedman, is learning to harness the time, talent and idealism of the older generation. Certainly, the use of senior volunteers is not new. However, bringing their talents into the fire service is, and allows the San Marcos Fire Department to increase essential services without affecting the city's financial bottom line.

With assistance from the San Diego County Sheriff's Department, which provides law enforcement services to the City of San Marcos, an application process was designed and a plan was developed to recruit potential members. The program had two distinguishing features. The first was training seniors to work in the non-emergency setting helping with non-emergency tasks and ever-increasing fire prevention education needs. The second was developing a call-out system, where seniors could assist with incident rehabilitation and non-emergency related support duties, such as filling air bottles and retrieving equipment.

Seniors Overcame the Obstacles

As with all new programs that introduce the concept of volunteers to the workforce, some resistance was anticipated from employees. To help alleviate these concerns, the fire chief personally met with all employees at the various fire stations to explain the purpose and needs of the program. However, employees embraced the concept, developing a strong working relationship with the senior fire volunteers. They have seen how the work the volunteers perform benefits the organization and how the seniors are able to assist them with their daily routines. Conversely, because the seniors have been so well received by the work force, morale has remained high and the department has not experienced any volunteer attrition since the program started.

Other start-up obstacles included:

- Finding money to start the program. (Using recycled ambulances and relying on some initial donations helped minimize the costs.)

- Overcoming myths about senior citizens. (For example, diminished driving abilities and decision-making skills; this program directly counters those myths.)
- Developing a core of highly dedicated volunteers.

Senior Success

The San Marcos Fire Department Senior Fire Volunteer Program is not only unique but also tremendously successful in helping deliver quality services to the people of San Marcos. Last year alone, the senior fire volunteers performed more than 4,000 hours of community service and worked on a number of projects related to fire safety. Their most recent project was inspecting and installing smoke detectors for the senior citizen community via a partnership with the Burn Institute. Other projects have included the Vial of Life program, fire patrols, mapping, fire safety public education displays, retrieving emergency medical equipment from area hospitals and fire hydrant inspections, to name a few. Additionally, the seniors fill a huge emergency response gap, providing emergency incident support with equipment and helping with firefighter rehabilitation responsibilities.

The benefits associated with the Senior Fire Volunteer Program are clear. The citizens receive increased fire services without increasing the fire budget. Fire safety employees are no longer pulled out of their first-in response areas to perform routine administrative tasks and are now more available to fulfill essential fire duties in the field. Finally, the senior fire volunteers now have meaningful, engaging activities that keep them connected to the community and constitute a truly outstanding public service.

The San Marcos Fire Department Senior Fire Volunteer program can serve as a model program for fire departments throughout the nation. As budgets continue to shrink, fire departments will eliminate fire prevention programs before reducing operational funds. This program bridges that gap and will assist in meeting fire prevention goals and administrative needs well into the future.

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