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## 5 steps to overcoming volunteer firefighter recruitment obstacles

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By Kimberly Quiros, FireRescue1 Contributor

A recent article in the "Pocono Record" highlighted Pennsylvania's shortage of volunteer firefighters and aging volunteer population. Articles such as these are becoming more common as local departments across the country struggle to meet staffing demands and find younger recruits.

If one looks strictly at the media reports, it may be easy to think that the volunteer fire service is waning. However, this is far from the case. Volunteers comprise 70 percent of the fire service, and small and rural communities continue to depend on volunteers to provide their emergency response services. And while statistics from the National Fire Protection Association show that the number of volunteer firefighters hit a low in 2011, the number has actually been on an upward trend since then.

These statistics may be little consolation to a chief who has seen local volunteer numbers drop steadily over the last decade, or that is having trouble meeting staffing needs amidst ever-growing call volumes and community demands. Fortunately, help is available. The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) is working to help local departments overcome recruitment obstacles and reach new members through its Make Me A Firefighter™ campaign.

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## Lack of awareness of the need for volunteer firefighters

One barrier to recruitment is the lack of public awareness of the need for volunteer firefighters, or that they can become a volunteer firefighter. A national study conducted by the NVFC prior to the launch of the Make Me A Firefighter campaign found that 79 percent of those polled did not know if their local department was seeking volunteers, and 41 percent were unsure if their department even utilized volunteers. It is hard to recruit people to the department when they do not know there is a need for their services or that these opportunities exist.

Lack of awareness does not mean lack of interest. When asked, 29 percent of the survey respondents indicated an interest in volunteering as an emergency responder. That number was even higher among the highly sought-after 18 to 34 year old age group, with 45 percent indicating an interest in volunteering as an emergency responder.

## Fire service diversity and inclusion

The make-up of a fire department should ideally match the demographic make-up of the community. Unfortunately for many departments, this is not the case. For instance, while women make up 50.8 percent of the U.S. population, the NFPA estimates that women represent only 8.9 percent of the volunteer fire service.

Once again, it is not a lack of interest that is the problem. The NVFC survey found women have just as much interest in volunteering as a firefighter as men do, and minority groups including black, Asian, and Hispanic respondents showed a higher level of interest than their white counterparts.

Under-represented audiences including millennials, women and minorities provide a significant area of opportunity for volunteer fire departments. Go beyond traditional recruitment methods to make sure you are reaching all of your community's demographics. Looking for more millennials? Conduct targeted online and social media outreach, and make sure to have younger firefighters on-hand at college and community recruitment events. Trying to attract more women and minorities? Make sure your marketing materials feature a diverse representation of firefighters.

Also, ensure your department is ready for new recruits. No one wants to join an organization where they feel like an outsider or are disrespected or ignored. Treat everyone as an integral part of the department, and respect new ideas and viewpoints that each member has to offer. Each individual brings his or her own strengths to the department, and these need to be recognized and nurtured. Stereotyping anyone based on gender, age, race, ethnicity, background or any other categorization is harmful to the department and will deter valuable new recruits from joining as well as lower the public's perception of the department as a whole.

## The recruitment marketing funnel

When implementing a recruitment campaign, it is important to understand the marketing funnel for volunteer recruitment. Finding and recruiting potential volunteers is a multi-step process that requires dedication, follow-up, and follow-through. The marketing funnel helps to identify and break down those steps. A department's recruitment tactics should aim to move potential recruits down this funnel to increase the likelihood of success. Here are five steps to increase recruit's potential for success:

- Step 1 – Interest:** It's difficult to expect potential volunteers to take action when they are unaware of the need. Educating the public and raising awareness that your department needs more volunteers is an important first step. Make it clear to the community that anyone who wants to serve can be a volunteer with your department.
- Step 2 – Invite:** Current recruits are almost always invited, and effective invites are typically personal. Finding ways to reach target audiences and providing them with a specific invitation to join the department is a key step in increasing your pool of potential volunteers.
- Step 3 – Sample:** Interested individuals often get involved after having a chance to sample what it's like to be a volunteer. Sampling activities such as ride-alongs, junior firefighter programs and open houses can help interested individuals connect with departments and build the confidence and excitement that is needed to truly consider the opportunity.
- Step 4 – Commit:** At this stage, a potential recruit will have an opportunity to decide if they are willing to commit to the department. Follow-up is key. Don't let interested individuals fall through the cracks due to a lack of follow-through. Let them know they are wanted, and that your department is a place they can belong.
- Step 5 – Train:** Once a new recruit has made the commitment, it is time to train them. Training is time intensive and can be overwhelming. Offer flexibility whenever possible. Assign mentors to help new recruits acclimate and learn. Recruits that feel a personal connection to the department through a mentor program and/or bonding with other recruits through shared training experience are more likely to remain an active member.

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Kathleen Serie

@Fox17Kathleen

A few photos from the hazmat situation at Merrol Hyde Magnet School in Hendersonville. 17 students and one teacher injured. Incident appears to have happened in a science lab. Fire Chief said he doesn't believe any of the injuries are critical. @FOXNashville



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## Volunteer firefighter recruitment tools/resources

The NVFC understands that many departments don't have the time or resources to create an entirely new recruitment campaign. That is where the Make Me A Firefighter campaign comes in. Departments can register for the free department portal to access resources and tools for every step of the recruitment funnel. This includes:

- Customizable outreach materials,
- PSAs,
- Invitation generator,
- Social media graphics,
- Event planning tips,
- Recruit tracker,
- Online training and
- More.

Materials are designed to reach all audiences and provide a diverse selection of messaging and imagery.

Departments can also add their volunteer opportunities to the national database so that potential volunteers can find and connect with them through the public website at [www.MakeMeAFirefighter.org](http://www.MakeMeAFirefighter.org). Since the program launched in December 2015, over 3,800 volunteer applications have been received by local departments through the national database.

### About the author

Kimberly Quiros is NVFC chief of communications.

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