

Read with caution

By Michael S. Williams

I am not an attorney, but that does not mean I don't appreciate a good disclaimer. If you are sensitive person, this may not be the article for you because there are few issues confronting the fire service today that bring up as much emotion and passion as volunteer firefighters. Without question, the lack of communication between career and volunteers firefighters over the decades has produced perceptions and attitudes based on emotion, not fact, or much rational thought.

Tradition and folklore runs rampant in the fire service. Presumably, all firefighters are acting in the best interest of the public, but this issue goes well beyond the needs of the public. While the fire or the public may not care if you are a seasonal, part-time, extra help, industrial, volunteer or a top step career firefighter, many of the people you work with do. The question I have is why?

Following incorporation in 2006, the Fire Services Training Institute commissioned the Interact Business Group to help us improve our business plan. It did not take long for us to realize that we did not have real answers to a lot of significant questions. No one else did either, so we bifurcated the project into a substantial survey from which we could then modify and improve our business plan. What ensued was a one and a half year journey throughout California to find some answers.

FSTI is designed to help the entire fire service, but we needed substantive information about the volunteer fire service so we focused on the issues confronting volunteers. What we learned was more less expected, but now we can prove it. Without question, the number one issue confronting the volunteer fire service is apathy. Time is also a growing problem for everyone. It could be argued that this applies to the career fire service as well.

It also became clear that on the whole volunteer agencies are not fully engaged in today's fire service. Many have no interest in engaging. Other organizations fall within the "self help" concept and are content to just protecting their immediate community. However, for those who are reaching out, there are significant challenges. Time, money, political and community support, leadership and management, as well as training rank high on the list of needs. Interestingly, these are the same needs of the career agencies. No difference here; however, the solutions are not the same.

We wanted to know, so we asked. The answers were frequently blunt and not particularly flattering for either side of the issue. One thing is clear, simple respect is missing in the fire service. Anyone who is putting their life at risk for someone else deserves some respect and appreciation for the commitment regardless of how they are compensated. The rewards of such commitments must go beyond the pay check and job perks. If you are in this for the money, you are in the wrong profession.

Some volunteer firefighters have a perception that they are the arch enemies of "the union." Among some groups, it is commonly accepted thinking that the rules, regulations, mandatory testing, physical requirements, training and certification requirements is the conspiracy of the career fire service attempting to push volunteers out. This is not only untrue; it supports the fact that these same miss-informed volunteer departments are profoundly out-of-touch with today's public safety world.

We interviewed career firefighters, captains, chief officers and chiefs from throughout the state, some of whom were union members. We asked them what the issues were regarding volunteers and why. No matter who we asked or where within the state the answers were the same; volunteers lack professionalism and training. Interestingly, no one ever commented on the dedication to the community or the service volunteers provide. Some

feel volunteers are a total liability on the fire ground, exposing incident commanders to liability for the actions, inactions, errors and omissions of people they have no control over. This is understandably unacceptable in the eyes of many. One can argue if this is true, but this is what many career firefighters think. Never mind that many of today's career firefighters came from the volunteer ranks. Either way, to be successful, volunteers must overcome these negative perceptions.


So what would make the relationships better we asked? Again, most said the same things; remedial training such as how to stage at a traffic collision, how to position for structure protection, how to pull a live line efficiently, how to give a proper size-up on the radio, how to correctly utilized the ICS system, radio communications protocols and physical agility were common examples. This was interesting information because none of these skills cost any money to learn how to do. Moreover, the vast majority of people we interviewed were all willing to help make it happen. But make no mistake; the career fire service has some very clear and well defined issues that must be addressed by the volunteer community if they are to obtain the respect they so dearly want.

We also talked to many people within the communities to learn what they thought of their volunteer departments, did they participate, and how did they support their efforts. The answers again were quite blunt and in some cases not very flattering. The public's perception is important because it is the community that supports the local volunteer fire department and is the same group departments hope to recruit from.

If your department is one of the volunteer departments that does not have enough money for fuel, you need to look directly at yourselves and consider how you look to your community. I urge you to go find out. There are reasons you don't have money and your community will be happy to tell you. The real question is how willing is the volunteer fire service to listen?

The career fire service clearly defined issues that are problematic that the public sees as inefficiency, poor training and a lack of management. This translates into poor community support, lack of volunteers, poor compliance to prevention efforts and a general hostile attitude.

Clearly, not all volunteer departments are the same but they all want and deserve respect. They vary from small rural organizations with limited resources to well functioning operations with strong community support. The successful departments have a structured training program, strong policies and procedures in place and strong management. In fact, some of the better departments in California are volunteer and combination organizations.

The issues confronting the volunteer fire service are complex and profoundly challenging. There are no simple answers. Volunteer firefighters represent over 75% of the nation's fire service and more than 45% of California's. Like it or not, they are not going to go away. In many cases they are the first line of defense. Are you ready to help improve the volunteer fire service, or just complain about it? 

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