



**FIRE SERVICES TRAINING INSTITUTE
&
CALIFORNIA STATE FIREFIGHTERS ASSOCIATION
Volunteer Committee**

**VOLUNTEER FIRE SERVICE OVERVIEW
April 18, 2013**

Ronny J. Coleman
CSFA Volunteer Committee Chair

Michael S. Williams
President-Executive Director
Fire Services Training Institute

The purpose of this document is to provide you a coordinated response to your recent questions regarding the volunteer fire service. We have integrated our individual responses together so this document actually reflects two levels of input.

To address any one question encroaches on another so we have incorporated the answers to the following questions to provide a better understanding the entire picture of volunteer firefighters.

- Are volunteer firefighters certified?
- What does it mean to be certified?
- How does this differ from professional firefighters?
- Are there different levels of volunteer firefighters?
- What does it take to get to the next level?
- How many different types of volunteer firefighters are there?
- What are the main differences between a professional firefighter and a volunteer?

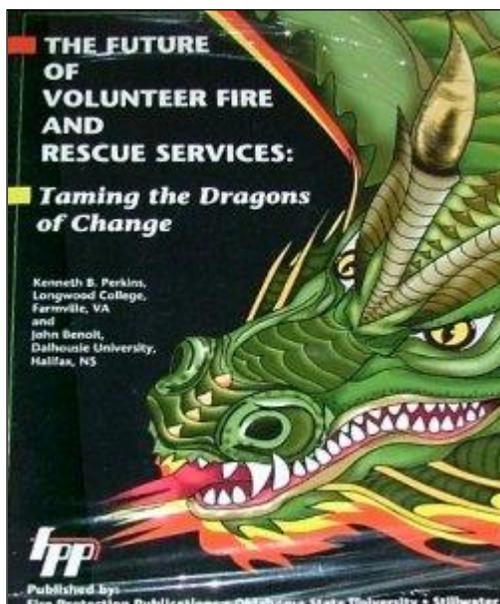
Fire departments are commonly classified according to the following criterion:

- Totally volunteer (everyone is unpaid)
- Mostly volunteer “combination” (some people are paid)
- Mostly paid “combination” (some people are not paid)
- Totally Paid (everyone is paid)

First, we need to distinguish between a professional and paid firefighter. Volunteer firefighters consider themselves to be “professional” but unpaid, or not compensated. The contemporary term considers the two groups as “career” or “volunteer”. The distinction is not about skill level, but rather the form of compensation.

There is a wide spectrum of paid and uncompensated (volunteer) firefighters that run the gamut from no compensation at all (a true volunteer), part paid (a reservist or “Paid Call”) or a fully compensated person (a career firefighter). We would also characterize a status in this system of a “part-time,” seasonal, or “interim” type firefighter that receives an hourly wage, but is not a career employee.

Additionally, not all firefighters are providing the same level of services. While municipal departments are generally tasked with taking on whatever comes their way, wildland fire departments are not trained to engage interior structure, fires large hazardous material incidents or emergency medical services. Private departments may only be trained to the level necessary to protect specific threats to life and property such as movie studios, amusement parks and oil facilities.



A good publication on the differences of fire organizations is Perkins, *The Future of Volunteer Fire and Rescue Services: Taming the Dragons of Change*, (1996), Fire Protection Publications, Oklahoma State University. The text provides many examples of fire departments at a various stages of development because of topography, geography, system of governance, financial support as well as community demographics and expectations of service.

Today, there are reportedly around 33,000 organizations that call themselves a “fire department.” To be a “fire department” you must be legally established. There are many different governance models. For example, a department can be a “not-for-profit” institution, a district (of which there are numerous types, a county agency, a federal agency), a municipal agency, or a private fire department to name just a few.

There are three national organizations that represent the interests of the fire service. In general, career firefighters are best represented by the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF). This organization represents career firefighter’s financial interest. Some states have union like representation of the IAFF/IAFC organizational structure at state and local levels.

The second organization representing the complexity of how agencies are organized and managed is the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). The Volunteer Combination Officers Section (VCOS) is a sub-group of the IAFC.



The third organization is the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC). They essentially represent totally volunteer departments but work closely with the IAFC and other organizations supporting the fire service such as the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA).

Department Types

A fire department type is based on the NFPA definition (Career: 100 percent of a department's firefighters are career; Mostly Career: 51-99 percent of a department's firefighters are career; Mostly Volunteer: 1-50 percent of a department's firefighters are career; Volunteer: 100 percent of a department's firefighters are volunteers). Of the fire departments registered with the census,

- 8 percent are career
- 5 percent are mostly career
- 16 percent are mostly volunteer
- 71 percent are volunteer

The numbers of firefighters by compensation classification are used to determine the department type. It is important to note that there were at least 123 fire departments that did not provide the number of personnel so they were excluded from this analysis.

Personnel

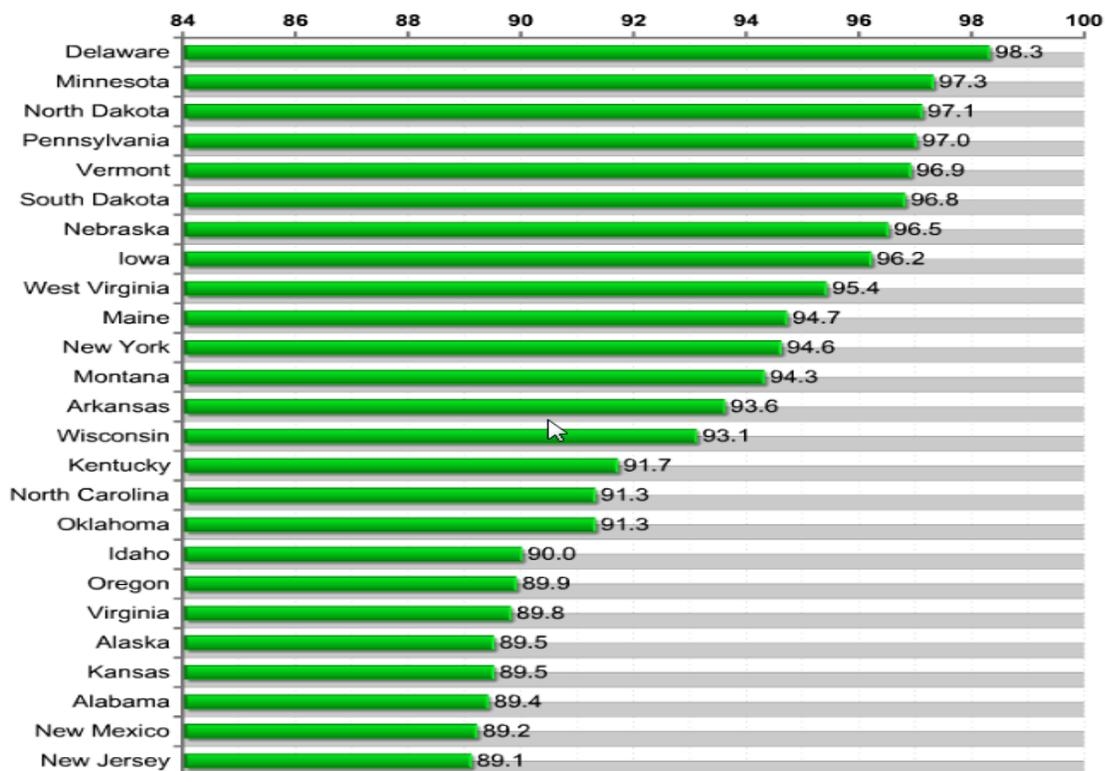
Fire departments registered with our own fire department census indicates that the American fire service is currently staffed by approximately 1,190,000 personnel. This figure includes career, volunteer, and paid per call firefighters as well as civilian staff and non-firefighting personnel. From this group, there are a total of 1,044,300 active career, volunteer, and paid per call firefighters representing nearly 88 percent of the registered departments' personnel.

For counties in Maryland, Nevada, and Virginia the county level fire department registered with the census as did the individual fire departments affiliated with that county. The computation of the number of personnel includes only the counts reported by the county level.

Department Type by State

The following figure shows the top 25 states by the percentage of volunteer and career fire departments. As of January 2012, California fire departments consist of 28.7 percent volunteer, 29.9 percent mostly volunteer, 16.3 percent mostly career and 25.1 percent career.

Hawaii is the only state that does not have volunteer firefighters.



Fire departments that did not provide the number of personnel were excluded from this analysis.

National Volunteer Fire Council

Today, volunteers comprise 69% of firefighters in the United States. Of the total estimated 1,100,450 firefighters across the country, 756,450 are volunteers.

The communities served by volunteer firefighters are dependent on them as their first line of defense for many types of emergencies. Volunteer firefighters are summoned to a wide array of emergencies across the country every day including fires, emergency medical incidents, terrorist events, natural disasters, hazardous materials incidents, water rescue emergencies, high-angle and confined space emergencies, and other general public service calls.

Because the public relies on the volunteer emergency services to be their first line of defense in these emergencies, dedicated volunteers spend an enormous amount of time training to prepare for these emergencies.

The fire services provided by volunteer firefighters save communities across the country an estimated \$129.7 billion per year. However, times are changing with the number of volunteer firefighters in the United States declining by over 18% since 1984. There are significant factors contributing to the decline including increased time demands, more rigorous training requirements, and the proliferation of two-income families whose members do not have time to volunteer.

The greatest areas of concern are the increased time demands and increased volume of emergency calls, coupled with a profound increase in mandated training necessary to comply with ever expanding training standards.

While the number of volunteer firefighters is declining, the average age of volunteer firefighters is increasing. Departments are finding it difficult to attract younger members due to a range of reasons, including increased demands on people’s time, longer commuting distances to and from work, the prevalence of two-income households, and increased training requirements.

Adding to the challenges confronting volunteer fire departments most fire departments across the country have experienced a steady increase in calls over the past two decades. This is a significant source of increased time demands placed upon volunteer firefighters. The increase in calls, coupled with the decline in the number of volunteer firefighters, means that fire departments have to do more with less. Most of the increase is attributed to a sharp increase in the number of emergency medical calls and false alarms.

Interestingly, the US Fire Administration reports that the number of fires has actually declined over the last decade. However, the damage and loss of life, including firefighters has increased over the same period.

Without question, small and mid-sized communities still rely heavily on volunteer firefighters. Small communities (populations under 10,000) across the U.S. are typically protected by all volunteer departments. In some cases, however, these communities have hired a few paid firefighters to assist.

Mid-sized communities (populations above 10,000) are typically served by combination volunteer and paid departments. Large communities (populations over 100,000) are most often protected by combination volunteer and paid departments that consist of primarily paid staff.

Career and Volunteer Firefighters in the United States by Population Protected, 2011

Population Protected	Career	Volunteer	Total
1,000,000 or more	40,800	600	41,400
500,000 to 999,999	36,050	6,900	42,950
250,000 to 499,999	26,900	2,950	29,850
100,000 to 249,999	45,000	2,300	56,300
50,000 to 99,999	43,900	7,700	51,600
25,000 to 49,999	48,350	24,350	72,700
10,000 to 24,999	54,050	74,600	128,650
5,000 to 9,999	20,750	110,600	131,350
2,500 to 4,999	8,350	161,950	170,300
Under 2,500	10,900	756,400	767,300
	344,050	756,400	1,492,400

Regardless of compensation, firefighters and emergency medical technicians (EMT's) across the country meet national and/or state training standards. Each state adopts its own training requirements that may apply to volunteer firefighters. Many states require that volunteers meet the National Fire Protection Association's Standard 1001 - Firefighter Professional Qualifications. The NFPA standard establishes a very rigorous course of classroom and practical evolutions for basic training.

Wildland departments frequently follow the National Wildfire Coordinating Group 310-1 standard for wildland firefighting, supervision, command and support functions. These are the federal standards used by federal wildland agencies and adopted by most states and required for anyone, including contractors on federal mutual-aid. California has adopted its own version of the standard called California Incident Command Certification System.

The NVFC recommends all volunteer fire departments set a goal that personnel attain, at a minimum, a level of training that meets or exceeds the NFPA 1001 Firefighter Standard or an equivalent state standard in order to engage in fire suppression. Likewise, volunteer emergency medical responders are trained to the national training criteria established by the U.S. Department of Transportation and other standard setting bodies.

In addition all firefighters are required to train in to the National Incident Management System (NIMS) or within California, the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS).

There is no question that volunteers invest a large amount of time serving their communities. While there is no national average of the amount of time a volunteer firefighter gives to his or her community volunteering in the fire and EMS service firefighting is one of the most demanding volunteer activities today.

A volunteer's time commitments include operational responses, often at a moment's notice, training, fundraising, vehicle and station maintenance, and various administrative duties.

The following questions are also complicated and can only be understood in the context of the previous answers.

- What kind of training do volunteer firefighters go through?
- How do they differ from career firefighter training?
- Does training differ from state to state?
- Are volunteers certified?
- What does it mean to be certified?
- Are there different types of certification?
- How does this differ from career firefighters?

There is a variety of choices that are utilized by fire agencies to achieve different levels of qualifications and certifications generally based on the "professional development documents" published by the National Fire Protection Association including NFPA 1001, NFPA 1002 and NFPA 1031.

However, each state adopts their own requirements and they can differ significantly. Some states have minimum requirements adopted by state agencies. In other states there are no specific requirements unless adopted by the local governing body. California has an extremely elaborate training matrix that includes many career paths such as suppression, prevention, administration and fire marshal.

There are also other regulatory requirements that all fire agencies must abide. For example, fire departments are required to comply with OSHA requirements relating to fire ground operations. Another is the Insurance Services Office fire protection training system (ISO) training suggestions oriented towards property protection. However, there is no national enforcement process to assure all fire departments are in compliance.

The National Professional Qualifications Board and the International Fire Services Accreditation Congress are also involved in the certification process. They are “third-party” bodies that evaluate what level of training and education has been adopted by the state. In short, they do not mandate anything but direct their attention on what the states have adopted for themselves. They assure quality control, but do not pursue judgment on the desirability of any standard.

The fire service into two groups: The first is the urban fire service, with an overlap with the suburban fire service and the suburban fire service with an overlap of the rural fire service.

This concept can also be reflected in the use (or non-use) of two other standard setting documents - NFPA 1710 and NFPA 1720. These standards relate to deployment and response criterion. On the surface they may not appear to relate to staffing, but they do.

Fire protection is based upon high population density with a high demand for services. That is, short response times with the appropriate amount of equipment and staffing. Consequently NFPA 1710 is the professional standard.

NFPA 1720 addresses the rural requirements for fire protection. This is less demanding, both in staffing and equipment. It is a standard that most volunteer departments strive to comply with even though it is not a mandate to do so.

Departments must develop policies and practices to that will best meet the needs of the community. This is encapsulated by a concept called “Standard of Cover.” The “Declaration of Deployment” can be used when the department is attempting to meet NFPA 1710 or 1720.

Some departments may have established polices to meet both standards. For municipal areas within a county they apply NFPA 1710. In the rural areas they apply NFPA 1720. This is particularly true in counties that have booth full-time career firefighters and volunteer firefighters in the outlining communities.

In spite of the lack of standardization or uniformity in levels of service there is a general recognition that there are “minimum” requirements from every firefighter before you allow them to respond to an emergency and engage in physical fire combat. The best title for this level is

“Firefighter I”. This is a generic title that is interpreted differently in various parts of the country. Essentially it is the absolute minimum requirement for a firefighter.

There are three primary textbooks that reflect the body of knowledge for basic “all risk” firefighting skills:

- International Fire Services Training Association, *Essentials of Firefighting, 6th Edition*, (2012), Fire Protection Publications, Oklahoma State University
- International Association of Fire Chiefs and National Fire Protection Association, *Fundamentals of Fire Fighter Skills, 2 Edition*, (2009), Jones and Bartlett Publishers
- Delmar Cengage Learning, *Firefighter’s Handbook, Firefighter 1 & Firefighter II*, (2009) Delmar

These texts are considered fundamental to keeping entry level firefighters safe. However, we do not wish to indicate that they are universally available. This is why FSTI has taken on the mission of helping the volunteer fire service meet a uniformed minimum standard based on their own defined needs.

To the contrary, in our capacity of reviewing volunteer training programs, we have observed a spectrum for the reduction to the sublime. Most volunteer fire departments have no training schedule, no adopted policies and procedures and no measurement of performance. However, there are completely volunteer departments that uphold very high standards.

Volunteer fire departments that have signed the Farmers sponsored FSTI/CSFA Memorandum of Understanding for the Volunteer Strategic Training Program are terrific examples of volunteer departments working to improve training, safety, standards and practices and service to the public.

MOU participating agencies include:

- El Dorado County Fire Chief’s Association
- Bishop Fire Department (Inyo County)
- Herlong Fire Protection District (Lassen County)
- American Canyon Fire Protection District (Napa County)
- Plumas County Fire Chief’s Association (Plumas County)
- Herald Fire Protection District (Sacramento County)
- San Marcos Pass Volunteer Fire Department (Santa Barbara County)
- Hollister Ranch Fire Company (Santa Barbara County)
- Siskiyou County Fire Chief’s Association (Siskiyou County)
- Solano County Fire Chief’s Association (Solano County)
- County of Sonoma Fire & Emergency Services Department (Sonoma County)
- Trinity County Fire Chief’s Association (Trinity County)
- Dinuba Fire Department (Tulare County)

To accomplish basic entry firefighting training is not the same as certification. Certification is totally within the control of state and national agencies and organizations that have adopted testing and measurement protocols. The term “certified” means that a third party has reviewed the training and its outcomes in accordance with some adopted standards.

The next consideration is the number and scope of other certifications that a volunteer department can adopt including:

- Emergency Medical Service- first aid, Emergency Medical Technician and Paramedic
- Department practices and procedures
- Basic and advanced firefighter, company officer and chief officer certifications
- Driver operator
- Fire prevention, investigation and public education
- Public information officer/external affairs officer

Continued education is also a challenge confronting most agencies. Most career firefighters are not required to have it. In most fire training systems once you are “certified” you possess it for life. However, this is changing as we speak as the public expectations of highly paid firefighters grow. The truth be known, many volunteers are better educated than their career counterparts.

One significant exception is with wildland firefighting certifications. Wildland firefighters are held to a high standard of training, testing and certification. Many of these certifications do require renewal and proof of ongoing competencies.

Extended training and certification within the fire service started with EMS and evolved into hazardous materials arena and is emerging under other areas right now. The idea of “life-long” and “long-distance” learning is concepts that are being explored as part of ongoing CEU discussions throughout the country. Currently, there is no distinction between paid or volunteer personnel level of qualifications. If someone earns it, they keep it.

Generally, volunteer fire departments are staffed with whoever they can get to participate. There are volunteer fire departments with no one under the age of 60. There is one California department consists of members from only one family. There is an all female volunteer department. There are other departments that are staffed by females during the day and men at night. Simply stated, there is no standardized volunteer firefighter except for the passion to help their community.

Well organized departments learn how to use community risk reduction processes to identify stakeholders. These stakeholders are frequently identified as potential volunteers. Additionally, there is a growing need for volunteer departments to utilize “non-traditional” volunteers to help with administrative functions and to provide needed support services.

With respect to the term “commitment of a volunteer” one needs to recognize several factors. First, there must be a basic commitment to training and education that takes up about 10 to 12 hours per month. Other department activities can consume another 8 to 10 hours a month. This of course is in addition to handling emergency calls for service.

If a volunteer firefighter is a company or chief officer there is additional time required for paperwork and administration. This can add an additional 4 to 6 hours per week. Clearly, with a few meetings a month and 3 or 4 calls per week and a volunteer have a very full plate.

Both FSTI and CSFA have used the NVFC “value” of a volunteer formula. This calculates that a single volunteer being recognized as a value of \$25.00 per hour can contribute up to \$1,000 per month. That is \$12,000 per year. This is, of course, an in-kind contribution because they are not paid. In existing cases of extensive training on high demand the value to the community.

There is no such thing as a “free fire department”. There are two facts that keep the volunteer fire service alive - contribution and commitment. If you lose both, the department will fail.

The question regarding the differences between states is huge. The following factors are factors relating to the significant differences between fire departments. These three factors include:

- History of the organization
- Leadership quality
- Quantity and cultural expectations of the community.

We can say without any reservation that these three factors are directly involved in the solvency and sustainability of any volunteer fire department. As you might expect, the variance in all of these factors ranges from non-existent to profoundly significant.

Do volunteers ever get paid?

The issue of volunteer compensation is complex. California considers volunteer firefighters as employees as it relates to mandatory workers compensation coverage. The Firefighter Bill of Rights also applies except for volunteers of non-profit corporations and tribal departments.

If a firefighter is a true “volunteer”, they get paid nothing. However, other “volunteers” receive compensation or “stipends.” Other departments provide volunteers a residence or may have 24 hour duty assignments that may including housing. This may include some form of compensation in the event of a call but not for stand-by time. Yet other volunteer departments pay by call. In some cases this is a flat rate, in others it is by the hour.

Firefighters who respond on various forms of mutual-aid may also be compensated by the hour or a flat rate depending on individual department policies. These arrangements may be governed by state mutual-aid reimbursement policies.

Another significant issue regarding compensation involves retirement and health benefits. There are also grant supported incentive programs such as the Department of Homeland Security-Federal Emergency Management Agency Staffing for Adequate Fire & Emergency Response grants (SAFER).

What type of document does a volunteer have to prove that they are a volunteer? This such sort of requires a question to whom do they have to prove they are a volunteer?

In California, most fire departments register with FIREScope indicating the number of members, qualifications, type of equipment. The primary purpose of the registration is to support the California Mutual Aid System.

California fire companies are generally non-profit corporations. These organizations must register each year with the Operational Area Coordinator for the county in which they operate. This certificate of organization must include the officers, firefighters and support staff.

Official documentation that identifies a volunteer fire department could include all of the following:

- Department identification card
- Uniform and/or wallet badge
- Dress and/or utility uniform
- Personal vehicle identification
- CICCIS and/or NWCG certification and qualification “Red Card”
- Authorized Emergency Vehicle Permit
- Local Operational Area identification

Not all departments use all methods. Items 1 through 3 are the most common.

Do they have any statistic that would show “hobby” volunteer firefighters?

As far as we are concerned there is no such thing as a “hobby” firefighter. However, there are active and inactive members of many volunteer fire departments. The problem some departments experience is making that distinction on a daily basis. Indeed, there are cases of those who hang on but do not participate. However, as the costs associated with volunteers continue to rise; this is quickly becoming a self-correcting problem.

If members are on a department roster but do not attend training or fail to respond to a reasonable number of calls, they will eventually need to be removed. In limited cases there are some who might be considered “knife and fork” firefighters who only show up for food or drink. Needless to say, in the contemporary volunteer fire service, there isn’t much room for that type of limited and self-serving participation.

Over the years it has become increasingly difficult to acquire “lifetime” volunteers. Recruitment and retention is a serious issue confronting the national volunteer fire service. The two primary issues relating to recruitment and retention include:

- The average tenure for volunteers has shrunk from 20 years to around 5 years.
- More and more young people join volunteer departments to gain experience so they become a career firefighter

The national program Fire Corps focused on developing non-fire suppression support members is growing but certainly not considered a hobby. Anyone who poses or misrepresents him/herself as a firefighter is committing a crime. Firefighters take great pride in their work. They do not appreciate posers, imposters and groupies. Moreover, the training demands alone drive away most anyone who is just looking to “be cool.”

Conclusion

The following two publications are outstanding resources for further information:

- *A Call For Action, The Blue Ribbon Report, Preserving and Improving the Future of the Volunteer Fire Service*, (March 2004) Volunteer & Combination Officers Section, International Fire Chief’s Association
- *White Paper on Volunteer Firefighter Training*, (January 2010), National Volunteer Fire Council

We hope that we have adequately addressed your questions. However, if you should have any questions or concerns, you may reach Ronny J. Coleman at 916-689-5363 or Michael S. Williams at 805-969-9829.

*The CSFA Volunteer Committee includes members from the following volunteer fire departments and organizations:

- Jenny Lind Fire Department (Calaveras County)
- Tulare County Fire Department (Tulare County)
- Grenada Fire Protection District (Siskiyou County)
- Spring Valley Volunteer Fire Department (Santa Clara County)
- Cloverdale Fire Protection District (Sonoma County)
- Healdsburg Fire Department (Sonoma County)
- Sonoma County Department of Emergency Services (Sonoma County)
- Seiad Valley Fire Department (Siskiyou County)
- Shasta County Fire Protection District (Shasta County)
- Williams Fire Protection Agency (Colusa County)
- Plumas-Eureka Fire & Rescue (Plumas County)
- Quincy Fire Protection District (Plumas County)
- California State Fire Marshall’s Office – State Fire Training Fire Services Training Institute