

THE DRAGONS OF CHANGE – VOLUNTEERS IN EMERGENCY SERVICES

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“I met with several kinds of associations in America of which I confess I had no previous notion; and I have often admired the extreme skill with which the inhabitants of the United States succeed in proposing a common object for the exertions of a great many men and in inducing them voluntarily to pursue it.”

- Alexis de Tocqueville

“Let’s face it: Volunteerism isn’t what it used to be” reports Benjamin Peetz in his February 2014 *fireengineering.com* article “Battling the Brain Drain.” This is an understatement that is well known to volunteers and managers of volunteers alike.

The days of donating time to a local organization to help out has been replaced with what amounts to a second job that includes all of the obligations of full-time employment but without pay or benefits.

There is no area where the impact of declining volunteerism is more threatened than emergency services and support organizations including volunteer fire departments and emergency medical services.

The 2012 National Fire Protection Association statistics show that of the 1.1 million firefighters and emergency medical services first responders 69 percent are volunteers. This is down from previous levels of over 75 percent.

The apparent trend of declining volunteer first responders is alarming. Yet, the question begs to be asked: Should the United States be so dependent on almost two thirds of its public safety emergency services being volunteers? Just as important from the volunteer’s perspective, when is a volunteer an asset and performing valued community service and when is the volunteer being taken advantage of?

These are difficult and challenging questions that no doubt have different answers depending who is asking the question.

In addition to the decline of volunteers, the demands upon public safety organizations in rural America are growing. One former California State Fire Marshal refers to this group as “Equity Emigrants” – people who move from the metropolitan areas to the rural communities expecting the same level of public services. This growing population also seems to be averse to paying for the services they demand.

These challenges are not new. One of the definitive books on the evolving volunteer fire service is Kenneth Perkins and John Benoit’s 1996 book *The Future of Volunteer Fire and Rescue Services: Taming the Dragons of Change*.

Today's trends were well in play over twenty years ago. The book points out early in the introduction, "We have already noted that economic factors have not created bountiful funding for expanded government services in most areas of the U.S. and Canada. 'Do more with less,' seems to be the order of the day."

Returning to Benjamin Peetz's article, he addresses three primary issues confronting volunteer fire departments. Truth be known, these challenges confront most every volunteer organization in America today.

"First, the increased training and time requirements needed to be volunteer firefighter strains community residents who likely already have limited schedules."

Peetz continues, "Today's citizens expect the same level of emergency services no matter where they reside...and third, in recent years, fire personnel have been asked to provide more diversified services to the communities they protect."

To be sure, this is not a unique problem for volunteer organizations. Public and private first responders are also confronted by increasing training demands, new certification requirements and performance expectations. Cost and time demands are becoming crippling for many small organizations.

Complaining is of little value. How to address the growing challenges is the issue at hand and Peetz provides some potential solutions.

"Value and appreciate what you have." It is important to support the efforts of volunteers. It is equally important to not abuse them. The same can be said of career organizations.

"Encourage teamwork and participation." With less time and more demands it is more important than ever to support teamwork that includes community support to make sure that help will be there when you need it.

"Be problem solvers, not problem finders." Separating issues of importance from the noise can be difficult. Nonetheless, solutions must be found to overcome the growing challenges confronting volunteer organizations. Hiring volunteers who are solution based thinkers are significant assets for any organization. No one needs more whiners.

"Diversification of members." Time is limited for most people today. Reaching out to a more diverse group can help populate a shrinking organization's membership roster.

"Recruitment." As I have said in the past, you hire your problems. However, you can also hire your solutions. Think long term, sustainability, future growth and anticipated demands as well as how to provide continuity of service.

“Tactical strategies.” Reduced staffing and budgets is hampering how business gets done during an emergency. Changing or modifying tactical strategies that require less staffing, equipment and training requirements may be an effective solution. Perhaps trying to be all things to all people is just not possible anymore.

“Lower a community’s expectation for response.” This can be a sensitive issue but must be addressed. One gets what one pays for. Expecting a metropolitan level of service from a volunteer organization is unreasonable and even under the best of intentions frequently difficult to achieve.

“Use other resources.” Mutual aid is nothing new in public safety. Fire departments rely on it almost daily through Automatic Aid Agreements. Perhaps expanding the use of other organizations assets and resources can help eliminate internal challenges confronting many volunteer and career organizations alike.

Regionalization and consolidation are considerations that more and more public safety organizations are considering. No one can stand alone and do it all anymore - those days are long gone. The collaborative use of resources is essential for survival as well as service delivery.

“Encourage changes outside your department’s control.” Despite the best efforts of volunteer organizations the reality is that they must accept change. Those organizations that can focus on what is important and adapt to change will succeed. Those who insist on holding on to business as usual will become distant memories of what once was.

Within Santa Barbara many of the volunteer challenges are being addressed aggressively by the Santa Barbara County Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters. Community based organizations and first responder organizations have come together to overcome obstacles and challenges. It is this teaming of resources that can help ensure the sustainability of our valued volunteer organizations.

Perkins and Benoit perhaps say it best, “The complex dynamic environment of the current volunteer emergency organization is such a sharp contrast to that of a generation ago that we should not be surprised that successful adaptation will be necessary. Beyond the generalizations listed earlier, the fact that this book cannot give simple rules demonstrates the turbulence of that environment. Nevertheless, when an environment is complex and dynamic, an appreciation of complexity can still lend itself to reasonable organizational adaptation...if skill, patience, luck, and motivation are present.”

Like it or not, change is here.