

A CALL FOR ACTION

THE BLUE RIBBON REPORT

PRESERVING AND IMPROVING  
THE FUTURE OF THE VOLUNTEER FIRE SERVICE



A CALL FOR ACTION  
THE BLUE RIBBON REPORT  
PRESERVING AND IMPROVING  
THE FUTURE OF THE VOLUNTEER FIRE SERVICE



M A R C H 2 0 0 4

# A CALL FOR ACTION

## THE BLUE RIBBON REPORT

### PRESERVING AND IMPROVING THE FUTURE OF THE VOLUNTEER FIRE SERVICE

#### **AUTHORS**

*Chief Gary Scott*  
VCOS Legislative Chair  
Campbell County Fire Department  
Gillette, Wyo.

*Chief John M. Buckman III, CFO*  
IAFC President 2001–2002  
German Township Volunteer Fire Department  
Evansville, Ind.

#### **CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS**

*Fire Marshal Robert Bettenhausen, CFO*  
VCOS Executive Committee  
Village of Tinley Park Volunteer Fire Department  
Tinley Park, Ill.

*Chief Larry Curl, Ret.*  
VCOS Chair  
Wayne Township Fire Department  
Indianapolis, Ind.

*Chief Richard Gasaway, EFO, CFO*  
Roseville Fire Department  
Roseville, Minn.

*Chief John Leahy*  
VCOS Executive Committee  
Former President ISFSI  
Pinellas Suncoast Fire and Rescue  
Indian Rocks Beach, Fla.

*Chief Fred Windisch EFO, CFO*  
Former VCOS Chair  
IAFC Director  
Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Department  
Houston, Texas

## Executive Summary

America's volunteer fire service has faithfully served our nation for more than 300 years. Volunteer firefighters serve their communities with dedication and enthusiasm. Volunteer fire departments save local communities approximately \$37 billion<sup>1</sup> per year—money that can be reinvested to improve local infrastructure, social programs and minimize the local tax burden.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, America has learned that local emergency responders are the community's FIRST line of response, regardless of the event. Community protection and well-being depends on the experience, expertise and tenure of local emergency service providers. The volunteer fire service faces significant challenges in overcoming a basic lack of resources—both financial and in human capital. Only by aggressively confronting both of these issues will we create the necessary atmosphere of stability that will allow volunteer fire and rescue departments to meet the new expectations and challenges of the 21st century.

While volunteer firefighters and emergency workers provide a tremendous contribution to our country, they are often under-funded and ill-equipped. Lacking cohesive national leadership, efforts to correct these problems are often fragmented and ineffective. Additionally, volunteer fire departments have a difficult time retaining volunteers. Ultimately, much of the blame for these problems can be attributed to poor leadership. Unfortunately, there are few programs at the local, state or national level to assist fire chiefs and volunteer managers in acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary for effective management.

Support from the local, state and federal levels is necessary to ensure that the volunteer fire service continues to be a full partner with all facets of homeland security response and effectively functions as the first line of defense within local communities. The International Association of Fire Chiefs believes that by enacting the specific recommendations outlined in the text of this report, we can enhance the role of the volunteer fire service in this critical mission. The most important of those recommendations are outlined below.

At the **local** level, we must:

1. Emphasize the importance of local support for this basic community service
2. Provide appropriate levels of funding for necessary safety gear and training
3. Engage in strategic planning that emphasizes volunteer retention
4. Use mutual aid to offset service and technical deficiencies
5. Use uniform incident management systems
6. Use performance measurement to measure and analyze response times, fire fighting effectiveness, training and retention rates of volunteer fire departments.

At the **state** level, we must:

1. Emphasize the importance of the state government in developing and promoting disaster planning
2. Certify fire and emergency medical services (EMS) personnel to comply with basic training standards
3. Promote regional service delivery where local capabilities and technical expertise are weak
4. Provide statewide volunteer benefit programs to protect both the firefighter and employer from the risks associated with volunteer fire service.

Finally, at the **federal** level, we must:

1. Work to produce a national climate encouraging individuals to volunteer within their local communities



# A CALL FOR ACTION

## THE BLUE RIBBON REPORT

### PRESERVING AND IMPROVING THE FUTURE OF THE VOLUNTEER FIRE SERVICE

#### **Introduction**

America's volunteer fire service is deeply woven into the basic fabric of our nation. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), there are close to 800,000 volunteer firefighters across the United States, and the majority of this nation's geographical area is protected by volunteer fire departments. Of all the fire departments in America, 73 percent are all-volunteer departments.

Firefighters, both career and volunteer, are extremely dedicated to public service. This trait explains why firefighters often take tremendous risks to save the lives of the citizens they are sworn to protect. Volunteer firefighters, because of their diverse educational and employment backgrounds, bring tremendous depth and diversity to any emergency scene based upon their regular jobs and expertise in their communities. In many cases, volunteer firefighters invest an enormous amount of time and dedication to fire fighting, moving the fire service forward through improved fire fighting techniques and technological innovations.

Volunteer firefighters provide an enormous economic benefit to our nation. It is estimated that volunteer firefighters save the American taxpayers \$37 billion<sup>i</sup> per year that can be reinvested in each community's infrastructure, social and other community programs, and/or a general reduction in local taxes.

Unfortunately, despite their tremendous contribution to American society, volunteer fire departments are often underfunded and ill-equipped, putting many in a position where they must raise their own operational funds to provide apparatus and safety equipment. In addition, the number of volunteer firefighters is declining across the country. During the mid-1980s, it was estimated the volunteer fire service was more than 880,000 members strong, but those numbers have dropped to less than 800,000 in recent years.<sup>ii</sup> Finally, the volunteer and combination fire service continues to be unorganized across the nation with no clear leadership representing the volunteers. It has no unified position on national legislative initiatives or research issues affecting their services. Volunteer departments and their managers will continue to struggle until local, state and national attention directs a concentrated effort to assist in preserving and improving the management of this long-standing American tradition.

The perception of the role of emergency services changed with the events of Sept. 11, 2001. These attacks against America changed the expectations of local emergency providers who are now clearly each community's first line of response, regardless of the event. As the country and local communities re-evaluate their abilities to respond and

handle new threats, such as weapons of mass destruction and biological incidents, the stability of the American volunteer fire service has become a significant issue. Community protection and well-being depends on the experience, expertise and longevity of local emergency service providers. It becomes imperative that local communities understand that the homeland is secure when the hometown is secure. Local communities and the leadership of those communities will look toward the volunteer fire department for answers to questions of terrorist threats and threat assessment. Enhancing the overall community safety is a new responsibility for local responders. Significant improvements in the volunteer fire service will be necessary to improve retention and create an atmosphere of stability, allowing local, volunteer fire departments to meet the new expectations and challenges of the 21st century.

### **Volunteer and Combination Fire Departments Across the United States: Examples of Value and Effectiveness**

*Campbell County, Wyo.*, is governed by a Joint Powers Fire Board and covers the City of Gillette, the Town of Wright and all of Campbell County, with a total response area of 5,000 square miles and a population of approximately 40,000 residents. One third of the nation's coal supply is mined in this community. The combination fire department is composed of 19 career positions and 175 volunteers. The volunteer firefighters of Campbell County have saved local taxpayers more than \$21 million in wages alone since 1996. The department's savings are calculated on the reduced need for full-time career staffing and the actual dollar savings for 226,243 donated hours<sup>v</sup> during the study period. When assigned a value of \$16.05 per volunteer hour<sup>w</sup> (used as a national mean), the volunteer contribution of \$3,413,244 annually becomes a significant savings for the community.

The Campbell County Fire Department provides all of the normal city emergency services—fire suppression, emergency medical response, rescue, etc. It enjoys an above average working relationship with law enforcement and provides extensive industrial and wildland fire response expertise. The department offers full administrative services including building inspections, plan reviews, investigations, public education, vehicle and building maintenance, and an aggressive industrial fire training and hazardous materials training program to community businesses. All career employees provide both shift coverage and administrative duties. Tactical operations are considered fully integrated and all personnel, regardless of career or volunteer status, meet the same training and experience standards for the rank that they hold. The department retention rate for volunteers is 17 years per person.

The department is family based with yearly activities that support and promote a strong family unit. The department sponsors the Campbell County Cadet Program, which functions as a worksite for juvenile offenders and was chosen as the number one Junior Emergency Services program in the United States in 2000 by Volunteer Fire Insurance Services. Volunteers are active in a number of community events throughout the calendar year, including a community pancake feed serving more than 2,000 people on the Fourth of July and a number of fundraising projects to assist less fortunate families in the community.

The midwest village of *Tinley Park, Ill.* is protected by a 120-member paid on-call volunteer fire department. All firefighters are certified and tested under the state of Illinois certification program. Tinley Park provides coverage for hazardous materials incidents, and features a Combined Area Rescue Team (CART) that provides special services for building collapse and major structural incidents, as well as a Rapid Intervention Team (RIT). All department members are trained to the Hazardous Materials Awareness level, and members of CART and RIT are certified by the state of Illinois.

The department also employs two personnel specializing in public education, inspections, preplanning, and investigations, supporting the overall safety mission of the department and relieving these administrative duties from the volunteers. It is the largest volunteer fire department of this type in the state of Illinois, protecting a population of 56,000 residents and an estimated 100,000 daytime work population within the 17-square mile area. Full city services are provided from four fully equipped fire stations, and personnel are trained at a state-of-the-art training center. Tinley Park has an Insurance Services Office (ISO) rating of Class 3. The department averages 800 calls per year with a

turnout rate of 30 firefighters per call.<sup>vi</sup> The department also assists the local EMS provider with incidents requiring extrication or reported entrapment. All fire department motorized equipment is secured through fund drives. For example, in 2004, community fund drives will finance and pay for the cost of one Class A pumper and a one combination Quint 95' aerial unit with a total cost \$1,500,000.

The department boasts a retention rate of approximately six years per firefighter. Because of the volunteer coverage, the estimated yearly savings to the village exceeds \$3,744,000 per year, deducting the direct volunteer expenses. This is one-quarter the cost of a full-time department.

In ***German Township, Ind.***, the predominantly volunteer department (two paid personnel and 70 active volunteers) serves 11,000 residents and provides the community a direct savings in staffing costs of \$441,000 per year. German Township Volunteer Fire Department responds with an average of 10 volunteer personnel per call. To replace the volunteers with an all paid staff would cost their residents more than \$1.5 million dollars annually.

The community is a suburban bedroom community. Nearly 99 percent of the residents own their residences, and 50 percent of the population has moved into the community within the last 10 years. The fire protection challenges are significantly impacted by the availability of water. A large segment of the population and geographical area has a rural water system that does not provide hydrants every 500 or 1,000 feet. The other portion of the population is protected by a municipal water system that does provide hydrants in the normal configuration. The water or lack of it requires the department purchase apparatus with large water tanks.

The department historically has made a significant commitment to training its members. It has always been its goal that each member is highly trained and competent in all necessary skills. The department's training program is outcome-based and requires a significant investment of time and energy. The instructional staff has identified more than 70 basic skills, and written drills have been developed to allow members to train and measure their competency without attending every regular training session. These basic skills drills have significantly improved the members' competency. They know that when confronted with a dangerous situation, they will be able to perform the fire ground evolution safely and effectively.

Leadership development and certification are encouraged, and in most cases tuition reimbursement is available for course work. The promotional process for leadership positions is based upon a written test, experience, education, seniority and personal performance evaluation. It is not based upon an election or the buddy system. Officers maintain their ranks on a permanent basis provided they continue to receive satisfactory evaluations.

The ***Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Department*** is an ISO Class 3 rated, combination fire department in northern Harris County (Houston), Texas—the third most populous county in the nation. The department, formed in 1972 as population growth in the area exploded, currently serves a population of approximately 45,000 people in 13 square miles and provides the community a direct savings of \$439,000 per year based on the hours donated by volunteers. To provide the same coverage with an all-career department would cost the taxpayers an additional \$3,315,000 per year in personnel expenses.<sup>vii</sup>

The county lacks the tax base to provide the necessary funding to transition to full-time career positions. The Emergency Services District levies a tax of 6 cents per hundred dollars of evaluation, which equates to \$60 per \$100,000 of property value that fund all operating and capital expenditures. The 65 volunteers continually demonstrate their commitment to the community by their performance and by maintaining a very effective response system that includes fire, technical rescue, EMS first response, water rescue, hazardous materials response, public education and a host of other services. The cost of the high quality services is only \$27 per resident, which compares to full career departments that are above \$110 per resident.<sup>viii</sup>

The *Roseville, Minn. Fire Department* is staffed by two full-time career firefighters and 70 volunteer firefighters serving a first-ring suburb of Minneapolis and St. Paul. The volunteers represent a vast cross-section of the community, ranging in age from 18 to 55. The chosen full-time career fields of Roseville's volunteers include: police officers, accountants, software engineers, bankers, career firefighters, city employees, teachers and a dentist. More than half of the department's members have college degrees. In addition to their very demanding full-time jobs and family commitments, each volunteer contributes an average of 16 hours every week serving the community. Many say that serving as a volunteer firefighter completes their lives, giving them an opportunity to serve others during difficult times and gives them a reward and sense of fulfillment and teamwork they are unable to achieve in their full-time occupations.

Providing fire and rescue services from three stations, the volunteer department consumes only 3.8 percent of the city's \$35 million budget, easily earning it the accolades of best value in town. In addition to an intense commitment to provide high quality service for the department's 700 annual emergency responses, members contribute thousands of hours supporting hundreds of community events each year. Throughout the summer, Roseville firefighters are frequent visitors to the city's 28 parks, giving hundreds of kids of all ages an opportunity to ride a fire engine and learn fire prevention tips. Firefighters will dress-up a parent in firefighter gear, using the opportunity to teach kids about the equipment firefighters use while educating the parents about the cost of a firefighter's ensemble. Kids are quizzed on fire safety and awarded prizes for correct answers. Roseville's firefighters attend more than 100 community block parties each year, regularly visit senior centers and pre-schools, hosts birthday parties in the fire stations and occasionally show up with a fire engine when the candles are lit on the cake during a celebration of a special senior resident's birthday.

Each and every one of these events represents an opportunity to educate, a role the department takes seriously. While some departments focus primarily on the response to emergency calls, in Roseville, the priority is prevention and education. It's no accident that first line of the department's mission statement reads "To continually strive for the prevention of fires, injuries and accidents..." When it comes to emergency responses, the department is well-trained, well-equipped and well-prepared. In 2001, the ISO scored the department with a 79.36 (ISO Rating 3).

### **Issues Confronting the Volunteer Fire Service**

While there are many volunteer fire departments across the country that play a vibrant role in their community—as exemplified by the examples mentioned in the previous section—much of the volunteer fire service across the United States is currently in crisis. While many departments function at a very high level, many other departments struggle for their very existence. Particularly in rural areas, volunteer departments are closing their doors and shuttering their windows for two basic reasons: 1) lack of financial resources and 2) lack of volunteers. But this problem is not only found in rural America. Many volunteer departments in more populated areas are in a state of crisis and face a deep-seated struggle to provide adequate services. In order to ensure that we maintain a vibrant, capable volunteer fire service throughout the United States, we must confront both of these complex problems head on.

### **LACK OF RESOURCES**

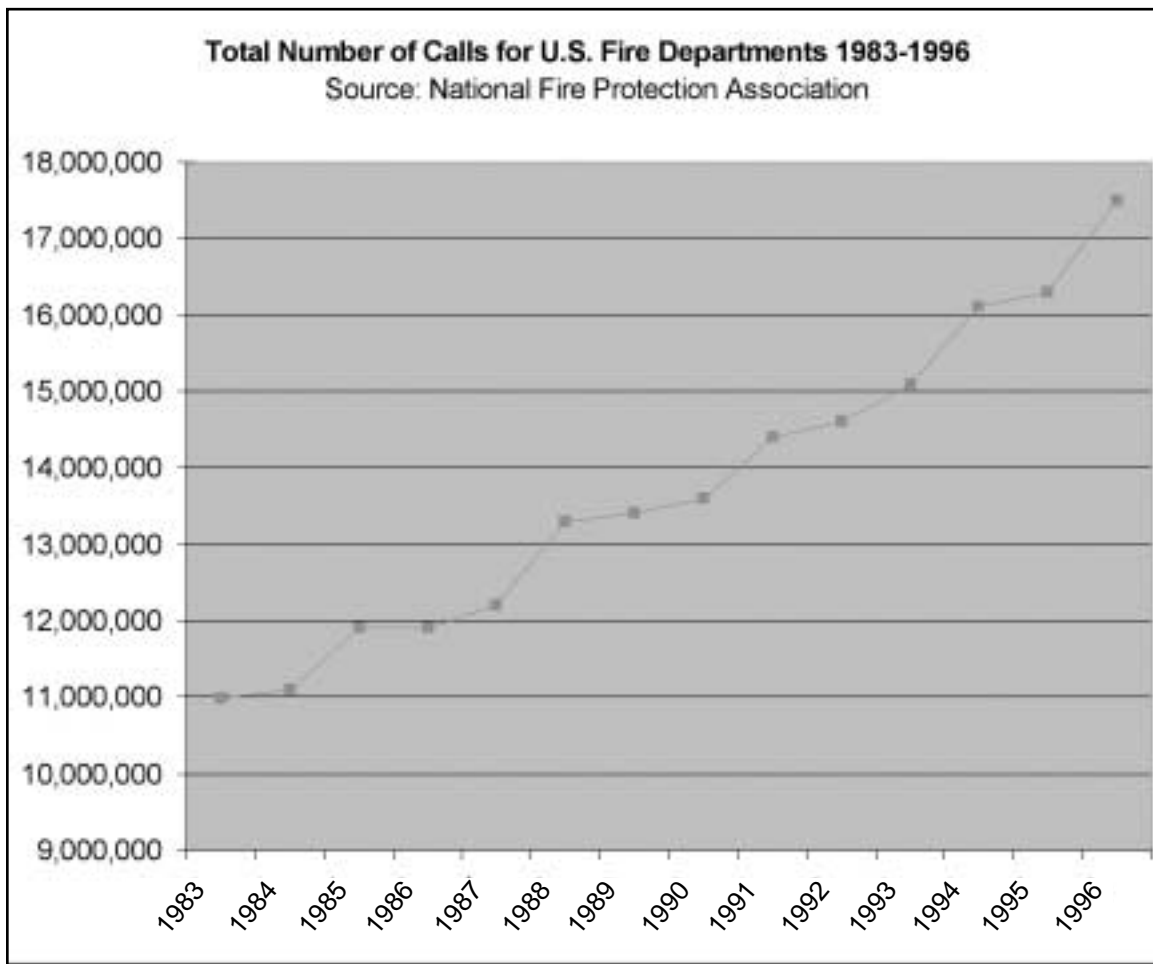
Few local governments understand the true value of their local volunteer fire department—both in financial terms as well as the social capital generated by the department. A number of departments are independent corporations that do not have direct attachment to their local government, yet they are the sole providers of emergency services. In addition, volunteer fire departments often serve as the social and communal hub of their towns. As detailed by the earlier examples, volunteer fire departments save local communities significant expenses. Unfortunately, most volunteer firefighters not only donate their time for this basic community service but also are required to spend a significant amount of time conducting fundraisers to generate revenue. In many communities, local governments take for granted the services provided by the volunteer fire department. They are not willing to assist with even the most basic expenses, such as appropriate safety gear, functional apparatus or station facilities.



Compounding this problem, the demands on volunteer fire departments have increased significantly over the past 20 years. Today, because of increasing call volumes, departments provide more and more traditional services (firefighting, EMS response, etc.). However, volunteer fire departments also are being asked to expand their role in order to address new problems, the most prominent of which are new duties surrounding homeland security. This increase in responses and responsibility, combined with the lack of resources noted above, means that many departments must make hard choices about the level of service they can provide. This is difficult in a mobile society, where urban dwellers often move to more remote locations and continue to expect the same level of service they were receiving previously. Often, they do not appreciate the funding constraints placed on rural communities.

In addition, the costs associated with new apparatus and equipment have increased exponentially. In 1972, a Class A pumper was about \$25,000; today a new pumper can easily approach \$350,000. Just a few years ago, a single self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) cost about \$1,900; today an SCBA unit costs about \$3,500. The cost for this basic equipment has increased over and above the funding levels available to many volunteer fire departments. As a result, many communities have had to reduce their capabilities by not purchasing needed apparatus, equipment and technology. Other communities have reacted by extending the life of their current equipment. Unfortunately, this decision can give rise to numerous safety related issues.

The following charts demonstrate the growth in emergency response calls in the United States. Total emergency calls in the United States have increased by an estimated 61 percent since 1983\* to nearly 18,000,000 responses per year.



What is particularly interesting about these statistics is the change in the nature of emergency responses. While total responses have increased, the number of actual working fires has decreased 47 percent since 1977.<sup>x</sup> Residential fires have decreased from a reported 472,000 incidents in 1992 to 396,500 fires in 2001, a 16 percent reduction.<sup>xi</sup> Because departments are responding to fewer fires, managers are often concerned about the promotion of engine/command officers who lack sufficient experience actually fighting fires. This problem affects the safety of emergency operations and could lead to increased liability exposure for departments.



### **Detailing the Lack of Resources**

As part of an effort to better understand the needs of the fire service, the Congress directed the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) to conduct a Needs Assessment Study of the U.S. Fire Service for the United States Fire Administration (USFA). The study attempted to define problem areas in the nation's fire service as well as function as a guide for future planning to enhance the fire service and firefighter safety.<sup>xii</sup>

The following issues were outlined in the executive summary provided in the NFPA report.<sup>xiii</sup> While the report surveyed all types of fire departments, items selected for this report have the most impact on volunteer/combination departments. All of the problems documented below are a greater problem in smaller communities.

### **Concerns with Facilities, Apparatus and Equipment**

- Roughly 15,500 fire stations (32 percent) are at least 40 years old and 27,500 fire stations (57 percent) have no backup electrical power.
- It is estimated that 60 to 75 percent of fire departments have too few fire stations to meet maximum response distance guidelines promulgated by the Insurance Services Office.
- Approximately half of all fire engines are at least 15 years old and more than one-third are over 20 years old.
- One-third of firefighters per response are not equipped with self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) and nearly half of SCBA units are at least 10 years old.

- Fifty percent of emergency responders per shift are not equipped with personal alert safety system (PASS) devices that assist in locating firefighters trapped in burning buildings.
- An estimated 57,000 firefighters lack even basic personal protective clothing, and an estimated one-third of personal protective clothing is at least 10 years old.

#### ***Communications and Communications Equipment***

- Fire departments do not have enough portable radios to equip more than half of the emergency responders. This is a particular problem in small communities.
- Only 25 percent of fire departments can communicate on scene with all of their public safety partners at the local, state and federal level.
- Forty percent of all fire departments lack internet access.

#### ***Training Concerns***

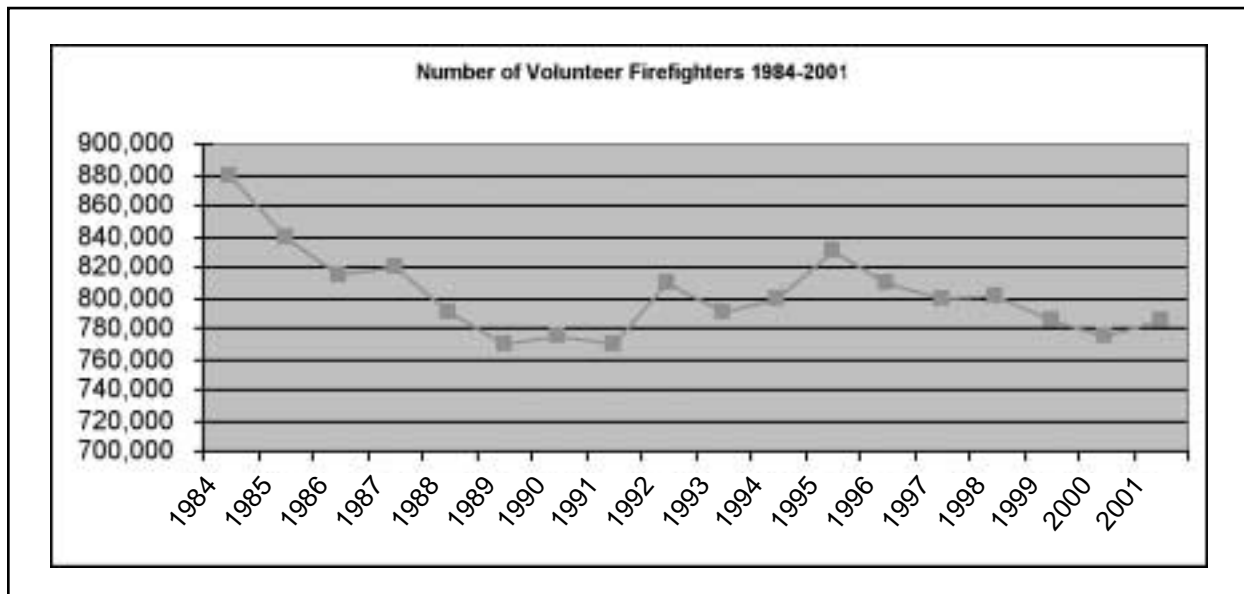
- An estimated 233,000 firefighters, most of whom are volunteers serving in small communities, lack formal training in structural firefighting—the most basic service the volunteer fire service provides. An additional 153,000 firefighters have received some training but lack certification in structural firefighting.
- An estimated 27 percent of fire department personnel involved in delivering EMS lack formal training in those duties. And in the majority of fire departments, EMS personnel are not certified to the level of Basic Life Support.
- An estimated 40 percent of fire department personnel involved in hazardous materials response lack formal training in those duties; the majority of them serve in smaller communities. In 80 percent of fire departments, personnel involved in hazardous materials response are not certified to the operational level.
- An estimated 41 percent of fire department personnel involved in wildland fire fighting lack formal training in those duties; there are substantial training and certification needs in communities of all sizes.

#### ***Ability to Handle Unusually Challenging Incidents***

- Only 11 percent of fire departments can handle a technical rescue with EMS at a structural collapse of a building involving 50 occupants with local trained personnel. Nearly half of all departments consider such an incident outside their scope.
- Only 13 percent of fire departments can handle a hazmat and EMS incident involving chemical and/or biological agents and 10 injuries with locally trained personnel. Forty percent of all departments consider such an incident outside their scope.
- Only 26 percent of fire departments can handle a wildland-urban interface fire affecting 500 acres with locally trained personnel. One-third of all departments consider such an incident outside their scope.
- Only 12 percent of fire departments can handle mitigation of a developing major flood with locally trained personnel. The majority of departments consider such an incident outside their scope.

## LACK OF VOLUNTEERS

Nationally, the number of volunteers has continued to drop since a high of 880,000 in 1984.<sup>xiv</sup> Today, the total number of volunteer firefighters has declined by about 10 percent, representing a reduction of approximately 90,000 individuals to 790,000.



The decline in the number of volunteers is a two-faceted problem. It stems both from difficulties in retaining current volunteers as well as problems with recruiting new volunteers.

### Retention

Retention of volunteer firefighters is a substantial concern for the fire service. It is estimated that the national retention average of volunteer firefighters is approximately four years<sup>xv</sup> per person, per department. When recruiting volunteer firefighters, the fire department will spend approximately \$4,000 per person in orienting, equipping and training those recruits. While this figure would appear to be conservative in some jurisdictions, the cost to maintain one volunteer for the national retention rate average of four years is approximately \$1,000 per year. This may not be an effective investment based on the return by the volunteer.

Retention of volunteer firefighters is a complex issue with a number of variables that can contribute to the lack of longevity. In 1993, the consulting firm Tri-Data, on behalf of the United States Fire Administration (USFA), conducted a national study titled *Retention and Recruitment in the Volunteer Fire Service, Problems and Solutions*. The study was assembled with input from volunteer departments across the country. The following areas were identified as major issues affecting retention of volunteer firefighters:

- Volunteers face increased demands from the fire department stemming from the increase in emergency response calls, the need for ongoing training and the increasing need to undertake specialized training.
- Demands on the volunteer's time are also increasing away from the fire department as families struggle to balance the career and family obligations of today's two-income families.
- Many of those who volunteer for the fire department do so in order to improve their employability. A volunteer fire department will provide training at no cost. This training can then be used to obtain a full-time position within the profession.

- The lack of a comprehensive benefit and incentive program. Benefits are necessary to protect the livelihood of the volunteer and his or her family in the event the volunteer suffers a significant injury or dies while on duty, while incentives are designed to recognize their personal achievements and to motivate them to improve their skills and participation.
- Finally, the lack of quality local leadership within the fire department is cited as the most significant problem to retaining volunteer firefighters. Echoing the sentiment of that finding, it is the opinion of the contributing authors that ineffective leadership will doom an otherwise excellent organization. Sound management practices have the potential to significantly enhance retention rates.

### **The Value of Good Management**

The following passage is taken directly from the Tri-Data report discussed above.

The ability of a fire department to retain its people is directly related to its ability to manage those people. *It was unanimous among workshop attendees that poor management contributed heavily to people leaving the volunteer fire service.* The leadership issue was considered the most important; in one way or another, nearly all the other causes were either directly or indirectly traced back to the leadership problem. (emphasis added)<sup>vi</sup>

The lack of quality leadership is the most critical issue confronting the volunteer and combination fire service. Few programs at the state or national level have been established to assist and provide fire chiefs and/or managers with the skills necessary for effective management. An example of how poor management can exacerbate a problem, such as an increase in call volume, is illustrated through the example below.

An increase in emergency service calls can significantly affect volunteer retention, so an effective manager will look at ways to minimize this intrusion on the daily life of a volunteer. A department that provides emergency medical services (EMS) will intrude on the life of a volunteer more often than those departments without EMS. EMS is an emergency response that can be reasonably predicted. As a result, staffing for EMS response is generally easier than staffing for activities that occur with a much lower frequency—such as structural fires. In addition, the number of staff required to respond to each call is relatively low. Three emergency care providers can handle the overwhelming majority of EMS calls. When a volunteer fire department providing EMS alerts a volunteer component of 20 members to an EMS call when only three members are needed, it can be damaging to a system. This intrusion into the life of the volunteer sets up a “cry wolf” syndrome where the pager is alerted but the volunteer is not needed. This increases the risk that the volunteer will not respond when actually needed.

### **The Challenges of Managing a Combination Department**

Another difficult management challenge is the management of fire departments staffed with both career and volunteer personnel—combination departments. Combination fire departments are difficult to manage because career and volunteer firefighters often have different institutional interests. Administrative changes such as the transition from an all-volunteer department to a combination system may exacerbate the problem. The individual volunteer’s sense of identity is important. Although the financial consequence of resigning a volunteer position is small, the psychological cost to an individual is extremely high because of the firefighter’s great personal investment in the organization. The structural distrust the volunteer and career groups have for each other might be more tolerable if each group did not have to work with the other, but they usually do. Efficiency is a desirable goal; however, reaching that goal can be a tortuous path of management anxiety arising from personnel conflict between the two groups. The conflicts within a combination department can lead to unproductive involvement by the local government that sees itself as legally and often politically responsible for resolving the conflict.

A combination system will not work when it is based on prejudice or when either group of firefighters, volunteer or career, functions in a minority role and is perceived as subservient to the other. This situation often creates an atmosphere where the department is unable to tap the knowledge and expertise possessed by the individual. This can be perpetuated when we lose site of our basic mission—serving the public. The real test of a successful combination department is its ability to fully integrate tactical rank structure. The training and performance standards should be the same, regardless of the firefighter or officer status with parallel lines of authority, bringing personnel resources into harmony. The quantitative measure of that success is the retention rate of the minority group.

### **Nature of Volunteerism in the United States and its Implications for the Volunteer Fire Service**

In 2002, the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor released the Volunteer Service Indicator, a new national measurement of volunteer behavior developed by the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the USA Freedom Corps. The indicator provides a wealth of information relating to volunteerism in the United States. Those findings indicate that 27.6 percent of individuals (more than 59 million) over the age of 16 volunteered with a volunteer service organization between September 2001 and September 2002. The findings suggest that certain groups are more likely to volunteer, while others are more likely to volunteer more hours. The findings also offer information regarding what types of organizations and activities enjoy support from different segments of the population. Finally, they give information on how much time people are dedicating to volunteer work, including data that more than 34 percent of those who volunteered did so for more than 100 hours during the past year.

Perhaps the most striking statistic from the survey is that volunteers spent a median of 52 hours volunteering during the year. Volunteering for the fire service can be and most often is substantially more demanding. Depending on the call volume, designated shift coverage and the level of training standards mandated by the local community, an average volunteer could easily contribute in excess of 1,000 hours per year in community service. In Campbell County, Wyo., an active average volunteer can expect to donate 750–1,000 hours of service per year,<sup>xvii</sup> German Township, Ind., 500 hours per year<sup>xviii</sup> and in Ponderosa, Tex., 360 hours per year.<sup>xix</sup> In two communities with mandatory 24-hour volunteer shift coverage—Tinley Park, Ill. and Roseville, Minn.—an active volunteer will be required to provide 1,000 hours<sup>xx</sup> to maintain his or her volunteer membership. Both departments provide volunteers with a monetary stipend as part of the compensation for services provided.

The estimated 800,000 volunteer firefighters account for less than one fifty-ninth of the estimated number of individuals who volunteered, in some fashion, for their communities during the time of this study. The available personnel pool for volunteer firefighters may be more extensive than we realize, and a more detailed review of this study may provide insight into the recruiting strategies and diversification options that must be developed to fill open positions within our departments.

To be competitive, the volunteer fire service may need to refocus recruiting efforts, develop diversification strategies and design other volunteer opportunities within the organization that utilize skills outside of traditional recruitment considerations.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS – A CALL FOR ACTION**

The International Association of Fire Chiefs represents the leaders of America's fire service, both career and volunteer. Through the technical expertise and guidance of its Volunteer & Combination Officers Section (VCOS), the IAFC is well positioned to lead the volunteer fire service forward to confront the difficult issues detailed in this report. The recommendations that follow are broken down by the level of government that should address the solution. While most of these recommendations must be implemented at the local level, the IAFC will be active at the national level to secure the necessary resources and climate to make these important changes in the volunteer fire service.

### **Federal Responsibilities/Recommendations:**

- Advance a Congressional Resolution supporting the American Volunteer Firefighters Bill of Rights.
- Create an Office of Volunteer and Combination Fire Service within the Department of Homeland Security.
- Develop a grading system for evaluating local emergency response capability.
- Create a national definition of allowable compensation for volunteer firefighters.
- Develop and support administrative changes to the Internal Revenue Code to clarify legislative issues related to length of service awards programs and allow "cafeteria style" benefit programs for volunteers.
- Create national job protection for volunteer firefighters.
- Fund the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program (FIRE Act) at its full authorization, allowing the fire service to build a solid baseline of apparatus and safety equipment within its hometown communities.
- Appropriate funding for the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Firefighters Act (SAFER Act).
- Provide tax incentives for the installation of automatic fire suppression and alert systems.
- Provide national tax incentives for certified volunteer firefighters, reducing federal income tax by 3 percent annually.

### **State-Level Responsibilities/Recommendations:**

- Develop community, regional and state disaster plans with specified review dates. Plans should include identified resources and certifiably trained personnel available for regional and statewide deployment.
- Develop methods for certifying fire and EMS personnel to enhance their professional commitment and achieve minimum training standards.
- Develop a benefits plan for all emergency responders to protect and provide for responders who are injured or killed in the line of duty.
- Develop a benefits plan that provides college tuition, including books, to the immediate family members of firefighters killed in the line of duty.
- Develop regional and statewide recruitment campaigns.
- Assure that volunteer liability protection is provided.
- Assure that statewide mutual aid places response liability on the responding agency versus the requesting agency.

### **Local Responsibilities/Recommendations:**

Volunteer firefighters, leadership within the volunteer fire department, community leaders, elected officials and citizens should expect that standards, rules and regulations be used, adopted and enforced at the local level that measure the effectiveness of services provided.

**Strategic planning** must become institutionalized as an integral part of fire department operations and community resource allocation.

- Plan development should be performed in conjunction with the community to meet community expectations, growth and staffing requirements.
- Planning should be done in conjunction with surrounding communities affected by automatic mutual aid agreements. A multi-jurisdictional approach must be utilized to provide specialized services such as technical rescue, hazardous materials response and water rescue as well as covering training needs for these responses.

- The planning process should be developed with immediate, intermediate and long-range goals and have established review dates.
- An evaluation of the current volunteer response capabilities must be completed as part of the strategic planning process.
- A risk management policy must be instituted that clearly identifies the necessity of performing defensive fire suppression operations under noted conditions.
- A management structure must be developed and maintained. It should address business management operations, training, EMS, member benefits and operational leadership strategies.
- The number of calls significantly increases the business aspect of running a fire department. A department that responds to more than 750 calls per year, which is an average of two calls per day, should consider providing a compensated leadership position for developing and executing an organizational plan.
- If transition to paid personnel is necessary, the emergency service delivery system must prepare for an orderly transition from an all-volunteer to a partial career staff with identifiable funding options. Critical issues such as pay rates, job descriptions, duties, responsibilities, positions and status authority for career and volunteer personnel must be examined. When the overall composition of the department is predominately volunteer, then career personnel serve to support the volunteer system.
- A funding plan for vehicle and equipment maintenance and replacement, as well as a plan to replace personal protective gear and accessory equipment in order to ensure adequate protection of emergency service personnel should be developed.
- Local, county, regional, state, federal and industrial resources that are available within the jurisdiction should be identified as part of a mutual aid agreement.
- The organization must develop a service delivery approach to meet the risks that are presented, consistent with what the community expects and can afford (standard of response cover).

**Recruiting and retaining quality personnel** continues to be the most important element in the overall success of a volunteer or combination fire department. Therefore, it is important to look at developing the following:

- Programs designed to certify and credential volunteer and career firefighters as well as officer positions at the state minimum level (NFPA Firefighter I/Fire Officer I or equivalent) to improve individual educational levels, emergency scene proficiency and safety.
- A diversification plan that maximizes individual talent and skill in order to enhance the overall efficiency, safety and effectiveness of the department. It should also guide the educational growth of the individual while maximizing his or her potential and enthusiasm in a specific discipline(s) within the organization.
- Ongoing educational opportunities that reinforce minimum training standards, enhance awareness and reinforce safety precautions dealing with local target hazards.
- Training that is measurable and emphasizes safety, command, multi-company drills, multi-agency drills and multi-jurisdictional responses.
- Benefit programs that encourage long-term participation from individual volunteers. Programs could include, but are not limited to, workers compensation; health, accident and life insurance; and coverage that will protect the livelihood of the individual volunteer against lost wages.
- A housing analysis to document housing availability and, if necessary, contingent housing alternatives for retaining reliable and well-trained volunteers within a community. Those options may include, but are not limited to, subsidized housing, dormitories, low or no-interest loans or relief on property taxes.
- Adequate liability coverage to protect an employer from costs associated with injuries that occur while performing duties. This consideration may extend to policies that provide the employer with overtime coverage to fill the position of the injured volunteer.
- A recruitment program that ensures adequate staffing and delivery of emergency services.
- Appropriate recognition and award programs to identify individuals or team members because of their performance or commitment to the department and community.



- A promotional process that ensures fairness for all members within the existing rank structure. Promotional systems should replace the traditional method of electing officer positions. It should be based upon merit with appropriate performance, education, training, skills and experience.
- Partnerships with other community emergency entities working to maximize resources.
- Partnerships with civic organizations and local businesses to integrate the fire department within the local community.
- Training programs that provide all new recruits with basic firefighting skills and First Responder level training before they are allowed to respond to and perform on fire, medical or rescue emergencies.
- A physical assessment program designed to evaluate each member's physical ability to perform the activities and tasks required for every job description within the organization. This assessment should be performed at least annually.
- A written policy prohibiting drug and alcohol use with specific enforcement, discipline and follow-up procedures.
- An "Emergency Vehicle Operational Policy" to qualify each member as a driver/operator of fire and rescue apparatus.
- A process to check the status of each member's driver's license annually.
- Criminal background checks on all prospective members.

**Community Support Services** are necessary elements to the overall image and success of the department and the well-being of the community. Departments should develop the following:

- Fire prevention and education programs to educate at risk groups as identified by the USFA. Programs should direct educational, awareness, prevention and support groups to assist in reducing concerns.
- Safety and accident prevention programs beyond the normal scope of fire prevention to augment identified needs of the community. Those programs could include, but are not limited to, drowning prevention; bike, roller-blade and car safety; and sponsorship of SAFE KIDS projects.
- Practices that would prevent fire loss, injury or death based upon occupancy, construction, apparatus, water supply, available personnel, communication abilities and response capabilities.
- An annual evaluation of water systems that affect local operations, including county, industrial and/or private delivery. Evaluations should include the capability of the water supply to deliver the required fire flows based upon existing occupancy as well as planned growth. Ensure that appropriate steps and procedures are in place to properly maintain supply.
- Customer service programs that provide community feedback and satisfaction ratings.
- The capability to complete investigations in an efficient and reliable manner involving police agencies where applicable.
- Appropriate preplan documents, including target hazards, to provide timely and accurate information to incident commanders.
- A partnership with the Local Emergency Planning Committee to work for a fire safe community.

The volunteer fire service is at a critical juncture in the United States. On one hand we have a positive can-do spirit, on the other hand we have forces that are creating ever-increasing challenges that attack that spirit. The needs and realities of the volunteer fire service appear to be moving in divergent directions, so when the spirit dies, all that remains is historic fact. It is imperative that local, state and federal government understand the challenges listed in this document, develop a problem solving attitude and be proactive in creating a new pathway that will allow the volunteer fire service to survive and flourish. The IAFC stands ready to work with all partners to lead this charge. This great country cannot afford to lose the rich legacy of the volunteer fire service.

---

## END NOTES

- <sup>i</sup> *Fire Protection in Rural America: A Challenge for the Future*. National Association of State Foresters, 1993.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Fire Protection in Rural America: A Challenge for the Future*. National Association of State Foresters, 1993.
- <sup>iii</sup> *U.S. Fire Department Profile Through 2000*. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, Massachusetts, December 2001.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Coal Bed Methane Exploration, Campbell County Fire Department Partners in Progress*, Impact Study Prepared for the Campbell County Commissioners January 2002, - Addendum Report 2003. Campbell County Fire Department managed by a Joint Powers Fire Board responsible for the City of Gillette, WY, Town of Wright, WY, and unincorporated areas of Campbell County, WY.
- <sup>v</sup> Figure of \$16.05 per hour provided by the National Volunteer Center as a national means for calculating time donated by volunteers.
- <sup>vi</sup> Tinley Park Village Fire Department volunteer firefighter staffing agreement per 24-hour shift.
- <sup>vii</sup> Ponderosa VFD Response and Training Statistics 2002, Ponderosa, TX.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Firehouse* magazine, Fire Department Annual Statistics
- <sup>ix</sup> *U.S. Fire Department Profile Through 2000*. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, Massachusetts, December 2001.
- <sup>x</sup> *U.S. Fire Problem 1977 – 2001*. National Fire Protection Association, Fire Analysis and Research Division, Quincy, Massachusetts, March 28, 2003.
- <sup>xi</sup> *U.S. Residential Fire Data 1992 – 2001*. National Fire Protection Association, Fire Analysis and Research Division, Quincy, Massachusetts, March 28, 2003.
- <sup>xii</sup> *A Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service*, A Cooperative Study Authorized by U.S. Public Law 106-398, FA-240/December 2002.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *ibid.*, pages iii – ix.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *U.S. Fire Department Profile Through 2000*. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, Massachusetts, December 2001.
- <sup>xv</sup> Figure is estimated based on the experiences of the authors. No formal studies have been developed to accurately define this figure.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Retention and Recruitment in the Volunteer Fire Service, Problems and Solutions, National Volunteer Fire Council and The U.S. Fire Administration, August 1993, pg 1.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Coal Bed Methane Exploration, Campbell County Fire Department Partners in Progress*, Impact Study Prepared for the Campbell County Commissioners January 2002, - Addendum Report 2003. Campbell County Fire Department managed by a Joint Powers Fire Board responsible for the City of Gillette, WY, Town of Wright, WY, and unincorporated areas of Campbell County, WY. Volunteers actively participate in numerous wildland campaigns each summer.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Calculation based on an average of three hours of training and seven hours of emergency response each.
- <sup>xix</sup> Ponderosa VFD Response and Training Statistics 2002, Ponderosa, TX.
- <sup>xx</sup> Based on an average of 16 hours of shift coverage and three hours of training per week.



*Officers Section*

**IAFC Volunteer and Combination Officers Section**  
4025 Fair Ridge Drive  
Fairfax, VA 22033