

## “What Strategies Can Wisconsin Use to Recruit and Retain Fire and EMS Volunteers?”

For as long as I can remember, my dad has left our family during celebrations & holidays. It's not because he didn't love us, it was because there was a fire call he had to go on. For many years, I couldn't understand what was more important than my birthday party or Christmas morning. As I became older and understood better what he did, I was sometimes jealous that he'd leave our family for a call. I didn't truly understand what being a firefighter meant until I joined the Sauk City Fire Department as a cadet, two years ago. Now that I am a cadet, I have much more appreciation for what he has been doing for almost 20 years. I am very proud of my father and honored to be following in his footsteps. As I learn more about what firefighters do and what is involved in keeping the department running, I am aware of the need that volunteer departments have for members and how personnel shortages affects the communities they serve.

Cadets in our fire district are children of active members. I was eligible to join at age 16, versus the usual minimum age of 18, because my dad was on the department. In addition to my dad, my great-grandfather, my grandfather, two of my uncles and my sister are or were firefighters, so I guess it's in my blood.

I think back over the years to some of the calls that he has had and how dangerous some of them have been. A call that happened recently was when the fire department was called out to assist the police and sheriff's department when a man with a gun was holding hostages. Even though my dad wasn't outside the building where this was happening, he was down the road from it and if the man escaped, my dad could have been injured or killed. This call isn't the common type that my dad usually has, but even standard calls can be dangerous. Structure fires can be very dangerous, obviously, but I try

to remember that my dad has had years of training that should help keep him safe. But, I know accidents happen.

More than 90 percent of Wisconsin's fire departments are staffed mostly or entirely by volunteers, according to the U.S. Fire Administration.<sup>1</sup> The Sauk City Fire Department currently has 32 members. There are 8 positions open, which means the department is only staffed at about 75% capacity. Sauk Fire is not the only volunteer department that is hurting for members. This is a common problem all over Wisconsin, for both fire and EMS.

A shortage of members has many negative outcomes for both the department and the communities they serve. Lack of members can cause a delayed response time to a call due to the required number of personnel on a truck may not be met. Not enough members on the call could prevent the proper service needed for the call type, such as a car accident or a structure fire, resulting in victims not being rescued as quickly as they should be. Not enough members risk the safety of the responders on a call due to lack of securing the scene to make it safe for them when they are working. A car accident on a highway that doesn't have the personnel needed risks EMS workers being hit by a vehicle due to improper traffic control.

The National Volunteer Fire Council says close to 100,000 fewer people volunteer for the fire service nationwide now than in 1983, when the records started.<sup>2</sup>

Recruiting and retaining members on departments is difficult. Currently, the department is trying to attract new applicants by posting signs in local businesses and on their Facebook page and website.

At a recent fish fry held by the department, over 150 flyers were handed out providing information on who to contact if someone was interested in joining and what is required, and sadly, there was not one applicant.

My dad and the other officers have had frequent conversations about what they think needs to be done to encourage new members to join and to retain existing members. As with any occupation, the pay is a big incentive. Most volunteer departments provide a wage per hour for calls. Sauk Fire pays \$8.75 for members while they are in the probationary period, then \$15.75 when they become a regular member. Their pay comes from property taxes. Increasing the wage would be a definite incentive, but that then would require the residents having their taxes increased.

Fire calls during weekdays are often short on responders, as many of them are working their full-time jobs. There are a few businesses locally that allow their employees to leave for calls. If the state would pass a law that employers were required to allow their employees to leave for calls, and still pay them their wages, many more members could attend day calls and it would provide another incentive for recruiting and retaining members.

Currently, the government is considering tax breaks for EMS personnel. State Sen. Patrick Testin, R-Stevens Point, is one of the authors of a new bill that would offer tax credits to volunteer firefighters and emergency services personnel. The legislators unveiled the proposal, called the BRAVE Act, on May 21, 2019, in Madison. The B.R.A.V.E. Act, which stands for Beginning Retention and Attraction for Volunteer Emergency personnel, is a proposal that creates refundable tax credits. The bill would give volunteer firefighters, and those providing emergency medical services, a \$300 tax credit in their first five years and \$600 per year for those who've volunteered for five years or more. Two additional tax credits would add as much as \$900 toward the cost of training and equipment. <sup>3</sup>

This problem is not going to go away so something needs to be done to encourage more people to join fire and EMS departments. The possible outcomes if this does not improve will have a negative outcome to many.

## Bibliography

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2- [www.nbc26.com/news/critical-shortage-of-volunteer-firefighters-leaves-northeast-wisconsin-communities-in-danger](http://www.nbc26.com/news/critical-shortage-of-volunteer-firefighters-leaves-northeast-wisconsin-communities-in-danger)

3- [www.wpr.org/new-bill-would-boost-wisconsin-volunteer-firefighters-emts](http://www.wpr.org/new-bill-would-boost-wisconsin-volunteer-firefighters-emts)