

2020 Wisconsin Towns Association Scholarship

Promote, Protect, Provide

“More than 90% of Wisconsin’s fire departments are staffed mostly or entirely by volunteers” (*Mentzer, 2019*), and approximately 60% of the state receives volunteer Emergency Medical Services (EMS) (*Davis*). Regardless of how emergency agencies are staffed, citizens expect to be rescued when they dial 911. Thus, mobilizing new volunteers while maintaining current volunteers is critical for the health and well-being of all residents. After researching the topic, three strategies were formulated to improve recruitment and retention of firefighters and EMS personnel in Wisconsin: promote the benefits of serving; protect those who volunteer; and provide opportunities for local emergency personnel.

People volunteer for a variety of reasons. Some individuals want to make a difference in their communities, while others want to learn new skills. One firefighter told me he enjoys being a “super hero” to the kids in his community. Whatever the reason, promoting the benefits of serving is the first strategy to increase retention and recruitment of firefighters and EMS staff. There are many opportunities to recognize volunteers. For example, International Firefighters’ Day is observed every May 4th. National EMS Week is the third week of May. Governor Evers designated September 27, 2019 as First Responders Appreciation Day, and the Wisconsin State Assembly honored several volunteers with First Responder of the Year awards. Other ways to promote the benefits of serving include offering discounts at local businesses, providing meals, organizing ride-alongs, issuing reimbursements for training, assisting the families of volunteers, and honoring fallen or injured personnel. Locally, our volunteer department invites students to visit the fire station every October during Fire Safety Month. Kids get a chance to learn about

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firefighting, which may inspire them to become firefighters. Promoting the benefits of serving is only limited by the creativity and the budgetary restraints of the community. Protecting those who volunteer is more complicated.

Between 1984 and 2011, the number of volunteer firefighters declined by 15% (“*Volunteer Fire*”). At the same time, the number of emergency calls increased by 300%, resulting in burnout and increased health risks for first responders (“*Volunteer Fire*”). According to one study, in the United States, it would cost \$140 billion to replace volunteer firefighters with professionals vs the \$44.2 billion that was spent on fire protection in 2013 (*Finger*). Since two-thirds of Wisconsin’s rural counties lost residents between 2010 and 2018, tax bases and the funds to pay for services are shrinking (*Mentzer, 2020*). As a result, most Wisconsin communities would struggle to finance a service staffed entirely with paid professionals. Thus, protecting current and potential volunteers is the second strategy for recruiting and retaining emergency personnel. Legislators have an important role in this area. The first step is getting EMS permanently identified as essential. “Wisconsin has no requirement for local governments to offer emergency medical services” (*Sable-Smith*). Additionally, Medicaid reimbursement rates for ambulance services have not increased since 2008. As a result, “...local groups often rely on a patchwork of financing, including bake sales and fundraising” (*Sable-Smith*).

Laws supporting operations and reasonable training are also needed. For instance, Wisconsin Act 97 permits first responders to “...operate at the highest level for which they have a state license” (“*New State Law*”). Prior to its passage in 2017, responders were only allowed to operate as a basic EMT, regardless of their licensure. In 2019, a group of Wisconsin senators

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proposed the B.R.A.V.E. Act to provide tax credits to volunteers, but the legislation never passed. Another option is establishing training waivers for licensed medical professionals who want to volunteer. Differentiating firefighting training for rural vs urban areas would also provide a great incentive. Other ways to protect emergency volunteers is to recognize and provide treatment for some of the indirect risks of serving like exposure to toxic materials, cancer, and PTSD. In order to protect all volunteers, we have to provide opportunities for them.

Since 2006, the average age of volunteer firefighters has increased from 50 to 60 years old (*Mentzer, 2019*). Furthermore, young people are leaving rural areas for urban centers and jobs with unpredictable hours and less job security. As a result, the third strategy of recruitment and retention focuses on providing opportunities for volunteers. Survey past, present, and potential emergency personnel to determine strengths and areas of improvement in local organizations. Former volunteers cite the lack of leadership and the politics of local stations as key reasons why they stopped volunteering. Many of them want to be personally invited to serve, which requires recruiting outside of existing social networks—like family or friends. For example, women make up about 10% of volunteer firefighters in the United States (*Finger*). However, when polled, they are equally as interested as men in becoming firefighters. In 2004, the National Volunteer Fire Council instituted the Fire Corps program which “... connects resource-constrained fire/EMS departments with community members to assist in non-emergency roles” (“*Fire Corps*”). For example, fundraising, maintaining equipment, administrative tasks, and education programs could be handled by untapped sources

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like students and senior citizens. At my high school, there are course tracks for careers in medicine or business. Volunteering with the fire/EMS departments would provide valuable job experience for young people. Encouraging senior citizens to volunteer gives them the opportunity to share their background knowledge and feel valued by younger generations.

Even though there has been a decrease in emergency volunteers in recent years, there are many varied and creative options to recruit and retain firefighters and EMS personnel.

Ultimately, it requires the cooperative efforts of state and local authorities, emergency service volunteers, plus the citizens they serve. Utilizing the ideals of promoting, protecting, and providing for past, present, and potential volunteers will sustain Wisconsin's emergency services for the next generation.

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