

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

Growing up in a small community comes with many advantages but one of the challenges is maintaining a strong, well trained volunteer fire and emergency medical services (EMS) department with the depth to meet the needs of their communities they serve. Many people are struggling to balance the long hours of volunteering and the cost and time of initial and continuing education (Lukens, 2018), as well as family and professional commitments (Kelley & Brauer, 2017). Wisconsin has taken action to investigate and implement strategies in recruitment and retention of volunteers.

The Joint Legislative Council’s Report of the Study Committee on Volunteer Firefighter and Emergency Medical Technician Shortages report (Kelley & Brauer, 2017) and the Rural Health Information Hub (Lukens, 2018) note some common strategies to remove barriers and to encourage volunteerism including financial subsidies, employer support, education standardization, recognition, and supporting continued discussion on areas of opportunity.

One strategy is to be creative with financial support such as offering stipends for calls, tax credits for being a volunteer, funding for training, and involving business’s in offering discounts. Another strategy is to promote employer support for time off for training and responding to calls. The state could “expand protected absences from work to include responding to declared state of emergency” (Kelley & Brauer, 2017).

The report notes regulation on required education and training hours, extending licensure periods, while also encouraging education and training at local fire and EMS departments in rural areas (Kelley & Brauer, 2017) would support the need of individuals by offering standardization across the state and limiting the amount of time traveling for training.

Kelley and Brauer (2017), noted that “Volunteering is likely linked to community pride”. Recognition of volunteer fire and EMS can support recruitment and retention. Some of the recommendations for recognition are years of service awards from the community, local newspaper or social media articles, and the state could offer “active firefighter or EMS personnel a specialty license plate at no charge” (Kelley & Brauer, 2017).

The last strategy is continuing to “participate in the dialogue” (Lukens, 2018) for improvement and promotion of volunteer fire and EMS departments. By states sharing their struggles and successes we can learn from each other. On February 1, 2017 the Joint Legislative Council voted to introduce seven drafts into law on behalf of their investigation to support the strategies reviewed (Kelley & Brauer, 2017). They also send letters to the Wisconsin Technical College System Board and the Secretary, of the Department of Health Services supporting the strategies for financial and employer support, education, and recognition initiatives. The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) offers a Junior firefighters program with the goal of getting more young people interested and connected to their local firefighting and EMS departments to promote their support throughout their adulthood (Volunteer Fire Service Fact Sheet , 2019). On the NVFC website and through the “Make Me A Firefighter” program they offer resources, volunteer opportunity postings, and public information to increase awareness of volunteer needs and barriers.

Many towns and villages in Wisconsin have volunteer fire and EMS who are struggling with the same barriers to maintain a strong and well-trained department with the depth to support their community needs. These communities rely on these services as the “first line of defense for many emergencies” (Volunteer Fire Service Fact Sheet , 2019) in their times of great need. It is a topic that will need continued monitoring and partnership between local and government agencies to remove the barriers those dedicated to supporting their communities through volunteer firefighting and emergency medical services.

Bibliography

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Lukens, J. (2018, February 7). *The Rural Monitor*. Retrieved from Rural Health Information Hub: <http://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/rural-monitor/ems-recruitment-retention>

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