

What strategies can Wisconsin use to recruit and retain fire and EMS volunteers?

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Last weekend, I celebrated my high school graduation with several local, volunteer fire/EMS departments. My graduating class reveled with a parade through three nearby towns. The parade was escorted by **SIX** local fire/EMS departments and they made the parade the event it was meant to be! Seeing the support that the fire/EMS departments gave to the graduating class made me feel proud of our volunteers. Their support meant a lot to our senior class.

My dad is the Town Clerk of Drummond (Bayfield County). Our fire department consists solely of volunteers. When I asked him about how to recruit more volunteers, he laughingly responded, “Let me know when you figure it out” (A. Tuttle, Personal Communication, 2020). This comment made me realize what a very real and complex problem this is. The average percentage of fire departments that are volunteer-only departments in the United States is 70.8%. In Wisconsin, this number jumps to 78.8% (U.S. Fire Administration, 2020). It is critical that we recruit new volunteers and retain our existing volunteers as well. This is not only a problem that towns are dealing with right now, but it will be a problem for the next generation, my generation. In just a few short years, the class of 2020 will be trying to answer this question again, but this time it will not be in an essay it will be in real life.

My hometown of Drummond has a population of just over 400 people. We are very fortunate and have a fire department of 15 to 20 volunteers at any given time. Nearby towns around Drummond have not been so lucky and only have three to five volunteers each. One of the reasons that Drummond has been so fortunate is because of the sense of belonging that our

volunteers have in the fire department. No one in the fire department is working alone, they are part of a team. They have a strong sense that the whole is more important than the single.

I feel a very important method to recruit more volunteers is working to eliminate the “good ol’ boy” stigma. Historically, there has been a stereotype that if you are a volunteer firefighter you are a local or you are a man or you have a certain profession. To recruit more volunteers, we need to work to put an end to this stereotype. It needs to be known that anyone can be a volunteer firefighter or EMS. We need to actively recruit women, minorities, white collar workers and anyone who doesn’t fit the traditional stereotype. In my community, we have a very diverse population of volunteer firefighters. We have men and women and young and older. We have town employees, college students, a librarian, local businessmen, law enforcement and many others who feel welcomed and appreciated in addition to simply enjoying their service and the other members of the department. I feel one of the reasons Drummond is so successful is that they have a diverse force.

Another critical aspect of recruiting and retaining fire/EMS department volunteers is the financial support they receive from the town and the community. Going hand-in-hand with this is financial planning and responsible spending by the fire department. Drummond recently built a new fire hall that had been planned for many years. Through thoughtful fundraising and input from town government this project was successful and well received by Drummond citizens. Most all citizens chipped in over the years to fund this project and proper management of the funding by the fire department resulted in a beautiful new fire hall that helps to serve Drummond and the surrounding areas. Local government support is critical, but even more so is support from citizenry.

My Dad's philosophy, which he has passed down to me, is that everyone in a community should do their part. Everyone has a role to serve, whether it is as an elected official, such as my Dad, serving on a committee, beautifying a park, or becoming a volunteer firefighter/EMS. This is what makes small towns and communities work. With everyone doing their part and pitching in towards the betterment of the community, little towns like Drummond work well and people are proud of their community.

I love my community and the northern part of Wisconsin and my plan is to return upon graduation from college. I very much intend to contribute to my town when the time comes so that it remains the wonderful town it currently is.

Bibliography

May 28, 2020. *U.S. Fire Administration; Working For A fire-safe America*. Retrieved From, <https://apps.usfa.fema.gov/registry/summary>