

Strategies Wisconsin Can Use to Recruit and Retain Fire and EMS Volunteers

From extinguishing fires, courageously rescuing victims from motor vehicle accidents, and also treating individuals suffering from injuries or illness, fire and EMS volunteers make a tremendous impact in the community. This impact of fire and EMS volunteers is very prevalent in towns throughout Wisconsin. Many Wisconsin towns depend on volunteers to provide emergency services. In fact, according to the U.S Fire Administration, 78.8% of Wisconsin Fire Departments consist of all volunteers, and 13.7% consist of mostly volunteers. With this high percentage of volunteer fire departments that serve Wisconsin towns, there does lie concern. Many communities across the United States have been experiencing a decline in the number of volunteer firefighters and EMS workers. And, this includes a decrease in Wisconsin. Strategies to recruit and retain fire and EMS volunteers must be implemented in Wisconsin to prevent this decline of volunteers.

To recruit more fire and EMS volunteers, one strategy that Wisconsin can implement is the utilization of the internet and social media sites. The internet and social media sites are spaces for social interaction where users can absorb, share, and generate content such as stories, videos, pictures, and more (*Forbes Magazine*). They are popular platforms that have become an essential part of daily life for many. By embracing these platforms, fire departments could reach the younger demographic and grow the general public's interest. First, each Wisconsin Fire Department should create an informative website. For instance, a department could generate volunteer interest by creating a website containing information about volunteers' responsibilities and how volunteering is a fantastic opportunity to serve the community. On the website, departments could provide a quick form for people to fill out so that a member of the department

can personally contact interested individuals. Secondly, a department could also use social media sites to reach prospective volunteers. By using platforms such as Youtube, Instagram, or Facebook, volunteers can share their stories of serving the community and the need for volunteers. To make this possible, local fire departments could hire social media interns from a local college. Many individuals are always looking to gain experience in their field. By providing an unpaid internship, students could even earn some college credit. The creation of a website and social media accounts could generate recruitment interest.

Another strategy to recruit volunteers is through increasing community support and awareness. Wisconsin towns could give their volunteer departments more opportunities to advertise. Communities could host open house events for fire and EMS volunteers and place flyers or signs throughout the town. Through this advertisement, more people could become aware of volunteer opportunities. At open house events, the firefighters and EMS workers could talk to town residents about the impact of being a fire or EMS volunteer. For example, my uncle is a volunteer firefighter. He has a strong sense of pride, achievement, and accomplishment in the work that he does. There are many sacrifices within this job, but he always states that serving people and saving lives is worth it. By communicating a message similar to my uncle, volunteers could inform others of the satisfaction involved in the job. Fire departments in Wisconsin could also ask high school students who are taking a business class to create signs and flyers for their department. Some of these students may even develop an interest in volunteering in the future.

Although recruitment is vital, the retainment of fire and EMS volunteers is even more critical. Strategies that Wisconsin could implement are incentives for volunteers. In a Wisconsin Public Radio article, reporter Rob Mentzer writes that a proposed 2019 Wisconsin bill would give

volunteer firefighters and EMS workers a \$300 tax credit in their first five years, and \$600 per year for those who have volunteered for five years or more. Two additional tax credits would add up to \$900 toward the cost of training and equipment. A bill similar to this 2019 proposed bill could help retain volunteers. Incentives may drive volunteers to continue serving the community for several years. Through this, Wisconsin towns would benefit greatly. Other possible incentives include reimbursements for items such as gas or food, tuition assistance, and local business discounts. By issuing incentives, long-term retainment of volunteers could improve.

Fostering a welcoming and friendly environment is another crucial aspect of the retainment of volunteers. By applying strategies that encourage departments to act with kindness, retainment of volunteers will increase. Leadership is an essential aspect of this. Leaders need to emphasize the importance of teamwork. Recruits need to feel as though they fit into the team. If recruits develop secure connections with others, they will be less likely to quit. Therefore, developing a tight-knit group of people will allow a volunteer fire and EMS team to prevail. Being a volunteer fire or EMS worker requires making several sacrifices, including taking time away from your family and possibly your job or special events. By fostering a welcoming and friendly environment, volunteer members will be more willing to accept these sacrifices because they are happy serving with their fellow volunteers. With the retention of more fire and EMS volunteers, more volunteers will make a difference in their community.

Therefore, there are several strategies that Wisconsin can implement to improve the recruitment and retention of fire and EMS volunteers. These strategies include creating a website, using social media, increasing community involvement, issuing incentives, and fostering a welcoming environment. These strategies are essential because volunteer firefighters and EMS

workers are critical to the livelihood of Wisconsin towns. Through the recruitment and retention of volunteers, whether there is a fire, accident, or health emergency, fire and EMS volunteers will be able to continue to protect the citizens of Wisconsin courageously.

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