

Help Wanted takes an in depth look at recruitment and retention in the volunteer / Paid-On-Call fire service. Get real answers from real firefighters. Learn the 5-Step process that is critical in building a successful recruitment program.

Help Wanted - Volunteer Recruitment and Retention

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# **Help Wanted**

**Recruitment & Retention  
in the Volunteer Fire Service**

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## *Introduction*

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Since the 1800's communities have depended on volunteers to provide fire protection. As the population of cities grew it became increasingly difficult for the volunteer fire departments to provide the service necessary to maintain an acceptable level of protection. As fire losses increased citizens began to push towards the transition from volunteer fire departments to career fire departments. The volunteers fought these proposed changes and there were many public debates both for and against retaining the volunteers. The development of career departments would mark a significant change in how fire protection would be delivered in many cities across the United States.

The newly created career fire departments often found themselves in uncomfortable situations when working at the same incident as the volunteer fire departments. The fire service became a public service of "us" and "them". Although the division between volunteer firefighters and career firefighters can still be found in some areas today, it certainly is not as prevalent as it was in the early 1900's.

With 825,450 volunteer firefighters in the United States (National Fire Protection Agency, 2009) volunteer fire departments continue to play an essential role in the delivery of fire protection in today's society. As a whole, these fire

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departments are better organized, equipped, and trained than ever before. Nonetheless, some organizations continue to face staffing challenges similar to their predecessors of 200+ years ago. Armed with the data from this study and the 5-step process, leaders will be able to build a long-range plan for strengthening their organization's staffing to levels that were once thought to be unobtainable.

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In addition to assessing your personnel needs you will need to assess your equipment and financial needs. For example, do you have enough personal protective equipment for the new members? Is there money in the budget for operating the recruitment program? What about the costs associated with training the new members? If your members receive monetary compensation for their time, is there enough money in the budget to cover the additional expense? Many organizations are limited as to the maximum number of members they are authorized to have at any one time. What level of service does this number allow you to provide? Is there a need to receive authorization to exceed or raise the maximum number of members you are allowed to have.

It is important to be thorough during the needs assessment process as it will drive the direction of the recruitment program. Keeping your governing body informed from the beginning will assist you in securing the necessary support and funding for the recruitment program.

### *Process Design*

The second step is designing the process of the recruitment program. There are many resources available to assist you in designing a recruitment program. I encourage you to begin by visiting the U.S. Fire Administration's website <http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/> or the Volunteer Fire Council's website <http://www.nvfc.org/> and researching the information



they have to offer. I also recommend talking to your peers at local, state, and national conferences. This is a good time to check your ego at the door; there are many organizations that have very successful recruitment programs and are willing to share their knowledge. Rather than spending your resources on building a new model, find one that works and revise it to fit your needs.

Successful recruitment programs often go beyond defining the minimum qualifications of a new member by also identifying desired characteristics. These programs look beyond an applicant's education and experience by looking for qualities that will result in a long-term relationship and are aligned with the organization's vision/mission. Many organizations search for applicants that show stability and commitment by reviewing employment histories as well as their association with other volunteer organizations. In addition, many organizations look for individuals that participate in team oriented activities and those that do not have too many competing obligations.

By defining the qualifications and characteristics of the individuals you want your organization to attract, you will also identify where to invest your marketing resources. Once you have defined the characteristics of the individual(s) that you want to join your organization, you can begin targeting the places that they will be found. For example, if you need members that can respond during the day, you will want to

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identify those that work during first shift and are permitted to respond from work, or work a later shift and do not have obligations during the day. A business that only operates during the day and does not permit their employees to leave work for emergency response is not a viable location for filling this need. When recruiting new members, soft costs such as time and energy can often exceed the hard costs such as money. Clearly defining the characteristics you wish your new members to have as well as where you will solicit new members will help to contain these costs.

Many organizations conduct their recruiting by using a process referred to as open enrollment. This process is continuous throughout the year and allows individuals to join the organization at any time. I recommend using a defined enrollment period. A defined enrollment period is easier to manage and costs less to operate. By having a defined enrollment period the time and energy of your staff and resources will be consumed over a shorter period of time. Recruitment efforts are scheduled (preferably during the same time each year) and expenses such as advertising are focused and incurred over a defined period of time.

A benefit of operating a defined enrollment period is the economies of scale received by enrolling a larger number of new members. By enrolling a larger number of new members you may qualify to host the state required training at your facility, thus reducing or eliminating expenses such as travel

and meals. In addition, you can often negotiate better pricing from vendors when purchasing larger quantities of personal protective equipment. An often overlooked benefit of defined enrollment is the camaraderie that is gained when new members have someone else to share their learning experience with. New members are likely to seek the help of those they are most comfortable with, i.e., those experiencing the same situation. Defined enrollment provides new members with the opportunity to learn with others that will be part of the same organization. This creates an environment conducive to building personal relationships and provides for a more comfortable transition into the organization.

Organizations have a tendency to shy away from defined enrollment when membership numbers are low and emergency response times are increasing. They often find themselves lowering their standards and willing to accept nearly anyone willing to serve. It is important to resist these temptations as they become self-defeating when you are working to build or maintain a healthy organization. If you are in dire straits for personnel I recommend doing two things: first, meet with the organizations surrounding your district and explain your staffing situation and plans for addressing it. Ask for their assistance in executing a short-term plan to assist with emergency responses. Second, continue using the recruitment method of defined enrollment, increase the number of enrollment periods from once a year to two or three times a

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year. This allows you to retain control of marketing expenses and when new members will be brought into your organization while increasing the number of opportunities for people to join your organization.

The shotgun approach of mass marketing for members is inefficient and unlikely to produce positive long-term results. In addition, it may attract applicants to your organization that are not aligned with your mission or vision and thus increase the time and effort involved in the screening process. Ultimately some of these applicants will find themselves as new members of your organization. Over time this will increase the turnover rate of personnel and have a negative effect on the organization's investment of time and money spent recruiting, training, and outfitting these individuals with personal protective equipment. In addition, the organization's health will continue to deteriorate because of the additional responsibilities the current members will endure over an extended period of time.

It is a vicious cycle, just as a successful recruitment program will continuously attract good applicants, an unsuccessful recruitment program will continuously provide poor results. Building a successful program is not easy and cannot be done overnight, but doing it any way but the right way should not be an option.

Considerations for implementing a defined enrollment program include:

- ✦ Define the period for accepting applications. I recommend a 4-6 week period.
- ✦ Define when interviews will be held. I recommend conducting interviews no later than 30 days after the application deadline.
- ✦ Conduct background checks
- ✦ Schedule physicals (if applicable)
- ✦ Assign a start date

Some organizations I have worked with conduct open orientations for prospective members. Those wishing to apply with the organization must attend one of several orientations to receive an application. Other organizations allow applicants to pick up an application at the station or download it off of the Department's website. All of these methods are acceptable and you should choose what works best for your organization.

Those organizations requiring attendance at an orientation are often able to attract applicants that are better aligned with their organization because the applicants learn about the organization and the commitments involved with being a member prior to applying. This is an effective method

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for filtering out applicants that do not have the time, ability, or desire to work in this profession. The downside to this method is that it requires an upfront investment of time and resources. Nonetheless, I feel the benefits of this method far outweigh the long-term costs associated with a less affective screening process. To prevent missing out on qualified applicants, I recommend holding the orientations at different times and days to meet the needs of various schedules. Regardless of the method you choose, the key is to define when the process is going to start and when it is going to end.

### ***Implementing the Plan***

Implementation is the third step in the recruitment process. During this phase you will execute the program designed during step two of the process. I recommend separating the program into specific tasks and assigning each task to an individual(s) based on the skills, abilities, and resources required to complete the task. Dividing the program into tasks will make it less intimidating and more manageable. Using a project accountability form will assist you in assigning the tasks to individuals or teams. This form clearly states the task, who is responsible for the task, and when the task is expected to be completed.

The project manager should create a master accountability form (appendix A). This form provides a macro view of the recruitment program. The master accountability

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