



Busy Fire Departments Cope With Fewer Volunteers

Small Fire Departments Field an Increasing Number of Calls with Fewer on Hand to Respond

By MICHELLE SAN MIGUEL

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Nationwide, volunteer fire departments are responding to more calls but with fewer volunteers.

Since 1984, the number of volunteer firefighters in the United States has declined by more than 8 percent, while the number of calls to fire departments has more than doubled since 1986, according to the National Volunteer Fire Council.

"It just seems to be an overall trend across the country, of departments struggling with getting new volunteers in," said Kimberly Ettinger, director of communications for the council.

For many small and medium-size communities, volunteers serve as the first line of defense during an emergency. As volunteer fire departments dwindle in size, many have been asked to do more with less.

"The main concern is safety," said volunteer firefighter Lou Szitar of the Clay Fire Department in Clay, N.Y, a suburb of Syracuse. "You don't want to jeopardize the firefighter by trying to overextend what they can do. You want to make sure that they're protected when responding."

The Difficulty of Recruiting Volunteer Firefighters

As older firefighters retire, fire departments struggle to find younger volunteers to replace them.

"The challenge is quite simply recruitment of people who are willing to take the time to get the certification it takes to be a firefighter today," said Michael Hunt, chief of the Clearwater Volunteer Fire Department in Beech Island, S.C., an Aiken County township of about 4,000 people.

About 19 miles from Beech Island in Belvedere, S.C., Assistant Chief Todd Durance of the Belvedere Fire Department also has a recruiting problem, and sees it as a twofold challenge: People are busy, and training is more demanding, said Durance, explaining that South Carolina requires volunteers to complete 300 hours to become certified.

"People are very career-oriented now," said Justin Lanzito, another Clay Fire Department volunteer. "I know once they find a job, giving back isn't a top priority," even though volunteer firefighting can require less of a commitment than many potential recruits believe.

"A lot of people have a misconceived notion that you're spending a hundred hours a week out there," said Lanzito. "In a department like this," which numbers about 40 volunteers, "it could be three or four days when you don't run a call."

Daniel Ford, Clay Fire Department's chief, recalls a very different scenario when he signed on as a Clay firefighter more than 30 years ago. "When I first joined in 1978, we had 75 active members and a waiting list," he said. "You had to wait until somebody quit."

But times have changed. Ford said he would like to have 60 volunteers to cover the department's 20-square mile district and 60,000 residents, and falls about 20 short of that.

"As the district continues to grow, that just creates more work -- more alarms for us," said Ford. "I mean, [the number of calls] are not going down. That's for sure."

Fire Departments Face Volunteer Shortages Throughout the U.S.

Volunteer fire departments across the country, in cities and rural communities, echo the same story.

Nearly three out of four firefighters are volunteers. Many of them have other jobs and can't respond to every call that comes into the fire department.

In Gearhart, Ore., a community of about 1,200 along the state's coast, Gearhart Volunteer Fire Department chief Bill Eddy said he has 26 volunteers but could use nine more. "For people who are here, it just puts a lot more demand on them as far as responding," he said.

"People in this economy work multiple jobs, which takes away their time available to spend with us," said Fire Chief Fred Windisch of Houston's Ponderosa Fire Department.

Windisch said if his department could add about 20 more volunteers to cover its 13-square mile district, its current volunteers could commit to fewer hours.



Fire fighters from the Ogallala Volunteer Fire Department put out a hay fire in an agriculture field near Paxton, Neb., in this file photo. Since 1984, the number of volunteer firefighters in the United States has declined by more than 8 percent, while the number of calls to fire departments has more than doubled since 1986, according to the National Volunteer Fire Council. (Nate Jenkins/AP Photo)

How Fire Departments Cope With Increased Calls

At the Clay Fire Department, Ford said his department can average up to 600 calls a year and has an average response time of 10 minutes, compared with nearby Syracuse, which averages a response time of three minutes or less.

For those who want a fire department to respond faster, Ford said, it's ultimately up to the taxpayers to decide what kind of fire service they want to pay for.

"When the local volunteer fire department can't get out, and unfortunately, someone's house burns or someone gets killed, or the guy down the street has a heart attack and nobody shows up within a certain amount of time, then that's going to raise a red flag to people there," said Ford.

To handle more calls with fewer volunteers, many fire departments consolidate and share resources with those in neighboring communities. Clay's Ford said that although his department has never had to transfer a call to another department because it didn't have the resources to respond, he said survival for many of the country's nearly 21,000 volunteer fire departments would hinge on combining resources -- volunteers joining ranks with career firefighters.

Before he joined the Clay Fire Department in February 2009, Ianzito said he volunteered for the Cortland Fire Department, where volunteers worked along career firefighters. He admitted that working with people who were getting paid to do what he did for free was difficult at the beginning.

"At first it is tough. It is tough to have people who get paid to do this on a nightly basis, who are getting paid at 3 a.m. to go out on a medical call versus getting up out of your warm bed to come here."

Not all communities, however, can afford to pay for career firefighters. "Cities can afford the salaries and the staffing," said Ford. "When you get out into the rural areas, they don't have the tax base in a lot of the areas to be able to afford that."

And those are often the communities that depend most heavily on volunteers. "A lot of people are moving away from those smaller communities to find jobs or better opportunities in bigger cities," said Kimberly Ettinger of the National Volunteer Fire Council.

Ultimately, said Ford, it's important to remember that these volunteers do not get paid to respond to fires.

"These guys are volunteers. They're not career people. So, you can only ask so much of them," Ford said. "And when your alarm stats are going up along with it, it becomes very demanding."

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