

Albemarle, Orange participate in study to recruit, retain volunteer firefighters

Posted: Sunday, August 4, 2013 6:28 pm

Across the state and nation, struggles to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters have hobbled fire departments. Nationally, there has been an 8-percent drop in volunteer firefighters since the 1980s. In Virginia, 70 percent of fire departments said in a study that they need more volunteers. Additionally, 62 percent of departments said they didn't have a recruitment program and 74 percent said they didn't have a retention program.

Two area fire departments are participating in the second phase of a statewide study that could change those trends.

Albemarle and Orange are two of 14 fire departments in the Everyday Heroes study, which kicked off in July. The study is funded by a \$989,000 Department of Homeland Security grant, said Nick Caputo, a member of the Virginia Fire Chiefs Association's board and the program's state level manager.

The state association is leading the study in a partnership with the International Association of Fire Chiefs; Esri, a research company; and George Mason University.

In 2011, the state association began to study how geographic information system statistics about current volunteer firefighters can make a roadmap for finding new volunteers.

The first phase of the study, which covered 2011 and 2012, was funded by a \$999,000 federal grant. Ten departments recruited using GIS information to plan targeted activities and 10 departments recruited using traditional methods.

Esri classified neighborhoods into demographic market segments and looked at which segments current firefighters fell into. Each department received a report explaining the demographic information and suggestions for what to do with it.



fire volunteers

Albemarle and Orange are two of 14 fire departments in the Everyday Heroes study, which kicked off in July. The goal of the study is to reverse declining numbers of volunteer firefighters across Virginia and the nation.

For each county, the study identifies core groups — the groups that most current firefighters are part of and that have an above average chance of being a firefighter — and developmental groups, which some current firefighters are part of but don't have an above average chance of being a firefighter.

The report gives information about lifestyle characteristics such as eating, shopping and recreation choices for core and developmental groups, so departments can know exactly where to target their efforts.

“It shows us the easy picking people,” said Kathyne Presson, director of the Albemarle Fire Corps. “The core area is already like us.”

The reports give departments examples of targeted recruitment events to reach out to core and developmental groups.

An example given to Albemarle to target developmental demographics is hosting a volunteer firefighters' day at a cell phone or electronics store to display apps people can use to keep up with public safety.

In Orange, an idea for recruiting more people from a core demographic is attending a NASCAR event to show off the engines and equipment on a fire engine.

Caputo said that for most departments, time and money for recruitment are short, so targeting specific demographic groups using GIS information maximizes results. He said departments using GIS information during the study's first phase held successful targeted events.

John Harkness, Orange County's fire and EMS chief, said he wants between 25 and 50 new volunteers to join the department in the next year. Presson said Albemarle is also hoping for at least 25 new volunteers.

While the main portion of the grant is devoted to the GIS study, Caputo said part of the money is being used to survey current firefighters about why volunteers join and why they leave.

Caputo said retention is a problem for many departments. “A lot of times they might bring in 15 [new volunteers] and lose 12 in one year,” he said.

During the first phase of the study, George Mason surveyed more than 1,800 firefighters statewide.

The survey found that lack of leadership, bad relationships and internal politics were the biggest motivators for volunteers to leave.

To try to temper that, Caputo said some grant money from this phase of study will be used to host regional leadership workshops. The first will be held in September in Augusta County. Caputo said the workshops would continue through the end of the study.

“We believe you could bring in 15 or 20 new firefighters, but if you have poor leadership, it could run people away,” Caputo said.

A portion of the grant money is also being used to help departments with marketing materials and radio and television commercials and to run the everydayhero.org website.

Caputo said he hopes the study would help find “better candidates who will stay longer. We don’t want to just take any warm bodies,” he said.

Caputo said the study is the first of its kind. Virginia’s first phase ran concurrently with a similar study in Connecticut, which also had half of the participating departments use GIS information and half use traditional recruitment techniques. But Caputo said only Virginia’s grant was renewed for the second phase.

He said GIS-based recruitment could have national impact. “Our hope is to find ways to more scientifically market to the right people to save lives and protect property,” he said.

Caputo said the fire chiefs association plans to take the study’s results on the road to national conferences.

“We’re looking for solutions that can be expanded to national volunteer service,” he said. “It’s not just Virginia, it’s a national problem, and we’re trying to use science to address the problem.”