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Volunteer firefighters getting harder to find

With high turnover rates, departments in rural areas are getting creative in their recruiting efforts.

By [Jorge Valencia](#)

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Photos by Eric Brady | The Roanoke Times

Uniforms of the 29 volunteers at Fort Lewis Volunteer Fire Department.



Becky Ayers opens a fire hydrant Wednesday during a training session in which she was learning to use the truck at Fort Lewis Volunteer Fire Department in Roanoke County.



Fort Lewis Volunteer Fire Department member Shon Nadeau (right) instructs Becky Ayers on Wednesday. Nadeau has been a volunteer for six years and Ayers for one year.

Volunteer firefighter Bobby Simmons was wiping the dust off his arms and face after helping knock down a house fire the other day when he cracked: "The way you can tell volunteers from paid firefighters is that the volunteers are the ones who got dirty."

Jabs between the paid and the unpaid are as common in local firehouses as mustaches or helmet stickers. But in rural areas such as Botetourt County, where Simmons works, it's true that volunteers get dirtier because they're the majority of the force.

What departments don't joke about is that each year they lose about as many volunteers as they keep. In response, the Virginia Fire Chiefs Association -- with help from Bedford, Botetourt and Roanoke counties -- is trying to figure out the best way to recruit new firefighters by studying where prospective volunteers eat, work and sleep.

The association is studying areas served by 10 agencies in Virginia, including the Martinsville Fire Department, through December. At the same time, it's tracking the recruitment of 10 firefighting agencies -- including the Bedford, Botetourt and Roanoke county departments -- that are putting up banners, posters and flyers with a silhouette photo of a firefighter and a slogan that baits: "Do you have what it takes?"

The Virginia association will send the results of the study to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which gave it a grant of more than \$900,000 last year to help develop a national recruitment plan for volunteers, said Jimmy Carter, executive director of the state chiefs association.

"If you recruit 50 volunteers this year, there's a good chance you'll lose 48 at the end of the year," Carter said. "During the first year, people decide to stay or not. It's always family, or job, or 'I don't really have time for this,' so they move on."

The number of firefighters in Virginia declined to about 26,500 in 2010, from 27,000 in 2009, and 27,600 in 2008, according to surveys by the Virginia Department of Fire Programs. Volunteers made up about 63 percent of the state's firefighting force during those years.

Volunteers are even more vital in rural departments. At Bedford County Fire and Rescue, 81 percent of the 264 firefighters who served the county's roughly 760 square miles last year were volunteers.

Recruitment there, as in many localities, is informal and based on word of mouth.

Firefighters fly a banner that says "WE NEED YOU" in the city of Bedford's monthly CenterFest, said fire and rescue Deputy Chief Marci Stone. For the current campaign, they've given fliers to pizza shops to give away with delivery boxes.

At the Botetourt County Office of Emergency Services, 88 percent of the 151 who served the county's roughly 550 miles last year were volunteers. And at Roanoke County Fire & Rescue, about 44 percent of the 283 firefighters who served the county's 250 rural and suburban square miles were volunteers.

In recent years, Roanoke County has recruited -- and lost -- an annual average of 75 volunteers, Chief Rich Burch said. As part of the department's recruitment campaign this year, a married firefighting couple is promoting the department and fielding questions on Facebook through a profile called Firefighters Justin & Becky and a Twitter feed called FFJustinBecky.

Bedford County is doing something similar with a Facebook profile called Firefighter Bedford, and Botetourt County with a Twitter feed called FirefighterZach.

The state fire chiefs association's only retention effort is an eight-hour leadership course held at three locations for fire company command officers.

Justin Ayers, a volunteer at the Fort Lewis Volunteer Fire Department in Roanoke County, said he's honest when friends or co-workers at the Medeco lock factory ask him about his volunteer work.

He's had highs, like the time he helped stop a chimney fire from spreading to the rest of the house. And he's had lows, like the time he saw a man who was thrown from a car in a drunken-driving crash.

"I suggest they come in and watch how things work, and talk to a few more people," Ayers said. "Fire and rescue is not for everybody. I'm straight up."

At a two-story white house north of Fincastle in Botetourt County on Wednesday morning, volunteer and paid firefighters scouted the location for flames and charged through the back porch. Within minutes, they doused the flames shooting from a second-floor window with a hose from the inside.

Volunteer Jonathan Simmons, 19, was one of the responders, and the scene he saw was not unlike the first house fire he went to when he was 16 and still a student at Lord Botetourt High School.

"It's a big sense of accomplishment when you get here, the house is on fire, and when you leave everything is OK," said Simmons, fighting the blaze with his brother, Bobby, 35.

Jonathan Simmons, though, doesn't know how much longer he will be volunteering for Botetourt County. He's a second-year engineering student at James Madison University, he said, and when he graduates he'll move to wherever he finds a job.