

Fire departments try to extinguish staffing crisis

Olga Hajishengallis, USA TODAY 6:58 p.m. EDT September 29, 2013

Some fire departments turn to paid staff and stipends to attract and keep firefighters.



Red River Parish Fire District firefighters, from left, Ryan Smith, Jeremy Neal and Fire Chief Shane Felts discuss the repair of a fire truck.(Photo: Vickie Welborn, The Shreveport Times)

Story Highlights

- Volunteer recruitment and retention are problems for fire departments nationally
- Departments are turning to paid positions and incentives such as pay per call
- Some departments receive assistance from grants for better recruitment

Fire departments across the nation are establishing paid positions, increasing stipends and seeking assistance from government grants as they face challenges attracting and keeping volunteer personnel.

Ken Willette, division manager of Public Fire Protection at the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), said recruiting and maintaining volunteers in fire departments is "an ongoing challenge nationwide by large and small departments across the country."

"We are seeing communities cannot attract the number of volunteers they need anymore," Willette said. Two major challenges, Willette said, are time and location. The training for volunteer firefighters is equal to the training of career firefighters, making it difficult for individuals to fit that into their schedules, he said.

Most volunteers, he said, no longer regularly work where they live, so the possibility of businesses allowing employees to leave and fight a fire has greatly diminished. Plus, they don't have the time for routine tasks such as maintaining trucks.

Of the nation's approximately 1.1 million firefighters, 31% were paid career firefighters in 2011, leaving the majority of fire departments to be staffed by volunteers, according to the NFPA's latest statistics.

John Hall, division director of Fire Analysis and Research at the NFPA, said there was an 8.6% decrease in volunteer firefighters from 2008 to 2011. Hall said not-yet-released numbers for 2012 show that downward trend stopped last year, but he cautioned that may be temporary.

Though replacement of volunteers with paid positions is a growing national trend, Willette said it is not happening in great numbers. He said he has seen fire departments across the nation start by giving stipends to volunteers, then gradually transition to "career fully paid positions."

Recent examples include:

- The Red River Parish Fire District in Louisiana plans to move to about 14 paid full-time firefighter positions (in addition to about 70 volunteers) starting early next year, said Shane Felts, Red River Parish fire chief. Under a trial run, the district has four paid, part-time firefighters. The plan is expected to be officially approved in November, Felts said.
- This month, the city of North Liberty, Iowa, approved a plan replacing a yearly \$500 stipend for volunteer firefighters with a flat stipend per call, which depends on years of service, City Administrator Ryan Heiar said. If one responds to less than 18% of the calls during a quarter, he will receive \$7-\$13 per call. If the volunteer goes on 18% or more of the calls, he will receive \$8-\$14 per call.
- Several fire departments in Virginia receive assistance from government grants to help them recruit volunteers through the Volunteer Workforce Solutions program funded by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, said Nick Caputo, program manager for the Virginia Fire Chiefs Association.
- Over the past 10 years, Davidson County, N.C., has seen more paid positions created in its fire departments, said Danny Ward, the county's fire marshal. He said that although volunteer numbers were good, participation was low. Twenty-three of the 26 volunteer fire departments in the county have paid positions of some type, he said.

When Felts was voted as Red River Parish fire chief in 2007, he already had a full-time job. He works for the department as a paid part-time employee, while he hopes to become a full-time employee next year. He said the move to paid positions will help "because there will be people at the department 24/7 instead of only 8-4."

"We don't just pack up and leave after 4 p.m.," Felts said, adding that the part-time employees volunteer their time after hours.

Full-time positions would make for a more immediate response time, Felts said, as there will be firefighters in the station at all times.

"That way when the bell rings, they jump in the truck and leave," he said.

In addition to recruitment, Caputo and Heiar said, their measures aim to improve the retention of volunteer firefighters.

"If we recruit the right people upfront, they come in and stay," Caputo said.

Contributing: Vickie Welborn, The (Shreveport, La.) Times