GIS to Assist in Virginia's Recruitment of Volunteer Firefighters

In today's fast paced environment, the fire service is always looking for the quickest ways to produce the best results. The Virginia Fire Chiefs Association (VFCA), in partnership with the IAFC, is hoping that its "experimental" study, the Volunteer Workforce Solutions (VWS) Program, will provide a more effective and efficient method for helping fire chiefs recruit and retain volunteer firefighters. The VWS Program is being funded by SAFER grant funds.
The VFCA and IAFC understand that the mere mentioning of "R&R" requires a lot of time, energy and funds that do not always produce positive results. The VWS is taking a fresh, new, "outside of the box" approach to "R&R" by utilizing Geographic Information Systems, or GIS, to explore new ways of recruiting volunteers.

The Virginia VWS program could potentially change the way that the volunteer fire service recruits firefighters. The volunteer fire service is also just beginning a similar program in Connecticut.

The VWS program is based on the premise that a GIS-based citizen profile analysis can provide information to assist with identifying the best candidates for the volunteer fire service. The profile analysis helps identify certain personal characteristics, locations and neighborhoods as to where the best candidates live, and the best ways to communicate a "R&R" message to them. The VFCA enlisted Esri and Intterra to perform the detailed citizen profile analysis. Esri is the world's leading GIS software manufacturer and Intterra provides the analytical tools and fire service subject-matter expertise for the project. Esri's Tapestry Segmentation system was used to perform the detailed citizen profile analysis. The goal of VWS Program is to provide a roadmap for an individual community to identify the neighborhood characteristics in which their current firefighters live and, based on that knowledge, suggest recommendations to advance their future efforts to recruit and sustain volunteer firefighters.

Esri's Tapestry Segmentation classifies US residential neighborhoods into 65 distinct market segments. The distinctions between the market segments are based on key determinants of citizen behavior such as income, source of income, employment, home value, housing type, occupation, education, household composition and age. Tapestry Segmentation combines the "who" of lifestyle demography with the "where" of local neighborhood geography to create a model of various lifestyle classifications (segments) of actual neighborhoods, each with distinct behavioral market segments. Identifying these Tapestry Segments was the foundation in the development of the VWS Program's GIS-based marketing campaign –**Everyday Hero VA.**

Each of the ten departments involved in the GIS portion of the program received a customized Tapestry Segmentation Report specific to their community profile. The report graphically maps and identifies the following groups:

> **Core Group**: Segments within the community where a majority of its current firefighters live, and where potential recruits have the opportunity to interact with firefighters on a regular basis.
> **Developmental Group**: Segments within the community where higher proportions of firefighters live and offer good opportunities for recruitment.
> **Niche Group:** Segments within the community that identifies an area where a very small number of firefighters live, and will have little impact on recruitment strategies.

The VWS Program has also revealed the need for dedicated volunteer coordinators in our communities. Volunteer Coordinators can provide unified messages, quick response rates to potential volunteer candidates, consistent media contacts, current advertising and marketing materials, and reliable record keeping systems.

An informational, state-wide survey of Virginia's firefighters was also conducted as part of the VWS Program. One key finding of the survey shows that the most effective means to get a prospective volunteer candidate in the door is through personal contact with a current firefighter. In this email and social networking age, the survey found that having face-to-face discussions with a potential candidate elicits a much more positive response from a potential candidate. The face-to-face interaction with a volunteer firefighter allows the potential candidate to self identify with that firefighter as a citizen of the same community that has stepped up to volunteer and help protect those within their community. Esri's Tapestry Segmentation gives departments a clearer picture of their community and allows the department to focus their recruitment efforts at specific events and types of venues that are most likely to deliver a higher return on their recruitment efforts while using fewer resources.

The state-wide firefighter survey also provided some insight related to retention efforts. It is common knowledge that it is much easier to recruit volunteer firefighters than it is to retain them. The survey found that one of the top reasons individuals leave the volunteer fire service is due to family life changes; however, there is not much a department can do to address these changes other than being flexible and supportive during these times. Another survey finding is that the lack of leadership, both on the fireground and in the firehouse, has been listed as one of the main reasons firefighters leave the fire service. Strong leadership, at ALL levels of the organization, is absolutely essential for achieving and maintaining high morale and subsequently increasing your volunteer retention rates.

At the conclusion of the VWS Program, a qualitative and quantitative analysis will be made between departments using traditional recruitment methods and departments using GIS based Tapestry Segmentation methods.

The Virginia and Connecticut Fire Chiefs, leading the way in these groundbreaking programs, look forward to sharing the successes and lessons learned with the fire service community. More information on the survey report and analysis can be found at www.vfca.us.