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## FIREFIGHTER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION IDEAS YOU CAN USE

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BY WALTER A. MORRIS

Rockland County, New York, like many areas throughout the nation, has felt the impact of the declining number of men and women volunteering for the fire and emergency medical services. The county's 26 all-volunteer fire departments protect 285,000 residents in an area located about 40 miles northwest of New York City. These departments face the same recruitment and retention limitations identified in national fire service studies: a more mobile society, more demands on time, both parents working, other involvements, demanding training standards, and an increasing number of alarms. Five years ago, recruit and advanced fire training classes were regularly canceled because of lack of enrollment.

Through the effective use of a strong mutual-aid system, Rockland's volunteer firefighters continue to mitigate large fires, haz-mat incidents, and other emergencies. Volunteer fire service and EMS leaders applied the mutual-aid concept to the recruitment and retention issue, setting up several interdisciplinary committees to define the recruitment and retention problems and propose and execute high-yield solutions countywide.

They established the Rockland County Creative Approach to Fire Protection Committee, a group of fire service leaders whose specific purpose was to focus solely on recruitment and retention. According to its mission statement, the group's purpose is "to cultivate the public's awareness, respect, appreciation, and support of the volunteer emergency services." The committee meets monthly; all county fire and EMS organizations are represented. It works with local government boards and businesses to promote the volunteer emergency services. Since it was apparent that many residents and business owners were unaware that volunteers staff the county's emergency services, the committee developed an aggressive marketing strategy and

The committee collected data to demonstrate the financial benefits of maintaining effective volunteer emergency services in the county. Although respect and appreciation for volunteers is wonderful, the bottom line should always be grounded in sound financial management. The fire protection committee surveyed fire departments, ambulance corps, municipalities, and corporations for data in important areas such as membership, taxes, and insurance costs. Once it established sound financial reasons that justified the volunteer services, it examined the personal motivation of volunteers, asking them to explain why they chose to volunteer so that it could target and focus our recruitment efforts.

Next, the committee initiated a comprehensive study of fire protection in the county to determine how to provide fire protection more cost effectively and to reduce the financial burden on property owners. The committee looked at the Insurance Service Office (ISO) grading and its effect on fire insurance premiums. Tom Torpey, a 15-year veteran volunteer firefighter and an employee of the Ducey Insurance Agency, provided documentation regarding fire insurance premium discounts based on ISO ratings. Improving ISO ratings could reduce property owner fire insurance rates. The fire protection committee hosted a series of ISO requirement workshops and helped each fire department prepare for its ISO survey. Ultimately, all 26 fire departments were able to lower their ISO ratings on average from 5 to 3; some of Rockland's volunteer fire departments now have an ISO rating of 2! As a result, many homeowners and commercial building owners are now saving hundreds of dollars each year in insurance premiums. George Doremus, a former chief of the Tallman (NY) Volunteer Fire Department and a committee member, reported that his homeowner's policy annual premium dropped by more than \$100 because of his community's lower ISO rating!

To further demonstrate the financial advantages of a volunteer fire department, the committee conducted comparative studies of volunteer fire departments with similar-size career departments. One study, comparing the all-volunteer New City (NY) Fire Engine Company No. 1 with the career-staffed Hackensack (NJ) Fire Department, revealed that New City's annual operating budget was approximately \$3 million less than that of the New Jersey department. A recently released report by the Firemen's Association of the State of New York revealed that the state's volunteer firefighters save New York taxpayers more than \$2.9 billion each year.

When the fire protection committee shared this information with county residents, business leaders, and elected officials, many individuals offered to assist the committee. To make these

individuals part of our team, we formed the Committee to Promote Volunteerism in Rockland County Emergency Services, Inc. Organized like an ICS flowchart with assigned duties and responsibilities, the volunteerism subcommittee includes a public information officer and liaisons to other groups such as the county legislature and town and village boards.

### **PROMOTING VOLUNTEERISM**

The volunteerism subcommittee invited the leaders of the 50 largest county businesses to its first activity, the Heroes Breakfast. During this event, held at the county fire training center, the volunteerism group explained how volunteer fire and EMS agencies benefit the community and how they needed financial and other support to maintain their vital services. This single event raised more than \$38,000, providing important financial support for projects such as the publication of a brochure designed to educate new residents on the need for more fire service and EMS volunteers. The brochures are distributed to new residents by real estate agents.

Since that event, we have developed a strong relationship with the Rockland Business Association (RBA), which recognized the benefit of supporting volunteerism and thereafter formed the Emergency Service Task Force to help the volunteerism subcommittee. The volunteerism committee and task force members attend each other's monthly meetings. The RBA Task Force support includes setting up booths in local shopping malls to promote volunteerism, offering free legal advice, and funding for continuous marketing campaigns.

Additionally, the RBA has supported our Volunteer Incentive Program (VIP), through which retailers offer local volunteer firefighters and EMS providers discounts (photo 1). The VIP targets businesses younger members patronize, including movie theaters, restaurants, clothing stores, and automobile repair shops.

Business owners could see the bottom line value of such a program and also the satisfaction gained in helping firefighters and EMS workers. We had captured the energy of both financial and personal motivation on a number of different fronts.

Local elected officials have recognized the volunteerism subcommittee's many activities. Rockland County Executive C. Scott Vanderhoef welcomed the business leaders at our Heroes Breakfast and has supported our many activities. The county legislature has created a Recruitment and Retention Intergovernmental Task Force, which recently provided \$50,000 in funding for a community college tuition assistance program for volunteer firefighters and other emergency services volunteers.



1 Photos courtesy of author unless other- wise noted.

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Photos 2, 3 by Frank Hutton.

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The volunteerism committee also established the Fire and EMS Youth Academy, open to all Rockland County high school students. The academy, which meets for six evening sessions and one Saturday session, introduces participants to the fire and emergency services. Students are exposed to fire department and ambulance corps operations, and all participants receive basic first aid training and CPR certification. More than 90 percent of the participants indicate that they plan to become volunteer firefighters or EMS providers as a result of the positive experiences provided in the Youth Academy. Many participants go on to join the county Fire Explorer Post.

The Rockland County Fire Explorer Post 44, a co-ed collaboration between of the Boy Scouts of America and the Rockland Fire Training Center, has been functioning successfully for more than 10 years. We have maintained an average of 15 active members between the ages of 14 and 17. The Explorers hold two three-hour meetings each month at the training center, each involving a hands-on demonstration or classroom experience. Generally, there is some instruction followed by an opportunity to execute the skills demonstrated.

Fire companies from across the county supply apparatus and equipment with trained firefighters (many of them former Explorers) to assist and coach the boys and girls through evolutions. Safety is a major issue; evolutions are kept within safe limits for these inexperienced but highly motivated, future firefighters. The program has been a source of new members for all departments in Rockland County (photos 2, 3).

## **MEDIA INVOLVEMENT**

From the beginning, we realized the importance of good media relations and asked representatives of our local newspapers and radio station to share their expertise with us. The Journal News, a local daily newspaper, has continually provided excellent reporting on our activities and editorial support. News reports of major fires and emergencies note that the responders are volunteers, and the media have also provided more exposure for nonemergency events. For example, when the Haverstraw Fire Department held a muster to commemorate its 150th anniversary, several antique apparatus pumped water through the downtown area of the village. The newspaper featured several photographs of this relay operation along with an article detailing the history of the department's volunteer fire service.

A weekly newspaper published a series documenting a reporter's participation in a recruit firefighter training program. The reporter was so impressed by the camaraderie of the volunteer firefighters and their training that he joined his local fire department and soon became one of its most active volunteers.



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This good working relationship with the media resulted in a weekly half-hour program "Who Wants to Be a Volunteer?" co-hosted by Fire Coordinator Gordon Wren, Jr. This provides a regular forum for promoting the volunteer fire and EMS services to more than 20,000 Rockland residents. Veteran firefighter and committee member Frank Hutton operates the controls as residents call in with questions or comments regarding the volunteer emergency services. Topics have included discussions of recent emergencies and fire prevention tips. The response to this program has been very positive, and a local bank underwrites all costs for the program as a public service. Recent programs have focused on the need for affordable housing for volunteers (photo 4).

The many programs that have been implemented have been successful in recruiting volunteers

for Rockland's emergency services. Since this effort began five years ago, every agency has reported significant increases in membership. The most dramatic proof of our success is the fact that nearly all of the training classes at the county fire training center are now full; it's a struggle to offer enough Firefighter I classes to meet the demand. Our most recent Firefighter I class was filled within 24 hours of the distribution of the class announcement.

## **RETENTION**

The fire protection committee is now working on leadership and affordable housing, two issues that will affect the future of the volunteer emergency service in the county. After new members have been recruited, the organization must retain them as productive members. Below are some innovative and successful retention initiatives.

Much of the group's success is the result of defining problems and creating innovative team-oriented solutions based on the local research. This ensured that the programs were targeted to the proper audience. When the group began meeting, we asked, "Why do people volunteer?" According to our research involving all types of volunteers, not just those in the emergency services, the reasons are as follows:

- to help others (97 percent);
- enjoy the work (93 percent);
- like the added responsibility (75 percent); and
- someone they knew asked them (59 percent).

When we polled our volunteer fire and EMS responders on what impelled them to serve, they wanted

- to serve the community;
- to do something different;
- to participate in meaningful, team-oriented activity;
- to use their personal skills;
- to experience the physical and mental challenge;
- to do a special, complicated job; and
- to enjoy the sense of "family."

We designed the brochures, posters, video programs, and other marketing tools with these responses in mind. However, any agency facing the challenge of recruiting and retaining volunteers need not reinvent the wheel. Many excellent resources are available from the United States Fire Administration, the National Volunteer Fire Council, and the International Association of Fire Chiefs. Check with your state and local fire service organizations; many offer practical assistance for recruitment and retention activities.

Recruiting new firefighters is only part of the equation. To maintain an adequate staffing level for your organization, retaining volunteers is equally important. In Rockland County, we are focusing on two major retention issues, leadership and affordable housing.

You need good leaders to retain the volunteers you recruit. Anyone involved in firefighter recruitment and retention should become a student of good leadership; there are no effective organizations with ineffective leaders! Some organizations have implemented effective recruitment programs and have attracted many new members only to have them leave within a few years because their leaders did not provide the training and mentoring new members need.

Among the leadership training programs available is the excellent Volunteer Fire Service Leadership and Administration for the 21st Century program, sponsored by the Volunteer and Combination Section of the International Association of Fire Chiefs. The fire protection committee and the Rockland County Fire Chiefs Association sponsored this seminar for our firefighters. The county fire training center also developed a fire service leadership training program. Fire Department of New York Battalion Chief John Salka recently attended one of our County Fire Chiefs Association meetings to share his leadership lessons and sign copies of his new book *First In, Last Out: Leadership Lessons from the New York Fire Department*.

Affordable housing is a second major issue the committee is addressing. In the rapidly growing suburbs of New York City, the demand for housing is escalating, and the median price of housing in Rockland County has increased more than 50 percent in the past three years! Property taxes continue to climb, and many long-time residents are moving out of the county. Many young people join their local fire departments or ambulance corps but are forced to resign when they cannot find local affordable housing.

The fire protection committee has developed a partnership with the Rockland Housing Action Coalition, Inc. (RHAC), a not-for-profit agency that develops affordable housing. The RHAC has helped us educate municipal representatives on the need to build or renovate cost-effective homes for volunteers. The committee and the RHAC are also offering financial planning

assistance for emergency service volunteers so they can realize the dream of home ownership.

We are now working with the various town and village governments to make them aware of the volunteers' need for affordable housing. Since the ideal location for affordable housing is near fire stations and ambulance corps headquarters, the fire and EMS agencies in each town are forming their own coalitions to identify possible locations for these affordable housing projects.

In Piermont, New York, the local volunteer fire department now owns a six-unit apartment building (just a block from the fire station) that provides housing for six volunteer firefighters and their families (photo 5). In Nyack, New York, a builder is now constructing a new two-story building that will house a food market on the first floor and apartments for volunteer firefighters on the second; in Orangeburg, New York, some houses on property formerly owned by New York State will soon be renovated and sold to emergency service volunteers.

Successfully recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters and EMS providers in Rockland County has been accomplished because of the hard work and dedication of many individuals. These innovative leaders realized that we could accomplish more by working together. Remember, mutual aid is not just for emergencies!

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