

Final Report

Recruitment and Retention Task Force for Volunteer Firefighters, Volunteer Ambulance Personnel, and Volunteer Emergency Responders in Minnesota

*Report to the Commissioner of Public Safety
December 15, 2006*



Introduction

Numerous documents have been generated to address the issue of recruitment and retention across the nation. The majority of these documents appear to have a common theme—that workforce development and leadership are more of an issue than recruitment and retention. Many departments that demonstrate strong local leadership either in the fire service or in the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) industry seem to have more successful staffing levels. Without a strong leader or dedicated lead person many fire and EMS services will continue to struggle with a vision and a plan to face the workforce problem currently and in the future.

As John Becknell Publisher from EMS best practice writes: “**Workforce planning can help solve your Recruitment and Retention problems.**”

Unfortunately in order to develop a plan to address these issues someone in a department must take the lead. Many departments do not have the dedicated staff or lead person to accomplish this type of workforce planning. Many fire chiefs or EMS leaders are volunteers and face other issues more pressing than workforce development. Without strong and well trained leadership, the workforce will continue to struggle.

The Gallup organization states that the number one reason employees leaves their positions is due to their direct relationship with their supervisor. Can we succeed in developing programs and secure funding to assist EMS and fire leadership in developing skills to become better leaders to help maintain the current work force?

We have noticed that some communities have large staff rosters, while others have few responders to answer the call. It appears that communities with a local employer base and good-paying jobs are able to staff their EMS and fire service.

The fire and EMS community should be willing to discuss and work on long-term workforce planning in order to improve recruitment and retention. Questions to ask and issues to consider include:

- Consolidated systems that can afford a dedicated paid leadership position.
- Determine where future employees and volunteers will come from in the future.
- What can be done to ensure there is a response by trained personnel as some services may close or not always be available locally?
- Work out mutual aid coverage plans during the day when staffing in some communities is non-existent. (Preset mutual aid paging).

Additional conclusions and recommendations are available within this report.

Executive Summary

The 2006 Minnesota Legislature passed legislation directing the Commissioner of Public Safety to coordinate the formation of a task force. This task force will study the issues surrounding recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters, volunteer ambulance personnel, and volunteer emergency responders. Task force membership was open to all stakeholders demonstrating an interest in the issue. The task force was to be responsible for any cost associated with gathering the data for this project. The task force was co-chaired by the Minnesota Fire Chiefs Association and the Minnesota Ambulance Association, who agreed to cover all costs associated with this task force. The report is due back to the Commissioner of Public Safety by December 15, 2006.

The task force was made up of the following associations:

- Minnesota Ambulance Association
- Minnesota Fire Chiefs Association
- League of Minnesota Cities
- Minnesota Association of Townships
- Minnesota State Fire Department Association
- Minnesota Professional Firefighters Association

The task force gathered data using the following methods:

- 1- E-mailed survey to all the above listed industry associations membership listservs.
- 2- Researched best practices from other states and reviewed related articles.
- 3- Conducted outreach meetings in the following communities.
 - Mountain Iron
 - Monticello
 - Albert Lea
 - Marshall
 - EMS Leadership Summit at Mille Lacs Casino

The purpose of distributing the survey and holding outreach meetings was to gather data and hear from those who are currently “living” the issues everyday. This information would assist in developing a strategic plan to address recruitment and retention issues. At the conclusion of the meetings, it was extremely apparent that the issue is broader than just recruitment and retention. The industry faces more of a workforce issue; this trend is noticeable on a state and a national level in all aspects of emergency services.

The attached findings and recommendations are merely a start to a much needed ongoing process of addressing the emergency services workforce issue in Minnesota. As rural areas continue to see a decline in population, the pool of volunteers for EMS, fire, and first responders will continue to decline. Surprisingly enough, many metro fire departments with large populations continue to have a workforce shortage also.

Conclusions

The previous documents discussed ideas that might hopefully lead to options and answers in addressing the recruitment and retention issues facing Minnesota. Feedback received from the outreach meetings and surveys resulted in more questions than answers. However, the task force believes Minnesota's workforce issues could be impacted if a dedicated employee to address and commit time to work on the workforce issue long term. The task force does not believe another study will answer the problem. Numerous reports across the country have identified the same issues and concerns.

The issue at hand is a workforce issue. Those in attendance and those who replied to the surveys told us that something needs to be done this time around. Results are needed to ensure that the safety and well-being of Minnesota citizens and visitors to our state will not be jeopardized due to a lack of responders available to answer the call.

The task force felt strongly that the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and fire industries have a need for dedicated employees who can share data and work with other state agencies to ensure the availability of emergency services in Minnesota. Nationally, the number of potential employees is declining and will continue to decline as the "baby boomer" generation retires from the workforce. It is well documented that our industries will be greatly affected. In particular the declining number of available trained medical responders is staggering, and indeed demonstrates a significant situation right now that has no indication of relief. We owe it to the public to actively pursue and develop solutions to minimize the impact of the workforce issue.

The task force has discussed the option of creating two positions that would work within state government to address the workforce issue and how it affects the EMS and fire industries. One position would work in the Fire Marshalls office and could be funded with the new fire fund approved during the 2006 legislative session. The second position could be funded and housed through the office of Rural Health and Primary Care. These two positions could work with all the effected trade associations; they could also identify and develop relationships with other key stake holders that can assist with working towards solving the workforce issue. By being housed within state government, these positions can work as neutral parties to assist with consolidation and address issues that arise between departments.

Our state has a strong history of working together to address issues and make things work. Two people coordinating some of this activity could be extremely beneficial to the health of the EMS and fire industry. It is important to utilize current strong industry leadership working with the dedicated staffers to develop the future of the emergency services industries. The industry leaders provide a voice, experiences, and the background that is needed for the dedicated staffers to provide resources, and guidance.

In closing, numerous studies have been conducted across the nation. It seems that all the studies say the same thing: "we have a problem." The task force believes it is time to work on creating some tangible remedies.

Best Practices

Throughout the state numerous EMS and fire departments have successfully recruited and retained personnel. Below is a list of “best practices” that have helped communities continue to meet the challenge of workforce planning. It is important to stress that this success in recruitment and retention is helpful, but is not solving the larger workforce issue.

- Some EMS and fire services have partnered with school districts to train firefighters and EMTs while they are seniors in high school. During their senior year, if they are 18 years of age, they assist the fire/first responder and ambulance service by responding to calls. This training and life experience allows them to respond when they move to other communities.
- Employers that allow staff trained in emergency services to respond to calls has been successful in large and small companies in rural and urban areas. A related solution allows firefighters and emergency responders to train with their home department and then cover and respond to calls in the communities in which they work away from their home service during their shift at their place of employment.
- Mutual aid pre-arrangements also seemed to be a best practice in certain communities. For example, Marshall fire and EMS covers the surrounding smaller communities during the day with a preset dual page. Most of the surrounding small communities’ fire service members travel to Marshall to work. To ensure a rapid response, the Marshall Fire Department is paged during the day to neighboring small communities. Also, the small communities attend Marshall’s training to be able to assist them during the day in the event of a major incident.
- A first responder child daycare program appears to work in communities and allows parents who are at home to serve their local emergency services. A daycare provider or “on-call baby sitter” agrees to be available for short-notice drop off of a child. The daycare provider is reimbursed at a higher rate by the department or the service is provided free by volunteer baby sitters who carry pagers and respond to the station. At one station a room was set up for baby sitting, making it a safe and fun environment for children and the baby sitters during calls.
- Onsite training of emergency responders was a theme at most outreach meetings. Providers did not want to leave their community to train; they wanted the training delivered to them. Other states have incorporated training in rural areas via live web casting or other means that allow for interactive instruction. So one instructor teaches to many, at real time.
- Numerous surveys and comments stated that departments which are managed and run like professional operations seemed to experience less turnover. In particular, respondents stressed the importance of hiring standards, psychological evaluations, and a strong interview and testing process. Some department leaders pointed out that those individuals who completed the process seemed to stay involved and take ownership in the department.

Possible Legislative Initiatives

Below is a list of legislative recommendations that were discussed at the outreach meetings.

- 1- **Access to Minnesota Health Care program**—Many respondents to our surveys and outreach meetings discussed and requested access to the MN Health Care program. They felt paying a reduced rate for insurance may be an incentive to garner local interest in volunteering for emergency services.
- 2- **Tax incentives for individuals**—An annual tax deduction for volunteers who serve on a fire or EMS service.
- 3- **Tax incentives for business**—An annual deduction for employers that allow their employees to leave and participate in the fire and or EMS services in their communities.
- 4- **First responder reimbursement**—Require insurance companies to reimburse for medical calls for non-transport agencies responding to calls.
- 5- **Training issues/Funding**—Look at the training money appropriated and ensure more access and decisions on a local level. MNSCU may not always be the best spot to spend the money. Can a private training company or department get access to state funding?
- 6- **Tort reform**—Liability insurance is a big issue with non-governmental based providers. Some have realized a 300 percent increase in premiums since 9-11, which takes away money they use to be competitive with salaries.
- 7- **Pensions**—Develop an EMS pension comparable to the fire service for volunteers. Ensure the fire pensions stay funded at current levels.
- 8- **Dedicated leadership development employee fire service**—Assign a person in the Fire Marshall's office to assist with statewide work force issues. Perhaps fund this position through the fire fund.
- 9- **Dedicated leadership development employee EMS system**—Assign a person to work in the Rural Health and Primary Care division of MDH.
- 10- **EMS taxing districts**—Remove sunset from EMS taxing district language allowing long-term commitment to taxing dollars for EMS operation.
- 11- **Consolidation grants**—Develop a program funded through the Office of Rural Health and Primary Care to support EMS services that would like to consolidate services.
- 12- **Regional program funding**—Minnesota has eight regional EMS programs that are coordinated through out the state to assist with many of these issues. Over the last five years, their funding has been cut drastically.

The Minnesota State Fire Chiefs Association and the Minnesota Ambulance Association will take the lead in the legislative initiatives. The two organizations will need to work closely with other associations, industry and key partners to position for a successful legislative session.

Feedback From Surveys

What makes me want to volunteer?

- The ability to help out my community to make it a little safer to live in.
- I have been on a volunteer F.D. for 16 years. I originally started after watching “rescue 911”, yeah I know, kind of corny, but as time goes on I find belonging to a group, the comrade, and always being able to do something new or different (i.e.: work on committees, work on grants, fire prevention, go to instructor school on a new topic) which keeps me energized and focused. I also find the community involvement in our fund raisers and community support helps keep me motivated.
- The feeling of knowing we are giving back to our community.
- It’s a way to give back to the city and help the unfortunate out.
- Being able to put my skills to work, seeing how working together and caring can make a difference.
- Desire to help the community.
- I believe we are here to take care of each other and should do so at each stage of our lives as we are able to. It is also a wonderful learning opportunity.
- Helping our community and people
- To serve an important need
- Community service
- To help people
- Enjoy helping people
- Keep up license
- Community needed
- I think that this is as unique as each individual. There are many reasons for people to join. Some that come to mind quickly are: adrenaline rush, family ties, 911 (patriotism), friendship association, desire to do good for fellow people, and many others. Most start off their service being “gung ho” and attend as much training as possible at the area sectional schools. Usually at this time in their life they do not have other commitments pulling them back. As time goes on, and commitments increase, the challenge is to keep their interest in the department. I believe that instead of looking for 20 year people we, in this service, need to focus on 10 – 15 years. After this time frame, most are burnt out and losing interest in the fire service.

How far do I travel from my work to the station and when am I available for calls?

- I travel about 20 miles to the water patrol office one way and am usually available for calls at night.
- I work 10 miles from our fire hall. I work at our county 911 center and cannot leave work. I work rotating shifts and have permanent days off during the week.
- We have a paid Director to take day call from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., this was a result of a Rural Ambulance Assessment done by the EMSRB, and funded by the Rural Flex Grant for one year.
- We have 2 other EMT volunteers available for call during the day, the other 9 volunteers work greater than 12 miles for our station and are not able to respond until after 5:30.
- 2 blocks – most days and nights.
- If I work from home I am available for calls but if I go into the office I'm not.
- Few blocks, weekdays.
- ½ mile, I am only available nights and weekends.
- 8 blocks
- 1 block 20 24 hour shifts a month
- 30 minutes, I work weekends only.
- 25 miles, nights and weekends only.
- 2 blocks
- 30 miles, evenings only
- 3 blocks
- Most of our staff live and work within our community. In recent years we have had to extend the “normal response” guidelines for our department. It used to be that you needed to reside within two miles of the fire station. Then we went to live and work within 3 minutes of the fire station and can be 10 minutes from the station if your primary work has you in town for the majority of each day. We also have adopted a policy that allows for up to 6 members to reside outside of these guidelines. Each would need to be voted upon by our membership committee. Currently we are at 32 members and only 1 is outside the “normal” response guidelines.

Does your employer allow you to leave work for calls?

- Yes and no. Right now I may be able to leave sometimes, but that's about to change soon.
- No. I am a 911 dispatcher so I am working the "other" end of the call.
- We have 2 volunteers who are able to leave work for ambulance calls, (one of them does frequently, the other only on an emergency notice, if a staff person is ill for example.)No, I'm too far away unless I'm at home and not in a meeting.
- Yes
- Yes
- No
- No
- Self-employed, allow my employees to take calls.
- No
- No
- Work out of town
- No
- Most are very accepting and support fire service. There are a few that do not get paid while on a call.
- Yes

Do you need to make up your lost work time when you leave calls?

- Yes, sometimes that may be that I will have to come in and work on the weekend.
- Yes, both of our volunteers must make-up lost work time.
- Yes, if there is work to be done (which there always is).
- No
- Yes
- No, neither do my employees
- No
- Some do
- No

What would entice you as an incentive to stay involved with your volunteer organization?

- A pension plan, part-time licensing program. My fiancé would like more lenient time obligations.
- We are struggling with this issue; we currently pay our volunteers for time spent on a call but, not for call time. It just seems to be the general consensus that we would have more volunteers if they were paid for call time taken.
- A well run and organized organization. One where people are working together and not fighting each other. An organization that isn't afraid to take people's ideas and try them. An organization that isn't afraid of change. I think training opportunities such as the National Fire Academy, FDIC, MN state fire schools, etc. Keep members motivated also.
- Free or low medical through the city/state after 20 years of service.
- As long as I can, but some benefits would be nice.
- More volunteers.
- Better compensation, less federal mandatory training.
- Some type of additional income.
- Compensation
- I will always stay involved no matter what.
- More pay
- I would like to take less nights
- I believe that the pension plan is the one and ONLY tool that we have. We need to have something that is out there to entice them to stay committed over the long haul. I'm not taking about 20 years either. I'm talking about that 10 year target. If they stay longer, great, but the average individual's most productive time resides in the 5 to possibly 15-year range. There are far too many distractions in today's life styles to keep interest levels up for long period of time. The rising training requirements are also a major hurdle to overcome. The state needs to assist the firefighter's relief plans. Also it should be much easier to raise money, or use budget dollars, for our relief plans.

Hourly pay is not the "hook" that will keep the young firefighters with our organizations. They join initially for many of the reasons listed above. Over time, as requirements increase, is where we are losing them. I believe that a \$2,500 to \$3,500 a year plan is in order for the volunteer departments. They also need to start vesting times sooner and have them fully vested at 15 years versus 20. Being able to carry over your time served from one department to another is also a must.

After reaching the 15 – year mark there should be incentive to stay an additional 5 – years and so on. Most plans are at 20 years because they cannot afford anything else and it is too much work to try and make a change within the city government.

I wish I had more time to organize my thoughts on this topic. I truly believe that this is a crucial retention tool that needs desperate attention soon.

What is the average time involved with a call?

- Depends, usually 4-5 hours.
- 1 hour for medical calls, 2 to 4 on average for a fire call.
- Our current average time involved in a call is 71 minutes from the time paged to being back at the station.
- 3 hours
- 3 hours
- 3 hours
- 2 to 3 hours
- 2 ½ to 3 hours
- 3 hours
- 2 to 3 hours
- 2 to 3 hours
- 2 to 3 hours
- 3 hours
- I would say, a large percentage, are about an hour start to finish. In recent years our call volume is going up due to fire alarm panels and general false alarms. We return to the station, but still need to return the apparatus in service. Also the many responses to car accidents and possible Haz-Mat calls; are on the rise.

Are there any obstacles that prevent you from being able to respond?

- Yes, my job is my income to live on and I can't lose that. And the rising cost in gas prices for my drive.
- Work rotating shifts. Family commitments (I have twin 2 year old girls), and teaching at the local community college.
- Childcare seems to be the biggest issue. We have explored the option of offering childcare during call time but. Found it to be too costly.
- If I'm in the office or on a conference call.
- At times other commitments, limited staff at work.
- Work and family conflicts.
- Making sure I have someone to watch my 8 year old if my husband isn't home.
- Family commitments, work, some of the volunteers.
- Many but I still respond.
- Trains
- No
- Work Mostly
- Yes, like most: family

Are there any trends in your area right now that make a difference in your response?

- No
- Our area relies heavily on mutual aid for manpower and equipment which increases department's call volume.
- Less volunteers
- Our day response for a driver is very low.
- Can use more squad members.
- More difficult to cover shifts.
- Being a bedroom community to Fargo, ND.
- Some of the members missing family time, volunteering for other projects.
- No
- Times have changed. People are so busy with other volunteerism whereby they do not have to put so much time into training. Etc. they choose other areas before volunteering for ambulance. Also people are so busy with their children's activities.
- Not to my response.
- Need more volunteers
- Less weekend help.
- Not really. Always needing as many volunteers as possible for when it is a large working structure fire or other large-scale event.

How do we get others to volunteer?

- Offering a pension plan or some other incentive, so people have something to shoot for. Also, different volunteer day options (not just Saturdays and Sundays) so I can meet other family obligations. More publicity/promotion of the opportunities and programs; I lived in Hennepin County for seven years before I was aware that the Water Patrol Special Deputy program exists.
- I think we need to create organizations that people want to belong to and are proud to belong to. My department has recruited all of our members by word of mouth and member recruiting their friends and neighbors and that has worked very well for us. We also take members that live outside of our township but are "within a reasonable distance". We have several members who are on more than one department.
- Our service doesn't feel it's the volunteering that is the issue, it is the initial training involved for the EMT's. If one were allowed to be a first responder and do in the field training to obtain licensure within a period of time (6 months or 1 year), it would be easier. We have several first responders in our area, but with the requirement to run with two EMT's it makes it difficult. (i.e. Our service runs with 2 EMT's and 1 CPR certified driver, if we were allowed to run with a first responder, EMT, and driver with the First Responder doing in the field training, it would mean less call time for the EMT's, eventually we would have quite a few EMT's)
- Free or low cost medical
- A challenge, explore all avenues.
- I wish I knew.

- Right now, we beg, show the people the positive aspects.
- Ask and ask, solicit potentially good members.
- Get out into the community.
- I feel others would volunteer if they were able to leave work during the day when kids are in school and they don't have to make so many arrangements for nights and weekends.
- Make it worth your while.
- Education/Awareness
- Don't know
- I think that actively marketing for new members is the way to go. Create brochures on your department and have members at local/regional functions. Make them want to part of the department. Offer them something over the "other" draws in their life.

What would solve the issue at hand?

- Maybe fewer volunteers that receive a pension pay on call outs, etc. Instead of having a bunch of volunteers that aren't fully committed and only do the bare minimum to keep them in the program. Also, part time license program that pays.
- More volunteers during the day, we're set at night
- A challenge explores all avenues.
- Working with employers in town and giving them incentive to allow call time during work – Public relations campaign to help them vocalize how vital it is to the community and the relatively low impact it will have on them.
- Incentives to employers, easier/less paperwork, less training requirements, compensation
- More dedicated day or night members.
- Work with employers in town and impress on them how important it would be to allow at least 1 employee at a time to respond and to still pay their wages. Perhaps some form of reimbursement/incentive to employers/employees. Community awareness of their generosity and giving back to the community.
- Try to keep all the training at a minimum rather than continuing to increase the amount.
- Have employers more willing to let people go to help out.
- Maybe a good payment, but not sure if that would help.
- Good question. Not easy to answer. I think that finding a way that firefighters can be just that: Firemen. Get them there at a certain time, train them, and send them back to their families. During a call; get them to the station, to the scene, back in service safely, and send them home or to work ASAP. Quit adding all the responsibility on to the "catch all" fire department. The city officials need to get more involved and let the firemen do what they have been trained to do.