

# Recruitment and Retention

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*AFCA Working Group Report to the 2010 Annual Conference*

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## **Executive Summary**

The issue of recruiting and retaining firefighters is a worldwide issue that we in the Alberta Fire Service were naive enough to believe wasn't affecting us. During our 2008 Annual Conference our membership debated a resolution on recruitment and retention and it became evident we did have issues. It was time to stop hiding our heads in the sand and look at whom and what we are when it comes to recruiting new members and keeping the old.

This has been a long process and I believe a valuable one. As we have studied and developed reports, created some self assessment tools and recruiting tools we have seen Alberta departments continue to struggle. The report developed by Volunteer Alberta contained in this document has a good insight into the fire service and contains a large toolbox that can be used across the province to help with the recruitment and retention issues we all face.

Not all the tools are painted red and have lights and sirens but we as innovative Fire chiefs will still see the value of the tools and we can paint it red if we need to too make it work for our individual services.

The Working group has dedicated long hours to this process and I thank each member for their "Volunteer" commitment to the fire service as a whole in Alberta. Read the report and attend the related sessions during this 2010 AFCA Annual Conference and Tradeshow. We can as a group and as individuals overcome anything that stands in the way of protecting those we serve.

***Brian McEvoy***

Co-Chair  
Recruitment and Retention Working Group

## Working Group Members

**Brian McEvoy**, Fire Chief Bonnyville Regional Fire Services - Co-Chair

**Ernie Polsum**, Fire Commissioner - Co-Chair

**Trent West**, Fire Commissioner - Co-Chair (Replacing Ernie Polsum)

**Bob Jones**, AAMD&C

**Leon Smallboy**, First Nations

**Leon Cardinal**, Métis Settlements

**Brad Mason**, Fire Chief Taber

**Chad Sartison**, Fire Within

**Cherelyn Stefaniszyn**, Councillor Town Blackfalls

**Jeremy Wagner**, County Lac Ste Anne

**Joan Meidinger**, County of Leduc

**Lawrence Arnold**, Fire Chief Town Grimshaw

**Mark Murphy**, Region 6 AEMA

**Ted Dillon**, Town Ponoka

**Trudy Smith**, Village of Barons

**Brain Cornforth**, Lethbridge Fire Department, Ex-official President AFCA

### Advisors to working group

**Bonnie McLay**, AEMA

**Fred Tyrrell**, AEMA

**Bill Purdy**, AFCA

## **BACKGROUNDER ON RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION**

Many fire departments in Alberta including smaller towns and villages have experienced the decline in volunteers committing to the fire services. It is so serious that some municipalities have notified their residents that no emergency services would be available during daytime hours on weekdays.

A resolution from AFCA Region two was debated and approved by the membership of the AFCA at the 2008 Annual Conference and Tradeshow requesting the Alberta Fire Chiefs Association Board of Directors to write to the Ministers of Municipal Affairs, International and Intergovernmental Relations and Aboriginal Relations to request the Provincial Government work with Alberta communities to create a provincially based recruitment and retention incentive program to help address the issue throughout Alberta.

The President and Executive Director of the AFCA met with the Minister of Municipal Affairs at the time, Hon. Ray Danyluk and The Alberta Emergency Management Agency to discuss the concerns of the membership. The support shown by the Ministers office and the Agencies senior management to address this issue was outstanding.

With the assistance of the Agency a grant application was prepared which proposed a joint Working Group be established to study the issue in Alberta. The Minister approved a grant of \$50,000.00 to study recruitment and retention within the volunteer fire services and prepare a report and strategy for the Minister of Municipal Affairs to review.

As a first step in the process the working group was established and met in Nisku in the fall of 2008. After the initial meeting to discuss the concerns of the membership a plan was put in place and the work started. In the fall of 2008 Ernie Polsum, Alberta Fire Commissioner, Fred Tyrrell of Alberta Emergency Management Agency and Bill Purdy, Executive Director, AFCA visited each of the seven AFCA regions of Alberta seeking input and gathering information on the status of the recruitment and retention problems throughout Alberta. The same

questions were asked at each session and not surprisingly the answer where common.

Based on the information gathered at these sessions the committee commissioned Volunteer Alberta, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting volunteers, to do an environmental scan of the Fire Services in Alberta and prepare a report as phase one of the study. Volunteer Alberta completed the first phrase (Research and Environmental Scan) November 20, 2009, which was presented to and accepted by the working group. The report was posted on the AFCA webpage (<http://www.afca.ab.ca/news-mainmenu09-156/422-recruitment-a-retention-report>) in January of 2010 for all members to review.

After the phase one report was presented to the working group a plan to move into phase two of the project was developed. Phase two involved Volunteer Alberta doing a comprehensive study building on the original work done during the regional meetings and in the environmental scan process to develop and implement strategies for recruitment and retention of volunteer fire fighters.

Their mandate was to work with AFCA, AEMA and the Working Group to define the current situation in Alberta; conducting an external scan of exciting practices including compiling the research information into a useable format and identifying and creating relevant tools aimed at recruitment and retention of fire service personnel. The final outcome of the project is intended to provide individual communities will have the ability, tools and resources to create their own strategy around recruitment and retention of fire service personnel specific to their community needs.

Phrase two (Development and Creation of Tools and Resources) was completed May 15, 2010. The report was presented to a subcommittee of the working group for review at a May 25, 2010 meeting. The report contains a sample tool kit which will be the bases for a phase three project to evolve the tools into interactive on line tools with specific relevance to the Alberta Fire Service.

Attached to this report is the Volunteer Alberta report in its entirety. The report is thorough and comprehensive and will provide any department a good start point in self annualizing their situation and beginning the task of improving to meet the needs of the people we protect.

## AFCA RESOLUTION 2008. No. 2

AFCA REGION # 2

FIRE CHIEF WILLIAM H. SHELDON FUSON

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION IN VOLUNTEER FIRE SERVICES

Two Thirds (2/3) Majority Required

Endorsed by AFCA Board of Directors

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**WHEREAS**, the vast majority of municipalities, First Nations and Métis Settlements are providing fire suppression services to protect their citizens and protect their community infrastructure;

**AND WHEREAS**, the government of Alberta receives a benefit from municipalities, First Nations and Métis Settlements fire services since they are mandated by the *Emergency Management Act* to have a “Municipal Emergency Plan” in place and adopted by Council. and are required to fight and control fires as required by the *Forest and Prairie Protection Act*, and these activities are dependent on the fire services;

**AND WHEREAS**, approximately 95% of these fire services are staffed by “volunteer” members who are gainfully employed elsewhere;

**AND WHEREAS**, the majority of these fire services and communities are experiencing difficulties with recruitment and retention of volunteer members;

**AND WHEREAS**, people living in small Alberta communities that rely on volunteers face an increased risk of calling 911 and not receiving any response.

**THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Alberta Fire Chiefs Association Board of Directors be directed to write to the Ministers of Municipal Affairs, International and Intergovernmental Relations and Aboriginal Relations to request Provincial government work with communities to create a provincially based recruitment and retention incentive program including:**

1. The development and provision of a comprehensive injury and medical plan including disability caused by work related exposures for every volunteer firefighter employed in the province to protect them and their families from the financial effects that can be caused by serious injury or death at an emergency event

2. The inclusion of volunteer fire fighters in the Workers' Compensation legislation to protect them from work related cancers
3. Providing payments in lieu of taxes where a community offers property tax reductions to volunteer fire fighters
4. Payments in lieu of salary where a business permits its employees to leave work to serve on a community's fire service during an emergency situation
5. To provide financial assistance to communities that provide a form of pension earned by each volunteer firefighter as long as the volunteer is active in service to the community

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Fewer small-town residents joining volunteer fire units**

*Chicago Tribune* (September 25, 2006)

Sep. 25--McLAURIN, Miss.

After more than two centuries as one of America's favorite community service endeavors, the glory days of the volunteer firefighter are fading. Most people, particularly younger ones, now don't have the time or the inclination to put out fires for free anymore. As a result, some volunteer fire departments that provide emergency and rescue services, respond to natural disasters and make public service calls in addition to fighting fires are dangling on the edge of extinction. And people in small communities that rely solely on volunteers, such as McLaurin, a town of about 900 families outside Hattiesburg, increasingly risk calling 911 and not getting help.

About 73 percent of the more than 1 million firefighters in the U.S. are volunteers, as opposed to paid career firefighters, and about two-thirds of all fire departments are primarily volunteer, according to the National Volunteer Fire Council, a Washington-based lobbying group. But in two decades, the number of volunteers has declined by more than 10 percent, from 897,750 in 1984 to 800,050 in 2003. The council has begun a national recruitment campaign to rebuild the ranks.

Some say the decline is a sign of the times – busy schedules, households with two working parents and long work commutes. Some blame bureaucracy – too many government requirements on training, safety and funding. Others say this is simply another casualty in the decline of volunteerism in general.

"People do this because of their sense of community, a sense of wanting to give back," said Heather Schafer, executive director of the National Volunteer Fire Council. "This is a huge time commitment, and that is our No. 1 problem – recruiting and retaining people who have jobs and children."

Since Benjamin Franklin organized a volunteer fire department in Philadelphia in 1736, groups that began as "fire clubs" have attracted the likes of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Paul Revere. They thrived over the years by drawing families into their ranks and providing a social outlet in towns that had little else to offer. In McLaurin, the fire department sponsors baseball games, barbecues, car shows and even a male beauty pageant.

'It becomes your life'

When there is a fire, the 24 active members spread the word via two-way radios, and those who are available hop into their personal vehicles, pull their uniforms and gear out of the trunk of their car and head to the scene. When there is a car wreck, they are first on the scene, administering CPR or sometimes just offering words of comfort until an ambulance arrives.

The department, which peaked at about 60 volunteers in the mid-1980s, is made up of ordinary people--factory workers, secretaries, retired National Guardsmen--who have lived in the community for years. They pull snakes out of houses, help kids out of trees and clear the roads of hurricane debris. "If you volunteer, it becomes your life," said Sharron Trawick, 45, a florist and single mother who is the elected captain of the McLaurin department. "Most of the young people don't stay around here long, and if they do, they would rather be out having fun than fighting fires."

The biggest problems facing most departments, according to Robert Reason, Illinois state director for the volunteer fire council, are finding enough volunteers for the day shift and making time for the increased terrorism and hazardous materials training required by the federal government, particularly since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. In Illinois, he said, it takes 240 hours to become a state-certified firefighter.

"It basically takes a year and a half to teach a firefighter to become a firefighter, and that's just the baseline firefighting techniques," said Reason, who also is president of the Spring Bay Fire Protection District near Peoria. "For some communities it is a big challenge to come up with the money to educate their people and to keep them on duty."

Illinois provides benefits Volunteer firefighters in Illinois are better off than those in many states because they receive state benefits, including worker's compensation, death benefits and tuition waivers for their college-age children. However, as in most states, they do not qualify for pensions.

Companies are reluctant to give employees time off to fight fires in the middle of the day. Two years ago, Illinois passed legislation protecting volunteer firefighters from losing their jobs when they leave work to fight a fire. Larger communities with bigger budgets provide firefighting gear to their members, but in many small departments, the volunteers have to pay for their own. "If you damage your clothing, use your own car or need a pair of work gloves, nobody pays for that," said Tommy McDermott, volunteer president of the Mississippi Firefighters' Association. "If you figure gas, wear and tear on your vehicle, that's at least \$500 a year out of your pocket. A lot of people don't have that kind of money. They can't afford to be a firefighter."

Mississippi is considering incentive programs like those under way at some departments in Illinois. In the Spring Bay district, for example, the department pays a stipend of \$200 to \$700 a year for responding to calls and attending meetings and training sessions. Some departments pay their firefighters \$5 or \$10 per call. In recent years, volunteer fire departments have relied heavily on grants from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to replace outdated fire pumpers, ladder trucks and ambulances that can cost up to \$750,000 each. In order to apply for grants, departments must complete federally mandated training.

While the competition for money has grown, federal funding has shrunk. More than \$2.6 billion was sought from the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program, but Congress reduced the program's 2006 fiscal year budget to \$545 million, compared to \$650 million in 2005 and \$750 million in 2004.

This year, the Liberty Volunteer Fire Department in Indiana received a \$4,000 matching grant from the state to buy new uniforms. But \$8,000 was enough for only six uniforms. It will take three more years to come up with enough money to outfit the entire 22-member department, said Chief Jerry Kahl. The hardships have not deterred one of the department's most dedicated members, 24-year-old Matt Barnhizer. His youth is not the only thing that makes him an anomaly.

Barnhizer, who lives in Liberty, volunteers at his hometown station at night and at nearby College Corner during the day. He also holds down a job as an agriculture field technician. "My hours are flexible, so if there is a fire run, I leave work and go," said Barnhizer, who followed in his father's footsteps as a volunteer firefighter. "Sometimes it is tough, and when you are in the middle of something, you can't get it done. But if something happened to my place or my family's place, I would want someone there to help. That's why I do it." Before he could finish making his point that evening, an emergency call came in over the radio. "We'll have to finish this later," Barnhizer said, clicking off his cell phone and dashing out the door.

### **American Volunteer Firefighter Facts**

- 73 percent of all firefighters in the U.S. are volunteers.
- Communities smaller than 25,000 people depend heavily on volunteer firefighters.
- Volunteer firefighters save localities across the country an estimated \$37.2 billion a year in services.
- 76 of the 107 firefighters who died in the line of duty in 2004 were volunteers. Most had heart attacks. The second-highest cause of death was vehicle accidents.
- The average cost to train and equip a firefighter in protective clothing and breathing apparatus is about \$7,400.

Approved June 12, 2008

## **Volunteer Alberta Phase Two Report**