

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE

SEVENTY-SECOND LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

BY

VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER TASK FORCE

December 2002

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VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER TASK FORCE

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE LEGISLATURE

December 2002

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The job of a volunteer firefighter has changed in the past 25 years, as have the training requirements and time commitment needed to fill the role. A sharper focus on firefighter safety has driven higher training and protective equipment standards. A dramatic increase in calls for service, due largely to fire departments' growing role in emergency medical responses, places higher expectations on volunteers who are already stretched for time at work and at home.

The task force members found that a significant number of volunteer fire departments need additional firefighters to meet their communities' fire protection and emergency response needs. Community demographics and the time commitment required to be a volunteer firefighter can be firefighter recruitment and retention challenges over which a community has little control. Recruitment and retention factors over which communities and their fire service providers have more control are communicating to citizens the need for volunteers and then providing high quality training and making their volunteer firefighters feel valued and appreciated. The task force found that department leadership, training programs and financing are keys to recruiting and retaining volunteers.

High quality training is a critical factor to retaining motivated volunteers who have the skills and abilities to provide effective emergency response services to their communities. Effective training is also necessary for firefighters to meet minimum state safety standards. Rural, all-volunteer departments are unlikely to be able to provide adequate training to meet even the most basic safety and competency standards without state assistance.

Volunteer fire departments need adequate financial resources to equip, train, and support their volunteer firefighters. Federal grants have helped many departments purchase badly needed equipment and training programs. However, the fire department leadership must help their community understand fire protection costs and reach agreement on the level of service the community is willing to finance.

The task force reviewed actions taken by other states, as well as by healthy volunteer departments in Oregon, to address problems and challenges faced by volunteer firefighters and by rural fire departments and fire districts that rely on volunteer firefighters. The members found models that effectively address the key recruitment and retention factors. These models are likely to lower barriers to recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters if implemented more widely or at the state level.

The task force framed its recommendations with six components of a healthy volunteer fire department. They defined a healthy department as one that had at least 80 percent of optimum staffing and whose volunteers were staying for eight to ten years. The recommendations are addressed to fire service providers, the Legislature, and fire service organizations.

What can the legislature do to help rural fire departments and fire districts that rely on volunteer firefighters recruit and retain volunteers?

- Work with all interested parties to determine the collective interest in a legislative solution to the ambiguity of the ethics laws in Chapter 244. Support viable remedies which clearly and unambiguously maintain the highest level of ethical responsibility while allowing volunteer fire departments to encourage and support their volunteers.
- Fund the State Equipment Loan Fund at \$300,000.
- Support legislation to stabilize the Fire Insurance Premium Tax (FIPT).
- Provide new DPSST fire training funds to subsidize training costs for small rural volunteer departments at regional training centers.
- Provide \$200,000 seed monies to Oregon Volunteer Firefighters Association and Oregon Fire Chiefs Association to develop a statewide volunteer recruitment and retention campaign.

What can volunteer fire departments do to help themselves?

- Engage the community in a dialogue about community expectations and desires. Give citizens factual information about the staffing, equipment, and level of training required to provide various levels of service.
- Give volunteers responsibilities and meaningful work to do.
- Encourage socializing, a level workload, teamwork and equity between career and volunteer staff. Subject career and volunteer firefighters to the same rules, training requirements and standards of conduct.
- Provide skill development and time-efficient, interactive training. Reimburse or give stipends to volunteers to attend training on weekends or when using vacation leave.
- Provide social events (picnics, banquets, etc.) and involve volunteers in community events.
- Provide monetary and other awards based on time with the department and contributions to the department.
- Use those in the department to recruit others.
- Actively pursue federal grants.

How can Oregon's fire service organizations assist?

- Send consultant teams to help fire service providers be more successful getting community support for levies and bond measures.
- Provide tools to enhance fire chief professional development and performance.
- Develop a mentoring program for new volunteers.
- Facilitate regional use of existing training centers.

VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER TASK FORCE REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE LEGISLATURE

PART I: FINDINGS

The Job of a Volunteer Firefighter

Every day, in every community, emergency responders answer the call of our families, friends and neighbors who need help. Firefighters are the first line defenders against most community threats: fires, medical emergencies, hazardous materials spills, trench collapses, high-angle and water rescue, earthquakes and other natural disasters, and – post-9/11 – terrorist attacks. These firefighters, mostly volunteer, are a special type of people, with many different reasons for answering the call of duty. Some like the challenges and the adrenaline rush, while others want to sharpen their emergency skills and techniques. Each answers the call to help someone in need.

For those who answer the call, the requirements to volunteer as a firefighter in our communities have skyrocketed. It's no longer enough to possess the desire to help, the ability to pull a fire hose, and the courage to enter a burning building. Today's volunteer firefighter must take 40 hours of training just to meet OR-OSHA's entry-level firefighter safety standards. That accomplished, they need significantly more training in order to effectively fight fire in buildings and natural cover without direct supervision, safely drive the fire trucks, respond to hazardous materials accidents, and direct operations at incidents.

Additionally, volunteer fire departments' responsibilities have changed dramatically over the past decade. Nearly all fire departments were established to provide fire fighting services; today, about 80% of calls are medical responses. Obtaining emergency medical technician certification to provide basic level life support services requires 144 hours of training and rigorous testing. Basic level service does not include authority to administer intravenous drugs or use instruments to clear airways. To reach this level (intermediate life support), volunteers must take an additional 120 hours of training and additional testing.

Recruiting Volunteer Firefighters

Many fire departments across the state are experiencing more difficulty recruiting and retaining members than ever before. While Oregon’s population has grown, the number of volunteers in most departments has not commensurately increased. Fire departments struggle to do more with less as the number of emergency calls increases in nearly every community in the past decade. Most of the increase is attributed to a sharp rise in the number of emergency medical calls and false alarms.¹

While call volume and population increases, three-quarters of volunteer fire districts in Oregon report that their volunteer numbers have stayed the same (44 percent) or decreased (33 percent).²

Volunteer firefighters comprise 72% of the total firefighters in Oregon.³ This is comparable to the 74% average for the United States.⁴ Of the 343 fire protection agencies in Oregon, only 10 are staffed exclusively by paid firefighters. The rest of Oregon’s communities (97%) are protected by all or part volunteer fire departments.⁵ Nationwide, 94% are all or part volunteer.⁶

Numbers in Oregon ⁷	1991	2002
reported number of volunteer firefighters:	8021	8155
reported number of career firefighters:	2628	3143

Small and mid-sized communities rely heavily upon volunteer firefighters. This is especially true in rural Oregon. A recent survey by Western Advocates showed that 40 percent of firefighters in Oregon Fire District Directors member districts are all volunteer, and 26 percent of the chiefs are volunteer.⁸ The state fire marshal’s survey shows that departments in Eastern Oregon, Douglas county, and along the coast are more likely to be all volunteer or have only a paid chief. Departments in Central and Western Oregon are more likely to have combination departments, with both paid and volunteer firefighters, and more paid administrative staff.⁹

Volunteerism in general is dropping due to higher expectations and time commitments expected of workers and parents, as well as longer commutes and other factors. Research by the U.S. Fire Administration and National Volunteer Fire Council has shown that there is no single reason for the decline in volunteers in most departments. Several underlying factors were identified:

- people in today’s hectic society have more personal demands on their time;
- populations have shifted from smaller towns to urban centers;
- small town industries have changed, and so have employers’ expectations about productivity;
- there are more stringent training requirements to become a volunteer firefighter; and

¹ New Tools for the Volunteer Firefighter, fact sheet, U.S. Fire Administration, Emmitsburg MD and National Volunteer Fire Council, Washington DC

² Oregon Fire District Directors Association 2002 survey, Western Advocates Inc, West Linn OR

³ Oregon Fire Service Resource Directory; Office of State Fire Marshal, Salem OR; 2001 and 2002

⁴ 1999 Survey of Fire Departments for U.S. Fire Experience, National Fire Protection Association, Quincy MA

⁵ Oregon Fire Service Resource Directory; Office of State Fire Marshal, Salem OR; 2002

⁶ U.S. Fire Department Profile Through 1999, National Fire Protection Association, Quincy MA; November 2000

⁷ Oregon Fire Service Resource Directory, Office of State Fire Marshal, Salem OR, 1991 and 2002

⁸ Oregon Fire District Directors Association 2002 survey, Western Advocates Inc, West Linn OR

⁹ Oregon Fire Service Resource Directory, Office of State Fire Marshal, Salem OR, 2002

- there has been a general decline in civic volunteerism and activity.¹⁰

All these factors apply in Oregon.

Nationally, lack of time is the reason given by 79 percent of people who don't volunteer in their community.¹¹ Philip C. Stittleburg, current president of the National Volunteer Firefighters Council, believes that time, not funding, is the biggest obstacle that volunteer fire departments have to face.¹² Volunteering as a firefighter is one of the most time-demanding volunteer activities. Time demands include training, responding to growing numbers of emergency calls, meetings, equipment and station maintenance, and fund raising.

Additionally, many fire departments have assumed the role of first responder on medical calls. Many are the sole provider of emergency medical response and transport. This service requires volunteer firefighters to take costly and time-consuming emergency medical technician training.

Despite the time demands, more than 8,000 Oregonians are volunteer firefighters in their communities.¹³ People volunteer for their own reasons, which are varied and personal. The reasons most frequently given: because they were asked, camaraderie, career development, to give something back to the community, and because they believe they can do the job.¹⁴ *This is a way for me to contribute significantly to my community* was identified as the top reason in a recent survey of Clark county, Washington, volunteers.¹⁵

According to the National Volunteer Fire Council, the nations' volunteers have dropped by 12 percent since a record high in 1983. Fire departments in Oregon and other states have bucked the trend of declining numbers of volunteers and rapid turnover with a variety of recruitment and retention tools. Workshops at the 2000 National Volunteer Fire Summit revealed that people are willing to volunteer provided the following are true¹⁶:

- The experience is rewarding and worth their time
- The training requirements are not excessive
- The time demands are manageable
- They feel valued
- Conflict is minimized

Challenges

Internal

- Firefighter training requirements have risen steadily in the past 25 years, primarily to reduce firefighter injury and fatality rates. Until the 1960s, many departments gave new firefighters minimal training (usually under 30 hours) before fighting fires, or the firefighters learned on the job.¹⁷ Today, volunteers must train for 40 hours just to be on the fire ground (entry-level firefighter), and spend about four months of training (100

¹⁰ Retention and Recruitment in the Volunteer Fire Service: Problems and Solutions; U.S. Fire Administration, Emmitsburg MD and National Volunteer Fire Council, Washington DC; December 1998

¹¹ J.C. Penny Company national survey on volunteerism, 1987.

¹² "Evolving Volunteers," Phillip C. Stittleburg; *Fire Chief*; May 2002, p. 80.

¹³ Oregon Fire Service Resource Directory, Office of State Fire Marshal, Salem OR, 2002

¹⁴ Anecdotal surveys by Volunteer Firefighter Task Force members

¹⁵ Volunteerism in the Washington State Fire Service, Steven G. Wrightson; National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer research project; 1998.

¹⁶ Report on the 2000 National Volunteer Fire Summit, U.S. Fire Administration, Emmitsburg MD

¹⁷ Retention and Recruitment in the Volunteer Fire Service: Problems and Solutions; U.S. Fire Administration, Emmitsburg MD and National Volunteer Fire Council, Washington DC; December 1998

hours) to meet the competencies of Firefighter I and operate on the fire ground without direct supervision.

- Some departments require volunteers to be volunteer firefighters first, rather than recruit for volunteers directly into emergency medical, fire prevention, and administrative positions. This increases the volunteer's commitment for training and eliminates potential volunteers who cannot, or believe they cannot, be firefighters.
- Many departments have seen their emergency call volumes increase between 25 and 75 percent since the early 1980s, dramatically increasing volunteers' time demands.¹⁸
- The State's capability to provide training has been severely reduced from the service levels provided in the 1970s, when State trainers frequently provided drill night classes at rural volunteer departments.

External

- The primary contributing factor to citizens having less time to volunteer in their communities is the surge in the number of two-income families, which requires most people's time being spent at work, with the kids, and maintaining the household.¹⁹
- In "bedroom" communities, where most residents work in another town, it is difficult to recruit volunteers who are available to respond during the day.
- Employers are not as willing to let employees respond as volunteer firefighters during work time due to cost cutting and a higher emphasis on productivity.
- It is difficult to recruit volunteers willing to invest time to be trained as both EMTs and firefighters in communities where there is a high medical call volume and few fire calls.
- Many citizens are unaware of the numbers of volunteers needed and believe there are sufficient personnel to handle their emergencies.

Retaining Volunteer Firefighters

Anecdotal surveys in Oregon indicate that the average length of volunteer service has dropped significantly in the past ten years, to about half what it used to be. In departments where volunteers typically stayed 25 years, they are now staying 12; where volunteers usually stayed 10 years, they now stay five. In a survey this year, Oregon volunteer fire departments reported an eight year average. The National Volunteer Firefighter Association estimates that the national average length of service is five years and dropping rapidly. Oregon anecdotal surveys indicate that five years is a critical point for volunteers; those who stay five years often stay 20 or more.

Many fire departments have two groups of volunteers. One group, generally in the age range of 18 to 22, is exploring firefighting as a career or acquiring training and experience as a means to qualify for a full-time position. These volunteers typically stay two or three years and move on. The other group, usually late 20's and older, has a wider range of motivation for volunteering, and a mixture of retention tools is needed to retain volunteers in this group.

A 1997 survey of Washington state fire chiefs showed that the percentage of volunteer personnel had decreased in 61 percent of the departments. When asked why, a total of 86 percent of the

¹⁸ Retention and Recruitment in the Volunteer Fire Service: Problems and Solutions; U.S. Fire Administration, Emmitsburg MD and National Volunteer Fire Council, Washington DC; December 1998.

¹⁹ Ibid.

chiefs cited the difficulty for volunteers to maintain training, activity or standards requirements. The other top three were community demographics changes (56 percent) and young volunteers joining only for experience and career opportunities (48 percent).²⁰

However, volunteers themselves are more likely to attribute volunteer retention problems directly or indirectly to department leadership.²¹ New volunteers particularly need direction and coaching. Volunteers are also more likely to remain with departments that are progressive and led by chiefs with good communications skills and participatory management styles.

Challenges

Internal

- A primary role of the fire chief is volunteer retention. The chief's board or city manager should place a high priority on retention efforts.
- The fire chief's energy and motivation for volunteer retention can be drained in departments where too much of the department's operation falls to the chief, rather than being shared among staff and volunteers.
- Volunteers are not motivated to attend drills and training that rely upon lectures or that repeat basic skills they've already learned. Once volunteers begin skipping drills, it becomes easier to skip another until they've dropped out completely.
- Friction between volunteers and paid staff is a major source of volunteer decline in some combination volunteer-paid departments.²² Disagreements about how the department should be run or power struggles over whether a volunteer or paid person will be in charge at an emergency incident can cause a volunteer to become frustrated and quit.

External

- People move in and out of many rural communities dependent upon employment opportunity. This is seen especially in volunteer departments along the Oregon coast and resort areas, where many jobs are seasonal and people move frequently to change jobs.
- The amount of time needed to qualify as an EMT is daunting. Anecdotal interviews indicated that the volunteer dropout rate for EMT certification is 50%. It is difficult for all-volunteer, or largely volunteer, departments to meet a community's need for emergency medical response.
- Some volunteers (usually younger) feel the pay per call enticement is insufficient and that they can do something more productive with their time.
- Fire service groups consider the Government Standards and Practices Council rules to be overly narrow and often illogical in defining volunteers and in restricting volunteer awards and incentives. For example, rules allow a fire department to provide dinner to a volunteer's girlfriend at awards banquets, but not a volunteer's spouse or children.
- The IRS recently ruled that incentives to volunteers are taxable as wages and income.

²⁰ Volunteerism in the Washington State Fire Service, Steven G. Wrightson; National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer research project; 1998.

²¹ Retention and Recruitment in the Volunteer Fire Service: Problems and Solutions; U.S. Fire Administration, Emmitsburg MD and National Volunteer Fire Council, Washington DC; December 1998

²² Retention and Recruitment in the Volunteer Fire Service: Problems and Solutions; U.S. Fire Administration, Emmitsburg MD and National Volunteer Fire Council, Washington DC; December 1998

Volunteer Training: A Key to Recruitment and Retention

Training is critical to firefighter safety and service effectiveness. Additionally, volunteer firefighters want to be the best at what they do. Volunteers will make the time commitment if training delivery is efficient and convenient and if the materials are available and affordable. But they don't want to be there if they are not learning new skills, or the department provides only non-interactive (lecture) classroom training.

In Oregon, only training to meet OR-OSHA's minimum firefighting standard is required. The Department of Public Safety Standards and Training (DPSST) Firefighter I and other firefighter certifications are optional. DPSST certifies Oregon training programs, classes, and levels of firefighter training. DPSST recently changed from a state accreditation system based on training classes completed to a national competency-based certification system. This change required considerable effort by the state's firefighters to attend "bridge" classes offered by regional training associations and DPSST in order to stay certified. On the flip side, firefighters who are nationally certified in another state no longer need to take duplicative training to be certified in Oregon.

DPSST certification as Entry-level Firefighter fulfills OR-OSHA requirements, but a firefighter at this level must work with someone of a higher level. Certification as a Firefighter I or II requires additional training and completion of a task book to ensure competency.

Challenges

Internal

- Regularly providing comprehensive, high quality training is a significant challenge for most small volunteer departments. Availability of high quality, interactive training is a bigger issue for volunteers than time commitment.
- Small volunteer departments often lack administrative staff, so training is not well documented.
- Trainers observe that volunteers today want their training in 30-minute and one-hour increments. More and more, volunteers are not willing to make the time, financial, and travel commitment to attend weekend academies.
- Firefighter safety is a critical issue for any fire department, and safety relies upon effective firefighter training.
- Many fire departments are ignoring the requirement that firefighters trained only to entry-level cannot work on the fire ground without someone of a higher level.

External

While some volunteer fire departments do not use training services from the Department of Public Safety Standards and Training (DPSST), many rural volunteer departments rely upon DPSST for all of their training needs. DPSST fire training services have been reduced since the 1999-2001 biennium because the program funding source, the Fire Insurance Premium Tax, has been insufficient to support this and other State fire programs. Due to decreased revenue, DPSST fire service training was further reduced by 10% this biennium and is projecting 15%, or higher, cuts in 2003-05.

Funding Volunteer Fire Departments

Basically, citizens' expectations of their fire department are: they want them to come, they want them to have the right equipment, and they want them to do a good job. Funding for the right equipment for volunteers and funding training so volunteers can do a good job is a major issue for small departments. In some departments, volunteers are paying for their own training. When dollars will not stretch to cover equipment and training needs, firefighter safety regulations make equipment and protective clothing the first priority. Consequently, many departments are not providing adequate training to meet basic competency and safety standards, much less the advanced training needed to develop effective fire officers or specialty rescue skills.

The reality is that a community will have the level of firefighting and emergency medical services that the citizens are willing to fund. Frustration and conflict occur in communities where citizens have unrealistic expectations about how much services cost, or where volunteers want to provide more services than citizens feel they can afford.

Challenges

Internal

- The cost to train and equip a firefighter is approximately \$4,500.²³ This includes the cost of protective clothing (\$1000), self-contained breathing apparatus (\$2500) and training to the levels of Firefighter I, Emergency Medical Technician-Basic, Hazardous Materials Awareness, and Emergency Vehicle Operator.
- Firefighting and emergency medical equipment is very expensive. For example, a fire engine can range in cost from \$150,000 to \$300,000 depending on features and specifications. An ambulance typically costs \$60,000 to \$110,000, plus the cost of life support and other medical equipment.²⁴

External

- The State General Fund has not been a funding source for volunteer fire departments. General Fund revenues have been impacted by decreased taxes, Oregon tax law changes, and the Federal economic stimulus tax package.
- Some fire departments have successfully passed local levies and bonds. Others have found their local taxing efforts constrained by Oregon's property tax limitations and taxpayers' attitude toward any new taxes. Local option levies must leap a number of other hurdles, as well. These include the double majority requirement (more than 50% of the registered voters turned in a ballot and more than 50% of those voting said yes); competing levies (schools, community colleges, park and transit districts, etc.); and, occasionally, constituents' skepticism about fire districts' needs or their accountability for tax funds.

²³ New Tools for the Volunteer Firefighter, fact sheet, U.S. Fire Administration, Emmitsburg MD and National Volunteer Fire Council, Washington DC

²⁴ Ibid.

PART II: CONCLUSIONS

The task force members found that a significant number of volunteer fire departments need additional firefighters to meet their communities' fire protection and emergency response needs. Community demographics and the time commitment required to be a volunteer firefighter can be firefighter recruitment and retention challenges over which a community has little control. Recruitment and retention factors over which communities and their fire service providers have more control are communicating to citizens the need for volunteers and then providing high quality training and making their volunteer firefighters feel valued and appreciated.

High quality training is a key factor to retaining motivated volunteers who have the skills and abilities to provide effective emergency response services to their communities. Effective training is also necessary for firefighters to meet minimum state safety standards. Rural, all-volunteer departments are unlikely to be able to provide adequate training to meet even the most basic safety and competency standards without state assistance.

Volunteer fire departments need adequate financial resources to equip, train, and support their volunteer firefighters. Federal grants have helped many departments purchase badly needed equipment and training programs. However, the fire department leadership must help their community understand fire protection costs and reach agreement on the level of service the community is willing to finance.

Members also found models in Oregon and other states that effectively address key factors to recruiting and retaining volunteers. These models are likely to lower barriers to recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters if implemented more widely or at the state level. Part III of this report list the models found by the task force.

PART III: SUCCESSFUL MODELS

... FOR VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER RECRUITMENT

“New Tools for the Volunteer Firefighter” – a marketing program to help volunteer fire services agencies implement a media relations program. Kit includes media guide, information on using press releases and letters to the editor (samples included), resource list, fact sheet and camera-ready artwork. Sponsored by U.S. Fire Administration and National Volunteer Fire Council.

Existing volunteers are the biggest source of recruitment for new volunteers. Use those who are in your department to recruit others.

Give clear expectations to recruits.

Make initial training easily available and high-quality.

Recruit through the media that this generation accesses; be high-tech and catchy.

... FOR VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER RETENTION

The training officer is a key position for retaining volunteers. Volunteers are more likely to certify above and beyond entry-level firefighter (the minimum) where departments offer interactive, meaningful, and convenient training.

Training standards that establish minimum certification competencies can help retention if volunteers understand the intent of the standards. Meeting certification standards gives volunteers a feeling of accomplishment and professional pride.

Offer training in specialized rescue and officer development to retain volunteers who have had the basics so they feel they are learning new skills.

Volunteers who are primarily acquiring training and experience to become full-time firefighters or EMTs are most successfully retained with high-quality training, per-call or shift compensation, and tuition aid. Successful models exist at a number of Oregon fire departments.

Length-of-service award programs (LOSAPs) appeal most to mid-aged and long-term volunteers, especially those without employment retirement programs. Since LOSAPs require a period of years (usually four to five) to be vested, these programs are less of an incentive to those who are using their volunteer training and experience to obtain a paid firefighter position. In 1996, after Federal tax exemption legislation took effect, the Special Districts Association of Oregon (SDAO) launched its LOSAP. Under this defined benefit plan, the city or district makes a tax deferred contribution to a retirement fund for volunteers who meet certain training and participation requirements. Awards are paid after retirement as volunteers. The plans offer numerous vesting and distribution options and allow for transfer of credits to another district or city participating in LOSAP.

Participation-based awards translate volunteers' activity, such as attendance at training drills and alarm responses, into points. Point calculation and awards vary widely among fire departments

and districts. Points may be awarded as cash, chits for merchandise, or given to a firefighter association for distribution as the members wish.

- At Halsey-Shedd RFPD, volunteers use their points to “purchase” tools, appliances, fire department clothing, and other items from a “firefighters’ catalog.”
- At Boardman and Hermiston, point value is based upon training level, and a check for all points accumulated goes to the volunteer association for disbursement into the LOSAP. At McMinnville Fire Department, 50% of the cumulative points go into the LOSAP fund.
- At Keizer Fire District, the board allocates a predetermined amount each quarter to be divided among the members who responded to alarms, staffed duty shifts, and attended training.
- At Nestucca RFPD, volunteers feel they “are not there to get paid.” Members’ points are given to their respective community stations as spending limitations. The members of each station decide how to spend the money; most is spent on equipment for the station.
- Santa Clara RFPD budgets \$10,000 a year for a volunteer incentive program that reimburses volunteers for standby on their assigned duty shift.

Group life and disability insurance policies are emerging as valued by many volunteers, even more valued than LOSAPs.

- The Oregon Volunteer Firefighters Association provides free accidental death and disability (AD&D) insurance as a membership benefit.
- A \$30 individual membership in the National Volunteer Firefighter Association includes a \$10,000 AD&D policy.

Tax breaks are a tool that some states are exploring.

- Several Connecticut towns offer property tax abatement made possible through a 1999 state law. The New York legislature recently passed a similar bill. These state laws authorize local governments to grant personal property tax abatements to emergency volunteers. County and local governments pass their own laws to enact the tax break. Generally, volunteers must have five years experience and maintain minimum participation standards to be eligible.
- Maryland adopted a \$3500 annual income tax deduction in 1995 for volunteers in good standing. Good standing is based upon a state defined benefit LOSAP that provides points for various levels of volunteer participation.

Events and activities that tie volunteers to their communities and include their families in department events are effective for retention and morale.

- At Gold Hill RFPD, the district sponsored a popular annual pumpkin carving party for volunteers and their kids. A 4th of July event started when volunteers met at the station with their families for a safe area for their kids’ fireworks and grew to include a picnic dinner and karaoke for the whole community.
- Jackson Co. FD #3 supports volunteer events such as a Christmas dinner with Santa’s visit and gifts for volunteers’ children.

... FOR HIGH QUALITY VOLUNTEER TRAINING

Set high and attainable standards

Many volunteer departments have achieved high levels of firefighter training. These departments make training expectations clear in the beginning, and they make those expectations attainable by providing high quality, interactive training. They also reward success. Rewards include posting training and certification accomplishments, point qualification, and LOSAP qualification.

DPSST fire training offers a course, Training Operations for Small Departments, designed to provide students with basic tools and skills to coordinate training in a small fire/EMS organization. Content includes training officer leadership, legal issues, OSHA standards, internal marketing, selecting training materials, and effective delivery.

Budgeting for training expenses

Since volunteers are expected to attend training and are doing so on their own time, fire departments that are most successful at retaining volunteers pay for training expenses such as travel, meals, lodging and registration fees. Some provide paid reimbursement for training time, such as when a volunteer takes vacation time to attend the National Fire Academy.

Cooperative training

- Much of the training being delivered today is through regional training associations. This collaborative approach improves the availability of basic, advanced, and specialty training by sharing costs and the knowledge of individual training officers' and volunteers' expertise.
- Departments putting on special training events commonly invite nearby departments to fill the class capacity.
- Departments, or stations within a district, take turns sponsoring drills and classes. This relieves a department training officer from developing classes and delivering interesting and interactive drills every week. It also provides firefighters the opportunity to learn from other fire service providers' instructors.
- The Oregon Volunteer Firefighters Association annual conference is a cost-effective delivery of a wide variety of classes in EMS, firefighting, fire prevention, rescue, and officer development. The mid-June conference is held in a different location in the state each year.

New technology

Computer-based learning provides new opportunities for delivering knowledge-based classes such as bloodborne pathogens. On-line courses and self-study CDs are popular with younger volunteers and those pressed for training time. Computer-based training has a 25 to 50 percent higher content retention rate over classroom instruction.²⁵

²⁵ "E-Learning for Volunteers," by Mark Sprenger; Fire Chief; May 2002, page 36ff.

... FOR VOLUNTEER DEPARTMENT FUNDING

Grants

- Firefighter Investment and Response Enhancement (FIRE) grants are administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency under the Defense Authorization Act. Funds flow directly to fire departments. Grants require a 10% match by jurisdictions serving less than 50,000 population; 30% match by larger jurisdictions. Grants can be used to purchase apparatus and personal protective equipment, build training facilities, and provide public education, training and fitness programs. FEMA disbursed \$1,596,571 to 30 Oregon fire departments in FY 2001; \$4,792,414 to 77 departments in FY 2002 (to date).
- U.S. Forest Service Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) grants and U.S. Department of the Interior Rural Fire Assistance (RFA) grants are administered by Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF). Departments serving 10,000 or less population are eligible for these annual grants. Projects funded include fire district formation, equipment and training. Real property improvements are ineligible. VFA grants reimburse up to 50% of costs; RFA grants reimburse up to 90% of costs. Departments may use a soft match for their share. In FY 2000, ODF disbursed over \$1,000,000 in VFA and RFA grants to more than 80 fire districts.
- Neil R. MacDonald Charitable Foundation grants are one time grants for special needs or start-up costs for new programs. The founder had a special interest in rural fire departments. Contact the foundation c/o trustee Rod Zeeb, 1800 Blankenship Road, Suite 150, West Linn, OR 97068; phone 877-255-1739; email karip@rodzeeb.com.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Rural Development – Rural Development will provide grants for real property improvement, including fire station construction. For example, Wallowa Fire Department received \$175,000 in 2002 to replace its aged fire station. The City of Wallowa provided a \$25,000 “soft” match. Contact your regional USDA Rural Development representative for information and application assistance.
- Federal Excess Personal Property Program: ODF acquires federal excess fire and ambulance equipment and advertises it to fire departments. Equipment is used but in good shape and priced at four to five percent of the original price. Equipment available varies from year to year but includes fire trucks, generators, pumps, protective clothing and fire hose. Equipment can be altered, but remains the property of the federal government and must be returned at the end of fire department service. About 70% of the property is allocated to volunteer departments, and 30% to ODF districts. In FY 2001, ODF obtained equipment totaling one million dollars of original acquisition value.

Fedstrip: ODF may “sponsor” volunteer departments to purchase directly from the federal GSA catalog, resulting in significant savings (25-35%) on equipment and personal protective clothing.

Low interest loans: Special Districts Association of Oregon provides low interest (2.5%) loans to fire departments for purchase of fire apparatus and equipment.

State bond grants: Voters in Pennsylvania overwhelmingly approved a referendum in November 2002 that authorizes the state to float a \$100 million bond to assist funding of fire and emergency services across the state. Wording is not specific on time constraints or how grants will be disbursed to fire companies.

PART IV: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A HEALTHY VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT

After studying the problems and challenges faced by rural fire departments and fire districts in recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters, the task force identified six components of a healthy volunteer fire department. They defined a healthy department as one that had at least 80 percent of optimum staffing and whose volunteers were staying for eight to ten years.

The task force also reviewed actions taken by other states, as well as by healthy volunteer departments in Oregon, to address problems and challenges faced by volunteer firefighters and by rural fire departments and fire districts that rely on volunteer firefighters.

The task force makes the following recommendations:

The department leadership and the community have a mutual, realistic vision of a maintainable service level.

Recommendations:

Engage the community in a dialogue about community expectations and desires. Use the decision criteria in the Oregon Deployment Process so that communities served by volunteer fire departments can make informed decisions about meeting local service needs. Give citizens factual information about the staffing, equipment, and level of training required to provide various levels of service. Options include:

- reduce community expectations to match available funding.
 - convince the community to support a combination department.
 - consider merger or consolidation with neighboring districts for fire protection.
 - increase tax funding
- Fire service providers should provide an external attack standard that meets OSHA requirements.

The department has adequate support from taxpayers and employers.

Recommendations:

- Fire service providers should actively pursue federal grants.
- The Legislature should fund the State Equipment Loan Fund to provide for low interest loans to local fire service providers. Allow interest income to be used for equipment grants.
- The Legislature should fund the training of all firefighters to Firefighter I level.
- The state's fire service organizations should further study the costs and benefits of volunteer and employer tax incentives as a volunteer firefighter retention tool.
- The Oregon Fire Chiefs Association (OFCA) and Oregon Fire District Directors Association (OFDDA) should send consultant teams to help fire service providers be more successful getting community support for levies and bond measures.

- The Oregon Fire Service (OFCA / OVFA / OFDDA) should develop a statewide marketing campaign with legislative funding to both assist with recruitment and retention for volunteer firefighters and to increase public awareness of the fire service.

Volunteers feel valued and empowered, and they display a commitment to the department.

Recommendations:

- Fire service providers must give volunteers well-defined responsibilities and meaningful work to do, particularly emergency response activities.
- Fire service providers should involve volunteers in community events (parades, fairs, etc.)
- Fire service providers should provide social events for volunteers (picnics, banquets, etc).
- Fire service providers should provide monetary awards for volunteers' contributions and participation.
- Fire service providers should reimburse or pay a stipend to volunteers to attend training on weekends, or when using vacation leave.
- Fire service providers should provide training and skill development.
- The Legislature should work with all interested parties to determine the collective interest in a legislative solution to the ambiguity of the ethics laws in Chapter 244. Support viable remedies which clearly and unambiguously maintain the highest level of ethical responsibility while allowing volunteer fire departments to encourage and support their volunteers.
- Legislatively provide for job security if employees take leave without pay for volunteer firefighter training, similar to that provided members of the Oregon National Guard.
- Use those in the department to recruit others. Recruit through the media that this generation accesses; be high-tech and catchy

Volunteer firefighters have ready access to high quality, hands-on training.

Recommendations:

- Fire service providers should provide time-efficient, interactive training.
- Fire service providers should provide training stages to engage volunteers with assignments prior to full Firefighter I training.
- Fire service providers should tailor training to short increments; use more electronic training.
- Legislatively stabilize the Fire Insurance Premium Tax (FIPT) so DPSST training staff can provide hands-on training props and classes in rural areas without regional centers.
- Legislatively stabilize FIPT funding for fire investigation and for fire emergency mobilization training conducted by the state fire marshal and OSP Arson.
- Legislatively provide new DPSST fire training funds to subsidize training costs for small departments at regional training centers.
- OFCA-OFDDA should facilitate regional use of existing training centers.
- DPSST should develop and coordinate on-line training courses.

The chief officers and the board or city manager provide effective leadership.

Recommendations:

- OFCA should request DPSST recognition of the OFCA “Tool Box” course for Fire Officer I or higher.
- OFCA-OFDDA should develop a fire chief performance indicator matrix (similar to the Oregon deployment standard) as a guideline to boards and city managers for hiring fire chiefs.
- OFCA-OFDDA should promote use of fire chief performance indicator tool to improve chiefs’ performance.
- OFCA-OFDDA-OVFA should develop a new volunteer mentoring program.

Any conflicts between paid and volunteer workers in combined departments are effectively resolved.^{26 27}

Recommendations:

- Fire service providers should encourage socializing, a level workload, and equity between career and volunteer staff.
- Fire service providers should offer the same training to career and volunteer firefighters to meet the same standards. Whenever possible, this training should be offered jointly so career and volunteer firefighters train together.
- Fire service providers should hold career and volunteer firefighters to the same performance standards.
- Fire service providers should subject career and volunteer firefighters to the same rules and standards of conduct.
- Fire service providers should train career and volunteer firefighters in the team approach.
- Fire service providers should appoint career and volunteer officers on the basis of merit; they should be neither elected nor promoted solely on seniority.

- end -

²⁶*Fire Chief*; “Have You Found A Conflict-free Combination?” by Ronnie J. Coleman; February 2002

²⁷ “Managing Conflict in Combination Fire Departments;” International City/County Management Association; *IQ Service Report*; vol. 32, no. 7; July 2000

APPENDIX A
VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER TASK FORCE
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A HEALTHY FIRE DEPARTMENT
BY RESPONSIBILITY

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR FIRE SERVICE PROVIDERS

Engage the community in a dialogue about community expectations and desires. Use the decision criteria in the Oregon Deployment Process so that communities served by volunteer fire departments can make informed decisions about meeting local service needs. Give citizens factual information about the staffing, equipment, and level of training required to provide various levels of service. Options include:

- reduce community expectations to match available funding.
- convince the community to support a combination department.
- consider merger or consolidation with neighboring districts for fire protection.
- increase tax funding

Give volunteers responsibilities and meaningful work to do, especially emergency response activities.

Encourage socializing, a level workload, and equity between career and volunteer staff. Subject career and volunteer firefighters to the same rules, training requirements and standards of conduct.

Train career and volunteer firefighters in the team approach. Ensure career and volunteer firefighters receive training together.

Provide skill development and time-efficient, interactive training. Tailor training to shorter time commitments; use more electronic training. Provide training in stages to engage volunteers with assignments prior to completing Firefighter I training.

Reimburse or give stipends to volunteers attending training on weekends or on vacation leave.

Appoint career and volunteer officers on the basis of merit; they should not be elected.

Involve volunteers in community events (parades, county fairs, rodeos, etc.).

Provide social events for volunteers (picnics, banquets, etc.).

Provide monetary and other awards based on time with the department and contributions to the department.

Use those in the department to recruit others. Recruit through the media that this generation accesses; be high-tech and catchy.

Provide small volunteer departments a minimum standard for exterior attack that meets firefighter safety and OR-OSHA requirements.

Actively pursue federal grants.

RECOMMENDED LEGISLATIVE ACTION

Work with all interested parties to determine the collective interest in a legislative solution to the ambiguity of the ethics laws in Chapter 244. Support viable remedies which clearly and unambiguously maintain the highest level of ethical responsibility while allowing volunteer fire departments to encourage and support their volunteers.

Fund the State Equipment Loan Fund at \$300,000.

- Provide low interest loans to local fire departments.
- Allow interest income for equipment grants.

Support legislation to stabilize the Fire Insurance Premium Tax (FIPT), so DPSST fire training staff can provide hands-on training props and classes in rural areas without regional centers and State Fire Marshal staff can provide fire investigation and fire emergency mobilization training.

Provide new DPSST fire training funds to subsidize training costs for small rural volunteer departments at regional training centers. Subsidies would apply only to departments that have demonstrated local needs using the decision criteria in the Oregon Deployment Process or equivalent analysis.

Legislatively provide for job security if employees take leave without pay for volunteer firefighter training, similar to that provided members of the Oregon National Guard. Provisions would apply only to volunteers from departments that have demonstrated local needs using the decision criteria in the Oregon Deployment Process or equivalent analysis.

Fund the training of all firefighters to Firefighter I level. (Estimated cost undetermined per firefighter.) Training cost reimbursement would apply only to departments that have demonstrated local needs using the decision criteria in the Oregon Deployment Process or equivalent analysis.

Fund a statewide marketing campaign to both assist with recruitment and retention for volunteer firefighters and increase public awareness of the fire service.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR FIRE SERVICE ASSOCIATIONS (fire chiefs, fire district directors, and volunteer firefighters)

Oregon Fire Chiefs Association (OFCA) should request DPSST recognition of the OFCA “Tool Box” course for Fire Officer I or higher certification.

OFCA and Oregon Fire District Directors Association (OFDDA) and Oregon Volunteer Firefighters Association (OVFA) should develop a mentoring program for new volunteers.

OFCA and OFDDA should develop a fire chief performance indicator matrix (similar to the Oregon deployment standard) as a guideline to boards and city managers for hiring fire chiefs.

OFCA and OFDDA should promote use of the International Association of Fire Chiefs’ fire chief performance indicator tool to improve chiefs’ performance.

OFCA and OFDDA should facilitate regional use of existing training centers.

OFCA and OFDDA should send consultant teams to help fire service providers be more successful getting community support for levies and bond measures.

OFCA, OVFA, and OFDDA should develop and implement a statewide marketing campaign to both assist with recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters and increase public awareness of the fire service.

The state's fire service organizations should further study the costs and benefits of volunteer and employer tax incentives as a volunteer firefighter retention tool.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION FOR DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY STANDARDS
& TRAINING (DPSST)**

Develop and coordinate on-line training courses.

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APPENDIX C – enabling legislation

71st OREGON LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY--2001 Regular Session

Enrolled

House Bill 3111

Sponsored by Representative KROPF (at the request of Oregon Fire Chiefs Association)

CHAPTER

AN ACT

Relating to volunteer firefighters; and prescribing an effective date.

Be It Enacted by the People of the State of Oregon:

SECTION 1. (1) As used in this section:

(a) “Eastern Oregon” means that portion of the state lying east of a line beginning at the intersection of the northern boundary of the State of Oregon and the western boundary of Wasco County, thence southerly along the western boundaries of the counties of Wasco, Jefferson, Deschutes and Klamath to the southern boundary of the State of Oregon.

(b) “Western Oregon” means that portion of the state lying west of a line beginning at the intersection of the northern boundary of the State of Oregon and the western boundary of Wasco County, thence southerly along the western boundaries of the counties of Wasco, Jefferson, Deschutes and Klamath to the southern boundary of the State of Oregon.

(2) There is created an interim Volunteer Firefighter Task Force to study and report on the status of volunteer firefighters and volunteer-based fire jurisdictions in rural areas of the state. The task force shall consist of the State Fire Marshal, or a designee thereof, as an ex officio member and eight members appointed by, and serving at the pleasure of, the Governor. Members appointed by the Governor shall include:

(a) A chief of a fire department or district located in western Oregon and composed wholly or primarily of volunteer firefighters. In making the appointment, the Governor shall seek nominations from the Oregon Fire Chiefs Association.

(b) A chief of a fire department or district located in eastern Oregon and composed wholly or primarily of volunteer firefighters. In making the appointment, the Governor shall seek nominations from the Oregon Fire Chiefs Association.

(c) A director of a fire department or district composed wholly or primarily of volunteer firefighters. In making the appointment, the Governor shall seek nominations from the Oregon Fire District Directors Association.

(d) A representative of the Oregon Volunteer Firefighters Association or a similar organization.

(e) A representative of the Oregon State Firefighters Council or a similar organization.

(f) A representative of an Oregon employer.

(g) Two representatives of the public.

(3) The Governor shall complete appointment of the task force no later than January 1, 2002. The task force shall meet as often as the members consider necessary. The task force shall study the problems and challenges faced by rural fire departments and fire districts in recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters. The study shall include a review of actions taken by other states to address problems and challenges faced by volunteer firefighters and by rural fire departments and fire districts that rely on volunteer firefighters.

(4) Members of the task force are entitled to compensation and expenses under ORS 292.495. Claims for expenses incurred in performing functions of the task force shall be paid out of funds available for that purpose.

(5) The office of the State Fire Marshal shall provide staff services to the task force. All agencies, departments and officers of this state are directed to assist the interim task force in the performance of its functions and to furnish information and advice as the task force considers necessary.

(6) Official action by the task force shall require the approval of a majority of the members. The task force shall submit a report on its findings and recommendations to the Seventy-second Legislative Assembly and to the Governor no later than January 31, 2003.

All legislation recommended by official action of the task force must indicate that it is introduced at the request of the task force. Such legislation shall be prepared in time for pre-session filing under ORS 171.130, for presentation to the regular session of the Seventy-second Legislative Assembly.

SECTION 2. This 2001 Act takes effect on the 91st day after the date on which the regular session of the Seventy-first Legislative Assembly adjourns sine die.