



SUCCESS STORY

Fighting Fires Unites Communities

Volunteer firefighters put professionalism and compassion above all



Photo: USAID/Teresa Albor

Volunteer firefighter Tane Gorgovski, right, shakes hands with Rizvan Memedovski, whose farm was saved thanks to the quick response of the Krivogastani volunteer fire department.

“When I visit the families we’ve helped I see how much we meant to them. That’s all the reward I need,” said Tane Gorgovski, a volunteer firefighter in Krivogastani.

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It was a cloudy afternoon in the Macedonian village of Krivogastani when the Volunteer Fire Department got the call. A large barn was on fire in a small ethnic Albanian village about seven kilometers away from their headquarters. The village was not in the department’s jurisdiction, but the firemen did not hesitate. They arrived within ten minutes and were the first on the scene. It was a fierce fire that wasn’t put out until 9:30 that evening. Although the barn was lost, everyone at the farm survived.

Krivogastani is a small village in a valley surrounded by high mountains. The area is mostly agricultural, and barns are often filled with drying leaves and hay — perfect fuel for a fire. Because larger towns with full-time professional fire-fighting teams are some distance away, the Association of Volunteer Firemen was established in the 1950’s. But in 2002, antiquated equipment and out-of-date training almost forced the association to close down. That was when a group of individuals from the community, with the help of USAID, decided to take action.

Starting in 2004, USAID began donating fire-fighting equipment to the team, including hoses, specialized clothing, oxygen bottles, lamps, and radio signals. Volunteers also pitched in to help rebuild the headquarters office, which now is fitted with floodlights, an electric generator, and a portable motor pump.

The Krivogastani Volunteer Fire Department’s 10 active volunteers are ready to respond 24 hours a day. In 2005 alone, they responded to 20 fires. In addition, the team responds to road accidents and other incidents.

Now that they have the equipment they need, the Krivogastani firefighters are putting their volunteerism to use not only by fighting fires, but also by helping promote ethnic harmony and community spirit. “We have lived here for centuries,” says Tane Gorgovski, a volunteer firefighter in Krivogastani. “We are a community and we all know each other. We must look out for each other.”