

DISPARITY IN ETHNIC REPRESENTATION IN
KODIAK FIRE DEPARTMENT

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The research project investigated factors affecting the imbalance in ethnic diversity in the membership of the Kodiak Fire Department as compared to the ethnic diversity in the community. The problem was a lack of understanding of the factors contributing to the imbalance in diversity. The purpose of the project was to suggest factors in recruitment and retention that could be addressed to correct the imbalance. An evaluative research method was used. The following research questions were addressed: a) Are barriers present that discourage ethnic minority membership, b) Are there incentives that would encourage ethnic minority membership, and c) Are other fire departments in Alaska effectively dealing with a similar imbalance in representation of local ethnic diversity? The procedures for this research utilized a questionnaire for community members and a questionnaire for fire departments in the State of Alaska. The results suggested that the members of the community were unable and unwilling to become volunteer members of Kodiak Fire Department primarily due to lack of time. It was recommended that the Department maintain the current requirements for membership, but reorganize the strategy for recruitment to focus on incentives.

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Introduction

The problem that stimulated this research project is the lack of representation in the Kodiak Fire Department by members of ethnic groups in the same ratio as they are present in the community. The purpose of the study is to determine factors that can be helpful in correcting the imbalance in the representation of ethnic minority groups. This is an evaluative research project. The research questions are:

- a) Are barriers present that discourage ethnic minority membership?
- b) Are there incentives that would encourage ethnic minority membership?
- c) Are other fire departments in Alaska effectively dealing with a similar imbalance in representation of local ethnic diversity?

Background and Significance

Kodiak is a community located on an island in the Gulf of Alaska approximately 250 miles south of Anchorage. Kodiak consistently ranks among the top Cities with the highest cost of living in the United States (ACCRA, 2001). Kodiak's economy is primarily based on commercial fishing. The jobs that are available in the canneries historically attracted a seasonal migrant work force. In recent times,

the jobs have attracted an ethnically diverse population (See Appendix A) that has formed a stable resident work force.

Kodiak Fire Department is a modern, full service, combination fire department. Kodiak Fire Department and other emergency service agencies on Kodiak have learned to be self reliant for the delivery of service in all but extreme circumstances. Volunteers are given first consideration when filling career positions. This study is important since maintaining an effective and efficient fire and emergency medical service makes it incumbent upon Kodiak Fire Department to effectively attract and retain volunteers.

Better participation in the Fire Department by the ethnic community would support the efforts of Kodiak Fire Department to deliver emergency service, broaden the ability to deliver relevant customer service, and enhance the image of the Department.

This applied research project relates to the Executive Development course in the areas of organizational culture, ethics, legal issues, labor relations, and service quality/marketing.

Literature Review

A literature review was initiated at the Learning Resource Center on the campus of the National Fire Academy, Emmitsburg, Maryland; and continued in the Department's library, the City's library and on the Internet.

The sources consulted during the literature review confirmed the importance and desirability of diversity in the workplace ((Anderson, 1999; Dalton, 1995; Roper, 1998; United States Fire Administration [USFA], 1995; Van Solkema, 1999). They also pointed to a widespread difficulty in achieving sufficient representation of minorities in the fire service (USFA, 1998). The armed services also are finding it a challenge to attract qualified minority applicants (Dalton, 1995; Freeburg, 1999; Oliver, 1997). The literature comes from agencies and departments that are trying to fill career and volunteer positions. The emphasis is usually on recruiting strategies that focus on marketing and advertising. For career positions, the wage and benefit packages are considered adequate to provide a significant incentive.

The writer's observations about the decline of volunteerism (USFA, 1998) and the competition for the attention of potential volunteers (Snook, Johnson, Olsen, & Buckman, 1998) were confirmed in sources reviewed.

Sources were found that examined the importance of diversity (including gender) in the work place (Mathis, 1999). Numerous department's and organizations recognize the importance and benefits of a diverse work force. The importance is based on legal, moral, ethical, and political issues (Anderson, 1999; Roper, 1998). The benefits include enhanced organizational image and improved ability to relate to the organizations constituency (Snook, et al., 1998; USFA, 1998).

Numerous sources address gender as a diversity issue (Brown, 1992; Dalbey, 1993; Mathis, 1999; Watson, 1992). Some of the findings are relevant even though ethnicity, and not gender, is the focus of this research project.

Other sources focus on developing a strategy for recruiting and retaining volunteers in general (Bartel, 1998; Bury, 1999). These sources discuss the subject in broad enough terms that applicable sections can be applied to the more limited subject of recruiting ethnic minorities and dealing with related cultural issues.

Some studies focus on attracting under represented minorities into the hiring process for career positions (Brown, 1992; Roper, 1998; Van Solkema, 1999; Walthour, 1991). These studies have applicability to recruitment of minority members in a combination department. Anderson

(1999) focused on diversity issues in a 134-member combination fire department.

Armed services recognize an imbalance in representation of minority ethnic groups in their ranks. Even the Army is trying to find a way to attract more Hispanic recruits. Sydney J. Freeburg, Jr. (1999) considered minority representation in the US Army as more than a matter of "ethnic equity." John H. Dalton (1995), Secretary of the Navy, testified that it was important for the membership in that service to "reflect the society" that they serve.

The studies reinforced the assumption that diversity in the work place is an important moral, ethical, legal, and leadership factor.

The use of surveys and questionnaires was an effective means of gathering relevant data (Bartel, 1998; Bury, 1999; Corado, 1998). This prompted the writer to consider using this method.

Studies dealing with recruiting issues (Bartel, 1998; Bury, 1999; Cook, 1998; Corado, 1998; Mallick, 1998) were helpful in defining some of the items for the questionnaires. Reference texts (Snook, et al., 1998; USFA, 1995; USFA, 1998) were also consulted before preparing the questionnaires.

A text on survey research (Rea & Parker, 1997) was helpful in planning the survey.

Census data (State of Alaska, 2001) was used for comparison purposes when analyzing membership information for Alaska fire departments.

Procedures

The problem was suggested when simple observation provided evidence of the imbalance in ethnic representation in the Kodiak Fire Department. A glance at census data (State of Alaska, 2001) confirmed the writer's suspicion.

The purpose was formulated from the writer's belief that diversity in the work place is a goal worth achieving.

A literature review was conducted on the campus of the National Fire Academy while the writer was attending the Executive Development course. Additional literature was reviewed in the Department's library, the local library, and on the Internet. The literature review revealed helpful sources.

The writer consulted with Mr. Jesse Vizcocho, a City Council member and activist in the Filipino community, and Mr. Jim Mullican, President of the Volunteer Firefighters' Association, in an attempt to get some preliminary insight into the problem.

Mr. Jesse Vizcocho (personal conversation, May 2001) suggested, that the ethnic minority community in Kodiak was intent on earning a living because of the high cost of living (ACCRA, 2001). Many people work more than one job in order to support themselves, their families, and in some instances, extended families. So, not only is there a lack of time to commit to Kodiak Fire Department, but there is also little incentive to devote time to an activity that provides no compensation.

Mr. Jim Mullican (personal conversation, May 2001) suggested that the ethnic population might not feel a commitment to participate in Kodiak Fire Department as volunteers because they were not motivated to support a civic function in a community that they did not consider to be "home." This possibility was alluded to in discussions of the American tradition of volunteerism (Snook, et al., 1998) and the differing perspectives of other cultures toward volunteerism and public service (USFA, 1998).

The purpose of the study was focused to address the problem, and the research questions were formulated.

It was decided to gather data for research questions on perceived barriers and incentives with a survey of the community (Appendix B).

The first section of the Fire Department Volunteerism Questionnaire focused on Kodiak Fire Department requirements for membership and other issues that were thought to pose barriers to joining the Department. The respondents could pick as many items as they thought applied to them.

The second section of the questionnaire dealt with items that were suggested to be possible incentives to joining. Again, respondents could pick as many of the items that they felt applied to them.

A question tried to identify where respondent considered "home."

A final question tried to identify if respondents volunteered with other organizations in the community.

The in-person method of data collection was selected because of the involvement of the interviewer (Rhea & Parker, 1997). This method allows the interviewer to explain questions and to gain a sense of attitudes and nuances that would be lacking in a mailed or telephone survey. The questionnaires were completed using in-person interviews conducted by the writer going door-to-door on July 7th and 8th, 2001. The convenience sample of 47 responses was gathered from residents who were at home or

walking in a neighborhood known to have a diverse population.

The data for the third research question about other Alaska fire departments was gathered with a separate questionnaire. This Minority Recruitment Survey (Appendix C) was designed to gather data on attitudes about diversity in other fire departments in Alaska. The sample departments were chosen on the basis that they represented medium sized municipalities in Alaska. Thirteen (13) questionnaires were e-mailed or faxed, and nine (9) were returned.

This survey collected data to determine the departments' ethnic representation when compared with census data (Appendix A). It also solicited comments about the importance of diversity in the department, and their experience with barriers and incentives. A section for general comments was placed at the end of the survey, and the responses are presented in Appendix D. Although the issue of gender is not part of this study, the survey of other fire departments did ask for the number of male and female members as a secondary means of assessing balance in diversity.

Census 2000 data was gathered from the State of Alaska (2001) website (www.state.ak.us).

The responses to the questionnaires were tabulated, compared and analyzed.

Results

The results of the Fire Department Volunteerism Questionnaire are displayed in Appendix B.

The convenience sample that was contacted was felt to be representative of the gender and ethnicity in the community at large. And it is felt that the answers to the survey are representative as well.

The responses to the first section of the survey that addressed barriers (research question #1), demonstrated that a majority of respondents (72%) considered "Time commitment" as a reason that they could not serve Kodiak Fire Department. This was followed in frequency (42%) by "Not interested."

The section on incentives (research question #2) yielded the following results.

The most popular choice of incentives (62%) was "Training and career opportunities." The respondents generally thought that the training was most important in preparing them for their duties if they were to join Kodiak Fire Department. The opportunities for a career were a minor factor considering the comments from respondents. A "Social atmosphere" was thought to be an important

incentive by 45% of the respondents, and 36% felt that "Pay" was a significant incentive. Most respondents felt that they would not expect remuneration if they volunteered for Kodiak Fire Department.

A strong majority of the respondents (87%) felt that Kodiak was their home.

The respondents were split 45% to 55% between those who did and did not volunteer for an organization.

The Minority Recruitment Survey of other fire departments in Alaska (Appendix C) yielded the following results relative to research question #3.

Raw numbers of ethnic membership were converted to percentages and compared to census data (State of Alaska, 2001) in Appendix A. Kodiak was included for comparison purposes. Unalaska was the most comparable to Kodiak in the size of ethnic groups in the community.

Seven out of nine departments felt that their membership adequately represented the ethnic diversity of the community. And by the same margin, they said that minority representation was not a priority issue in the department.

All nine departments indicated that they had not identified any barriers to minority recruitment, and all but one department had not identified any incentives for

minority recruitment. The comment from the department that marked "yes" to the incentive identification question was, "If the (department) is perceived as competent, useful, & friendly, then our recruiting efforts attract "minority" & female folks, as well as white males."

It was interesting to note that Unalaska had a wide disparity in ethnicity, but the narrowest disparity in gender.

Discussion

Barriers

The most significant barrier to volunteering for Kodiak Fire Department is the "time commitment." This barrier is widely recognized and is generally linked to two-career families (USFA, 1998), family demands (Bury, 1999), and avocations (Snook, et al., 1998). The study confirms this national trend with a response rate of 72%. The writer also concludes from the comments obtained during the interviews that the lack of time is also linked to the work schedule (seven 12 hour days plus overtime) in the canneries when processing of fish is taking place, and the practice of working second jobs to earn a living in Kodiak, and to support extended families.

The second most commonly selected barrier was, "Not interested (43%)." In the literature (USFA, 1998), this

reason also ranks high behind "time commitment" as a significant reason for not volunteering in the fire service.

The issue of age was a barrier for 23% of the respondents. All respondents who selected "age" as a barrier felt that they were too old to participate in fire fighting or EMS work. The literature does not address this issue very well, but does recommend a practice of accommodating older recruits in administrative or non-combatant positions (Snook, et al., 1998; USFA, 1998).

23% of those interviewed said that they did not know of the need for volunteers. Of these, there were only two who were not aware that Kodiak Fire Department utilized volunteers. This is comparable to the result found by Corado (1998) when 32% of respondents lacked awareness of the volunteer department.

19% of the respondents thought that the work was too dangerous. This result is confirmed by the United States Fire Administration (1995) that concern about health and safety risks is not a deterrent to volunteering. The respondents who did not select this item as a barrier felt that Kodiak Fire Department would provide them training and protective equipment.

19% of the respondents felt that they were not strong enough. This result seems to be in keeping with the literature (USFA, 1998) that suggests the need for screening with physical examinations. Most of the respondents, including small females, felt that they could contribute physically, and that additional help would be available for situations that they could not handle.

The 19% in the "Other" category were all health and physical disability issues. This closely matches the 20% that was reported in a JCPenney National Survey on Volunteerism (as cited in USFA, 1998).

9% selected "No one has asked me to volunteer" as a barrier. This is not a significant number, but would still indicate a need to understand some of the cultural differences in the community and reach out to unrepresented groups as suggested by the US Fire Administration (1995, 1998)

Other items related to membership requirements (driver's license, fluency in English, eligibility for employment, and prohibition on beards) did not present significant barriers.

Incentives

The incentive most often selected (62%) was "Training and career opportunities." The popularity of this

incentive was mainly due to the interpretation that, as a new member, the respondent would need training in order to contribute to Kodiak Fire Department. Career opportunities were generally not an interest of the respondents. This is in keeping with Bartel (1998) who found only 11% of respondents were interested in career opportunities.

The second most popular incentive was a "Social atmosphere." Respondents who selected this item were mostly in favor of a friendly atmosphere at the fire station, and to a lesser degree, interested in parties and picnics. The importance of social events is confirmed by the US Fire Administration (1995, 1998).

Most of those interviewed did not feel that compensation for volunteer service would be an incentive. However, 36% selected "Pay" as an incentive. Bartel (1998) found that expense reimbursement ranked very low on a list of incentives, and Snook et al. (1998) suggest that compensation has no effect on volunteerism in the fire service. However, the United States Fire Administration (1998) suggests that some cultures without a tradition of volunteerism will expect to be paid for working.

"Free room in trade for time spent at the station" was considered an incentive by 11% of those interviewed. Housing was considered a factor for recruitment by Cook

(1998) and Mallick (1998). This incentive would probably attract more interest among apartment dwellers. Those interviewed were mostly homeowners or renters in single-family dwellings with families and extended families.

94% of those interviewed considered Kodiak as their home. This strong showing dispels the idea that a lack of identification with the community by ethnic groups is a reason for the imbalance in representation in Kodiak Fire Department.

The survey question about volunteering for other organizations was designed to shed light on the time-commitment issue and show if the community might be active in other volunteer efforts besides the fire service. The results showed a rather even division between those who did (45%) and did not (55%) volunteer for other organizations. This result seemed to confirm the results of the previous question about the location of "home." People do feel a link to the community, and do volunteer for other organizations, and these organizations are competing with the Fire Department for members (Snook, et al., 1998).

Other Alaska Departments

78% of the responding departments felt that their memberships adequately represented the diversity in their communities. This is significantly more than the 34% that

Van Solkema (1999) found when he asked the question of large fire departments (approximately 200 members) across North America.

To attempt an objective evaluation of the reflection of community diversity, the writer compared the fire departments' membership figures with census data (State of Alaska, 2001), and arbitrarily picked 10% or greater disparity in any ethnic group as a dividing line that demonstrated a lack of representation. The result showed that five fire departments (56%) were representative on this basis. This figure is closer to Van Solkema's (1999) results. Some significant differences could be expected between large urban departments dealing with recruitment for career positions and small Alaskan departments dealing with volunteer recruitment.

Despite the widely held opinion that fire department memberships reflect the diversity in the community, the comparison of membership and census figures suggests that there is a need for fire departments in Alaska to address work place diversity.

Implications for Kodiak Fire Department

Kodiak Fire Department has room to make significant improvement in work place diversity.

Kodiak Fire Department's entry requirements (age limit, driver's license, fluency in English, prohibition on beards, and eligibility for employment) do not appear to be significant barriers to membership.

Lack of time and lack of interest are the traditional barriers for Kodiak Fire Department to overcome.

A lack of knowledge in the community about the Department may be a significant barrier.

The incentives of training and a hospitable, friendly atmosphere could be used in recruitment efforts.

The traditional research about volunteers would suggest that remuneration is not an incentive (Bartel, 1998; Snook, et al., 1998). However, because of the local conditions and the cultural influences, compensation could be an effective recruiting tool.

As the Department learns more about attracting diversity into the work place, it can share the information with Unalaska and other fire departments in the State of Alaska and elsewhere.

Recommendations

This research project supplied valuable information and valuable lessons for the writer about the problem of the imbalance in ethnic representation.

The purpose of the study was fulfilled with limited success. The traditional barriers were confirmed. Some superficial incentives are indicated. Other fire departments in Alaska could not contribute any substantial experience in dealing effectively with disparity in diversity.

Kodiak Fire Department needs to establish a connection with local community leaders and organizations that represent the minority populations as a means of understanding cultural sensitivities to barriers and incentives.

The Department's recruiting strategy should be reorganized with a strategy that emphasizes the training that is available, the social activities that are planned. A plan that offers compensation to volunteers should be considered.

Additional research is suggested. Further study would be useful on this same problem with a focus on deeper cultural issues and motivators for the local Asian and Hispanic communities. A wider look at diversity that would include gender should also be considered.

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Appendix A

Diversity Comparison of Community & Fire Departments

		White	Native Am	Hispanic	Asian	Pac. Isl.	Afr. Am.	Male/Female
Petersburg Pop: 3224	Census	81.6	7.2	2.9	2.8	0.2	0.3	69/31
	Fire Dept.	89.0	7.6	0	3.0	0	0	
Seward 2830	Census	72.0	16.7	2.4	1.8	0.2	2.4	79/21
	Fire Dept.	94.0	3.0	0	0	0	3.0	60/40
Homer 3946	Census	90.5	4.2	2.4	0.9	0.1	0.3	61/39
	Fire Dept.	97.5	0	2.5	0	0	0	
Soldotna 3759	Census	88.1	5.0	3.2	1.7	0.4	0.3	80/20
	Fire Dept.	98.0	2.0	0	0	0	0	
Kodiak 6334	Census	46.4	10.5	8.5	31.7	0.9	0.7	77/23
	Fire Dept.	88.0	0	3.0	3.0	6.0	0	
Unalaska 4283	Census	47.0	7.7	12.9	30.6	0.6	7.7	69/31
	Fire Dept.	80.0	11.0	0	8.0	0	0	66/34
Kenai 6942	Census	82.8	8.7	3.8	1.7	0.2	0.5	94/6
	Fire Dept.	87.5	6.3	0	0	6.3	0	
Skagway 862	Census	92.3	3.0	2.1	0.6	0.2	0	64/36
	Fire Dept.	97.0	3.0	0	0	0	0	
Ketchikan 7922	Census	67.4	17.6	3.4	6.9	0.2	0.7	76/24
	Fire Dept.	89.0	11.0	0	0	0	0	
Valdez 4036	Census	83.6	7.2	4.0	2.2	0.4	0.4	73/27
	Fire Dept.	97.0	3.0	0	0	0	0	

Note 1. Figures on diversity are percentages.

Note 2. From the census data, the figure used for the Hispanic population is a total that is counted as an ethnic group comprised of different races.

Note 3. Gender distribution in the general population is within 3% of a 50/50 distribution unless otherwise listed.

Appendix B

Fire Department Volunteerism Questionnaire Results

Fire Department Volunteerism Questionnaire
Please check any of the items below that you feel are discouraging you from volunteering for the Kodiak Fire Department

23% Age (too old or too young)

11% No Driver's license

2% Unable to speak English

2% Not eligible for employment

2% Do not want to shave of a beard

72% Time commitment—too busy with family and work

19% Work is too dangerous

19% Not strong enough

42% Not interested

23% Did not know of the need for volunteers

9% No one has asked me to volunteer

19% Other (list) Health and physical disabilities

Check any of the items below that would increase your interest in being a volunteer for Kodiak Fire Department.

36% Pay

11% Free room in trade for time spent at the station

62% Training and career opportunities

45% Social atmosphere

4% Other (list) Retirement benefit

What location do you identify as "home?" Kodiak 87%, Other 6%

Do you volunteer with any other organizations?

(Circle one) Yes 45% No 55%

If "Yes," please list Church, Schools, Clubs, Senior Center, Special Olympics, Little League

Appendix C

MINORITY RECRUITMENT SURVEY

Include EMS-Only volunteers if your department also provides ambulance service. Use additional pages if needed.

Type of dept.(check one):(2)volunteer (6)combination (1)all paid

.....

Please enter the number of members in your department that fall into each group.

(For tabulation of diversity distribution, see Appendix A)

()Native American,()White,()Hispanic,()Asian,()Pacific Islander,()African American,()Other [Please list]

()Male,()Female

Do you feel that your membership adequately represents the ethnic diversity in the community that you serve? (7) Yes
(2) No

Is minority representation in your department a priority issue?
(2)Yes (7)No

.....

Have you identified any barrier(s) to minority recruitment?
()Yes(9)No If yes, please describe the barrier(s) and any effective strategy to overcome it.

Have you identified any incentive(s) for minority recruitment?
(1)Yes (8)No If yes, please describe the incentive(s) and how judged its success.

See Appendix D for additional response to this question.

.....

Comments:

See Appendix D for recap of comments.

Thank you for your assistance.

Appendix D

List of Comments to Minority Recruitment Survey

A. Comments received in response to, "Have you identified any incentive(s) for minority recruitment? () Yes () No If yes, please describe the incentive(s) and how [you] judged its success."

"If the [department] is perceived as competent, useful, & friendly, then our recruitment efforts attract "minority" & female folks, as well as white males."

B. Comments received in the comments section

"[City] population of natives and other nationalities is very limited. Probably not more than 5% of the population. We accept anyone who wants to be part of the [City] Fire Dept."

"Neither ethnicity nor gender are a factor in recruitment. Recruitment is designed to encourage variety of applicants. Hiring decisions are based on qualifications & ability to provide high quality service to the community."

"While our department does not totally reflect the demographics of our community with respect to Filipino and Vietnamese membership our main priority is just getting volunteers. We have not made any special efforts to recruit specifically from these groups. We make our radio and print advertisements very generic. Once we do get a person from a particular minority involved in our program we find that this opens the door for additional persons but this has not been the case with these two groups.

"I have found that our best recruiting occurs at the volunteer's work place rather than along ethnic, social/economic lines.

"We have not identified any barriers or for that matter incentives that would tend to bolster or discourage community members from becoming active in the department. However we have not been real active in determining if barriers exist so there could be something out there that we do not know about. I guess I will have to do some checking.

"Hope the info helps."

"...I do not feel there are any barriers to recruiting ethnic minorities. It is open to anyone. We have not specifically targeted ethnic groups."

"We attempt to hire full time personnel from within our volunteer ranks."

"As I'm not sure what the census says about our ethnicity in [City] it is difficult to determine what groups we could recruit from by any other means than currently applied (radio, newspaper, and word-of-mouth)."