

Retaining Volunteers during Transition to Combination Fire Department

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Certification Statement

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

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### Abstract

The research problem was determining how Graton Fire can best retain volunteer firefighters during an anticipated transition to a combination fire department. The purpose of this applied research paper was to determine how best to retain volunteer firefighters before, during, and after an anticipated transition to a combination fire department that would include using career staffing. This applied research project utilized the descriptive research method. The research approach comprised a review of literature related to the retention of volunteer firefighters. This literature review focused on the identification of best practices employed by other departments to retain volunteers. Questions to be answered included (a) what are the typical issues that arise for volunteer fire departments as they transition to combination departments, (b) what are the present understandings and feelings of Graton volunteer firefighters regarding the possible transition to a combination department, (c) how have other fire departments of a similar size navigated through such transitions and been able to retain their volunteers, and (d) what initiatives can Graton Fire implement that will encourage volunteers to continue their service before, during and after the transition to a combination department. In addition to the literature review, the applied research procedures utilized interviews, focus groups, and three surveys to gather information. The results suggested that volunteer firefighters need to feel valued regularly and not subordinate to the career staff. Proposed staffing models should schedule career and volunteer firefighters together, not segregated. The results also identified the need for all members of the department to have equal access to training and promotional opportunities. The findings recommend that Graton Fire implement expectations and initiatives that encourage volunteer firefighter retention such as combination staffing, intern opportunities, training, promotions, and recognition.

Keywords: volunteer, retention, combination, transition, leadership

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Retaining Volunteers During the Graton Fire  
Transition to a Combination Fire Department

The majority of the United States is protected by fire departments either fully or partially staffed by volunteer firefighters. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), roughly 66% of fire departments are volunteer or mostly volunteer; 69% of all firefighters are volunteers (2016). This NFPA profile report (2016) identified that 5,580 of fire departments are mostly volunteer (18.6% of the total) and another 19,915 are all volunteer (66.4%). The United States Fire Administration (USFA) published that volunteer fire departments are finding it more difficult to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters (2007). Volunteer firefighters save the communities they serve an average of \$37 billion in taxes annually (Ettinger, 2009). The Graton community, like many others nationally, relies on volunteer firefighters to provide emergency services.

The Graton Fire Protection District is experiencing an ever-increasing demand for service. It cannot sustain the continued growth in call volume without at least some dedicated staff. The research problem was determining how Graton Fire can best retain volunteer firefighters during an anticipated transition to a combination fire department. While some fire departments have hired career firefighters and retained their volunteer ranks, other departments have done so only to see their volunteer numbers dwindle to zero. The purpose of this research is to determine how best to retain volunteer firefighters before, during and after an anticipated transition to a combination fire department that would include using career staffing. Graton Fire is not sustainable with just volunteers and cannot afford 100% career staffing; this requires an effective transition to retain volunteers while hiring firefighters.

Descriptive research will be used to formulate Graton Fire's retention plan through reviewing literature, conducting interviews and focus groups of current volunteers, and collecting information through three survey instruments focused on answering four questions: (a) what are the typical issues that arise for volunteer fire departments as they transition to combination departments, (b) what are the present understandings and feelings of Graton volunteer firefighters regarding the possible transition to a combination department, (c) how have other fire departments of a similar size navigated through such transitions and been able to retain their volunteers, and (d) what initiatives can Graton Fire implement that will encourage volunteers to continue their service before, during and after the transition to a combination department. The findings of this applied research project are intended to support the successful integration of career firefighters into a volunteer fire department while retaining the existing volunteer firefighters.

### Background and Significance

Veterans returning from World War II formed the Graton Fire Protection District. In 1958, the State of California officially recognized the fire department and formed a special independent district. The district covers 26 square miles of unincorporated Western Sonoma County including Graton and parts of Sebastopol, Occidental, Santa Rosa, and Forestville. The community comprises both suburban and rural properties typically referred to as a wildland-urban interface area. Approximately 8,800 people live in the fire district. There is no municipal water system in most of Western Sonoma County which means additional firefighters and water tenders are needed from multiple departments to support water hauling operations during a working fire. Through this coordinated effort, Graton Fire has achieved a protection class rating



of 5 out of 10 by the Insurance Services Office (ISO). An elected board of five directors represents the taxpayers and oversees the financial needs of the fire district.

The demand for service continues to increase annually. During 2017, the volunteer firefighters responded to 763 calls from the Graton community. This call volume is 40% busier than any other volunteer department in Sonoma County and nine other departments that have

already transitioned into a combination department through hired firefighters. Combine this demand with the lack of affordable housing in the district for volunteers, and there is not sufficient staffing supply to match the demand for

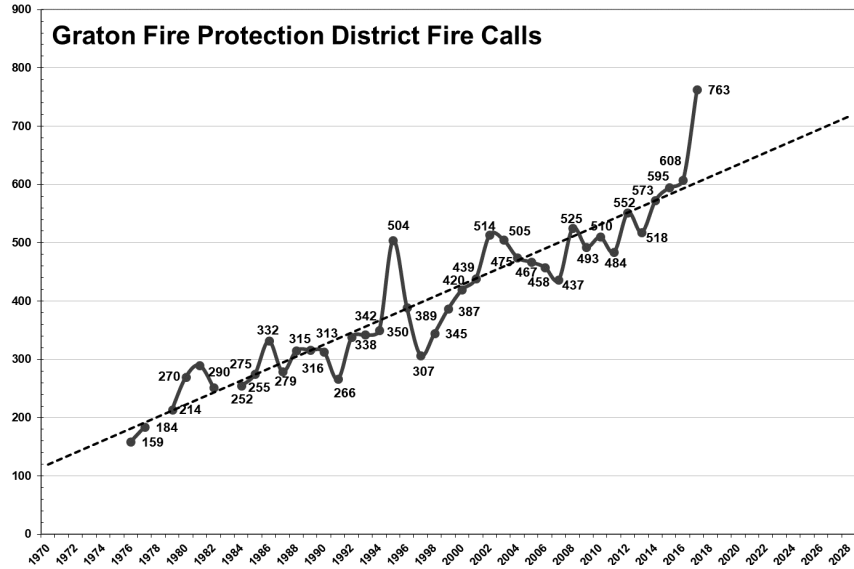


Figure 1: Historical call volume and trendline

service. These two factors have led to longer response times or even the need to request mutual aid from neighboring departments thus proving that volunteer firefighters alone cannot mitigate call volume growth.

While there is a need for career firefighters, the Graton Fire Board of Directors identified that there are not the financial resources for all paid staff. The board determined that there is currently funding for two firefighters. Even with a parcel tax measure currently under consideration, the most full-time positions financially feasible would be six. These six staff would equate to two career firefighters on duty at all times, which is not sufficient to staff an

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engine with the necessary three personnel. Therefore, a combination of volunteer and career firefighters is required to meet the needs of the community.

Historically, all of the volunteer firefighters lived in the district and included local farmers and other agriculture-related workers. Most worked for themselves and could easily leave work and respond to fires and medical aids. Each volunteer brought a high-level of self-taught skills to the department, and there are many stories of new volunteers fighting fires and driving fire engines on the same night they joined. There was little required training to meet the state standards for a firefighter. The call volume was significantly less and interrupted the work day only a couple times per week. This volume and the required training were manageable for the volunteer firefighters of the time.

Today, the majority of the volunteer firefighters live and work outside of Graton. Currently, six of the 22 (27%) volunteer firefighters can afford to live locally. The local cost of housing has risen dramatically with almost no apartments and only a few in-law cottages or small homes on larger parcels. The majority of those living in Graton are younger, i.e., under 25, and still living with their families. When they leave home, the only option is to leave Graton. The types of jobs have changed, and there are no longer local farmers. Most volunteers have full-time positions in offices located in the urban core – away from Graton. Only three (14%) work locally and are available to respond during the daytime. The primary impact of this housing and work migration out of Graton is longer response times. Most do not respond to calls when out of the area as it will take over 10 minutes to reach the station. A secondary impact is the motivation of the volunteer firefighter. In the past, many served to benefit the community with no aspirations of a fire career. Today, it is typical that more than half of the volunteers on the fire department roster are looking for experience to become a career firefighter. Some

volunteers also work as seasonal firefighters for the state to gain more experience – further impacting their availability to Graton. The lack of community-benefit motivation is also negatively affected by the ever-increasing training mandates. As an example, ISO wants 20 hours per month of firefighter continuing training; that is difficult to accomplish with volunteers (Indiana Firefighter Training System, 2015).

One of the steps taken to mitigate the longer response times and guarantee a staffed engine was a sleeper program. Two nighttime shifts began in 2015 and cover from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. The volunteer firefighters bid monthly for the shifts and receive a reimbursement of 35 to 45 dollars depending on their training level; i.e., engineers and captains receive the higher rate due to their ability to drive the fire engines. A chief officer responds from home when necessary to supplement the two-person engine staffing.

If the current volunteer staffing model continues, the impact will only become worse. There will be more calls for service spread over the already overburdened volunteer firefighters. Response times will continue to be unacceptable. The requests for mutual aid from the surrounding fire departments with career staffing will continue to increase. As a proactive step, Graton Fire applied for and was awarded a Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Starting in July 2019, there will be two career firefighters hired. The SAFER grant provides partial funding for these two positions for three years.

The ultimate goal of the Executive Fire Officer program at the National Fire Academy (NFA) is to develop fire service leaders, not just managers. Within the first year's course, Executive Development, two goals were established: (a) lead effectively and efficiently within a dynamic and complex organization by enhancing the development of teams and the application

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of research and (b) develop and integrate management and leadership techniques that are necessary in complex organizations (United States Fire Administration, 2016). Through this applied research, the goal is to determine what characteristics will motivate volunteer firefighters to transition as Graton Fire hires its first career firefighters. Unit 5: Change Management in the course textbook is particularly appropriate for this topic. The coursework and instructors described the change management process in four steps. First, identify the problem. The retention of volunteer firefighters during the transition to a combination department is the identified problem. Second, the change must have a purpose. The change is necessary to ensure there is adequate personnel to respond timely to emergencies at all times. Third, the purpose must be understood. The Board clearly understand the purpose, but the volunteer firefighters are understanding and agreeing that there is a need at different rates. The dichotomy of opinions has led to internal challenges. Lastly, what happens when a change occurs? After implementing change is probably the most volatile component of change management as each volunteer firefighter imagines a different conclusion to hiring career firefighters (United States Fire Administration, 2016).

In 2014, the USFA established five strategic goals. This applied research paper serves to deliver on all of the USFA objectives. The primary focus of this paper is best exemplified by USFA Goal #3 which states, “Enhance the fire and emergency services’ capability for response to and recovery from all hazards” (2014). By learning what is needed to encourage volunteer firefighters to remain through the transition to a combination department, Graton Fire will be that much more prepared to respond to the community’s emergencies.

### Literature Review

The first research question for this paper seeks to identify the typical issues that arise for volunteer fire departments as they transition to combination departments. A search of the existing literature is an excellent initial step as it focuses on the general or typical reasons why volunteers opt to remain at or leave an organization. The process began in the Training Center at NFA and continued online through its literature search portal website. Internet searches provided additional research materials. While a few articles and journals touched on the issue of retention specific to combination fire departments, a more global literature review was necessary to capture sufficient results. This literature included volunteer retention in fire departments with any level of volunteerism as well as organizations outside of the fire service. This research will support questions three and four which focus on how other fire departments have retained volunteers overall, not just through a transition. The results of the review were utilized to frame the focus group and interview discussions as well as develop the three surveys.

In 2017, David Greene and Marcus Hendershot completed a research project looking at the motives, expectations, and satisfaction of South Carolina's volunteer firefighters (2017). The authors surmised that a byproduct of urban sprawl starting in the 1950s, was the substantial increase in demand for fire service in the suburban and rural areas. The result is sparsely populated communities over large geographic areas pose "significant challenges with respect to essential public services like fire protection" without a tax base to fund said services (Green & Hendershot, 2017). The increased demand for service and decreased supply of tax funding are compounded by the number of volunteer firefighters in the United States dropping by more than 10% while the overall population increased by 32% from 1985 to 2011 (Karter & Stein, 2013). For the study, the authors utilized six goals identified with volunteerism from a 1998 study by

Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Stukas, and Haugen. The goals included (a) values – altruism or the concern for the welfare of others, (b) understanding – opportunities to learn, practice, and apply skills and abilities, (c) career – improvements in volunteers' job prospects or career enhancements, (d) social – solidarity and therapeutic motivations like combating isolation, reducing depression, and lessening loneliness and emotional deprivation, (e) protective – guilt relief and evaluation of personal resources compared to others, and (f) enhancement – increase in self-esteem, self-improvement, and self-confidence (Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Stukas, & Haugen, 1998). Each goal became a component of the survey completed by the South Carolina volunteer firefighters. Of the six goals defined by Clary et al. (1998), the firefighters ranked values and enhancement as the top two for overall satisfaction.

Green and Hendershot determined the top five related factors influencing the volunteer firefighters' satisfaction and, therefore, retention included helping others, civic responsibility, feeling of accomplishment, member valued public service and obtaining training. Four of these factors comprised the top reasons for originally volunteering. The authors concluded that South Carolina volunteer firefighters appear to be highly motivated by public service, recognition of service, and being a member of a valued public service. In contrast, it does not appear the same volunteer firefighters need to make friends, socialize with others, or receive compensation to be satisfied. While financial remuneration was appreciated, it denoted a low priority for volunteering and offering greater financial rewards may not improve retention. Finally, the study identified a trend that volunteers within combination fire departments were likely to quit four years sooner than their peers in an all-volunteer department. To mitigate this weakness within combination departments, the authors suggested training between volunteer and career staff should be as consistent as possible which may reduce friction between the two groups. The

results of the journal article indicate that a values orientation is the most prevalent influence affecting firefighters' commitment to the volunteer fire service, that personal enhancement and understanding goals were best able to systemically explain variance in the prospective service period (Green & Hendershot, 2017).

A similar study completed by Pennsylvania volunteer firefighters indicated additional insight into retention (Henderson & Sowa, 2018). The authors noted how critical volunteer firefighters are to the nation based on NFPA data that 35% of the United States' citizens receive fire protection by volunteers (2016). The survey results suggest that a stronger training plan, greater opportunities, and better support for the volunteers may positively impact retention. The authors also concluded based on the data that group (i.e., department) cohesiveness and the sense of closeness with the fire chief also influence the length of service. The study indicated "volunteer training, performance management, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment influence both short- and mid-term intent to remain, indicating that management practices, as well as other contextual factors that shape satisfaction and commitment, are important in retaining volunteers" (Henderson & Sowa, 2018). The authors recommend offering proactive training to further volunteer firefighter expertise along with quality and regular feedback to bolster individual self-worth and recognize the volunteer's contribution. The journal article concludes by reminding the reader that "volunteer retention and organizational effectiveness are not optional or unimportant strategies; service failure by nonprofit safety agencies would have a profound impact on local governments" (Henderson & Sowa, 2018).

In Australia, its Journal of Emergency Management published two articles related to the retention of volunteers. The first survey compiled data from 2,306 emergency service volunteers. The results indicate four factors that significantly contribute to volunteer

commitment to an organization. These include supervisor support, interactional justice, recognition, and group cohesion (Rice & Fallon, 2011). A second article focused on analyzing 396 exit survey results for Australian volunteer firefighters. The most common contributing reason for resigning was work or family needs (51%); this was followed by moving away (38%), age or health issues (28%), and dissatisfaction with the volunteer role (25%) (McLennan, Birch, Cowlshaw, & Hayes, 2009). The authors noted that three of the four reasons are within the control of the organization and can be mitigated through excellent management techniques by the fire department leadership.

A study conducted by the University of Nebraska at Omaha of three different volunteer organizations, not related to the fire service, suggested a further understanding of volunteer motivations through studying community service self-efficacy (Harp, Scherer, & Allen, 2017). The article suggested that fewer organizational constraints and reduced role ambiguity may lead to stronger engagement by volunteers. The authors recommended an assessment and support of each volunteer's community service self-efficacy in an attempt to build personal engagement and lengthen the years of volunteer service.

The German Township Fire & EMS in Ohio developed a performance-based award system to improve volunteer firefighter retention within its department (Holman, 1999). This volunteer department found itself in the same predicament as others; i.e., the 1,400 fire and medical calls each year were too significant to rely on local business owners and farmers to handle. The department budgeted \$10,000 for performance awards. Each response to a call, training completed, special detail and department meeting awarded two to three points to the volunteer firefighter. At the end of the year, the \$10,000 budget is allocated based on the total points accumulated by all volunteers. The average award received was \$450, with a range from



\$61.50 to almost \$2,000 (Holman, 1999). The author, who is also the fire chief, believed this program assisted his department in retaining volunteers.

A group of volunteer fire chiefs from North Dakota published an article on the factors they believed most impacted volunteer recruitment and retention (Yoon, Jensen, & Youngs, 2014). The authors suggested that “general social change and changes specific to firefighting have created retention and recruitment challenges for rural fire departments across the nation” (Yoon, Jensen, & Youngs, 2014). They go on to identify age, time demands, government mandates, and personality conflicts as the most significant factors affecting volunteer retention. To a secondary degree, the fire chiefs noted a sizable gap between the total number of volunteer firefighters and those who are considered active on the department roster. The implication is a volunteer or combination fire department could have a robust roster, but that does not necessarily translate that every firefighter is participating at or above a minimum number of calls and drills per year.

A 2015 article in *Fire Engineering* discussed the need to rethink current recruitment and retention methods (Geis). The article attempts to identify the motivation behind volunteer firefighting. Geis noted that intrinsic motivators appeared to drive personal satisfaction, such as the pride felt serving others, becoming a skilled expert at a particular task (e.g., firefighting, vehicle extrication, medical assessment), overcoming personal limitations and meeting challenges, along with the feeling of joy as a valued member of a well-functioning team. The author continues by sharing what he believes are the core competencies to support these motivators – respect, confidence, and given every chance to perform. When the volunteer firefighters are trained on a set of skills, given the autonomy to perform them, and respected by

the fire leadership, Geis believes the individual self-worth quotient is high, and this will lead to long-term volunteer service within the fire department.

A few months later, *Fire Engineering* published another article on how volunteer management is evolving (Maltbie, 2015). The article sets the current stage through a reference to *Bowling Alone*, a book by Robert Putnam where he determined that personal pursuits have become more individual than communal leading to fewer people volunteering in their communities (Putnam, 2000). The change in motivation is supported by the reducing number of volunteer firefighters in America as described previously (National Fire Protection Association, 2016). Maltbie identified that confusion before joining a volunteer fire department may be a significant deterrent and addressed proactively. To encourage recruitment, he suggests using measurable and specific terminology to remove the confusion. Terms may include the required initial training when volunteers are needed to respond, and any ongoing commitment may dispel the mystery and establish clear expectations for everyone. With a realistic expectation upon joining, it may be possible to influence long-term retention. Maltbie also noted a critical factor in retention is demonstrating that balance between work, life and fire service is possible for all volunteers at the fire department. He continues his thoughts on retention by identifying studies showing financial compensation is neither a primary motivator for volunteering nor does it serve as recognition. Factors that support retention include valuing volunteer input on organizational decision-making, opportunities to lead, and ongoing training that is not only encouraged but also a department priority according to Maltbie. He encourages the recognition of years of service and promptly applauding new certifications, achievements, and specialty training.

In 2016, a journal article described the concept of psychological contracts and their impact on volunteer retention (Walker, Accadia, & Costa). The authors describe this contract as

informal, virtual, and unknown by the organizational leadership (unless it asks the volunteer). The survey data included 721 Australian volunteers across a variety of organizations. The authors' goal was to determine if a psychological contract breach (i.e., the perceived failure of the organization to meet volunteer's expectations of reciprocity) impacts volunteer retention regardless of coworker and organizational support. The authors cited a prior study that found a link between the lack of perceived support from management and the feeling of breach of the psychological contract (Deery, 2003). Another study of 48 volunteers and 98 volunteer managers at an Australian sporting club suggests that a lack of explicit expectations can lead to the collapse of the volunteers' psychological contract and shorten the length of service (Taylor, Darcy, Hoyer, & Cuskelly, 2006). Walker et al. (2016) confirmed in their study that breaking the psychological contract had a 30% negative impact on the likelihood of the volunteer remaining with the organization. The authors reference a social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) as the potential rationale which describes the relationship created when a volunteer contributes to a cause or organization, that volunteer has a perceived expectation of reciprocity in the volunteer-organization relationship. This perceived expectation determines the volunteer's intention to remain and continue participation even if never shared with management (Walker, Accadia, & Costa, 2016).

In summary, the literature review supports some possible strategies and approaches to improve volunteer retention. One of the reoccurring themes is setting the right department expectations from the start and fully understanding the volunteer's expectations from the department. Multiple studies identified that helping others and feeling valued were critical to long-term volunteer retention. Quality and frequent training was another priority mentioned throughout the literature review. The factors commonly cited for leaving a volunteer

organization included age, time demands, and personality conflicts. Finally, a few journal articles recognized financial compensation as appreciated by the volunteers, but not integral to retention, and should not be a primary strategy for keeping volunteers. These conclusions need to be vetted using surveys of current volunteer firefighters within Graton Fire as well as other departments that have already hired career staff to augment the volunteers.

### Procedures

The applied research paper utilized descriptive method procedures to assess the current state of volunteer firefighter retention, understand the motivations behind volunteering, and potential strategies to improve retention. The procedures included descriptive research such as literature review, interviews, focus groups, and surveys of three different groups: (a) current Graton volunteer firefighters, (b) volunteer firefighters from other successful combination departments, and (c) fire chiefs from successful combination departments. The collection of these descriptive research methods serves to answer the four research questions.

The first phase of the research process included collecting and reviewing the literature on the topic of volunteer firefighter retention. Literature for this applied research project included industry journals, fire service publications, Internet websites, and prior applied research papers completed by other Executive Fire Officer candidates. The process began in the Training Center at the National Fire Academy and continued online through its literature search portal website. Internet searches provided additional research materials. The literature review helped identify the typical issues that arise for volunteer fire departments as they transition to combination departments which answered the first applied research question for this project – the research process located multiple trade journal articles and reports worth reviewing.

With a broad understanding of the subject from the literature review, the second phase began. Phase two included interviewing local fire departments that successfully made the transition from volunteer to combination departments. The goal during phase two was to refine the initial literature research understanding using specific case studies that would identify the detailed characteristics and strategies implemented by leadership that encouraged the volunteers to remain. The interviews occurred in person with the fire chiefs from their respective combination departments on August 28, 2018, September 28, 2018, and October 15, 2018. The format was informal and allowed the fire chiefs to share their opinions and recommendations without biasing the input using predetermined questions.

The third phase included focus groups of volunteer firefighters currently with Graton Fire. Sixteen people attended the first focus group on November 15, 2018, and five participated in a follow-up session on December 6, 2018. Both sessions occurred at the Graton Fire station. The first focus group lasted just under two hours and the second session concluded in 70 minutes as the fewer attendees did not drive as in-depth a discussion. The format was unscripted beyond sharing the second research question and allowing the group to direct the conversation as it felt most beneficial. Volunteers shared their present understanding and feelings regarding the possible transition to a combination department; this is the second question of the applied research project. Next, the focus groups discussed how to structure the transition to maximize the retention of existing staff. Finally, the volunteer firefighters suggested what steps could be implemented to help with retention.

The final phase of the applied research project was completed using surveys released on December 18, 2018, through an online survey tool (i.e., [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)). The surveys were created using the results of the first three research phases to ask better, more targeted,

questions of the respondents. The three surveys developed identified three separate target audiences to address all four of the research questions for this project. Survey collection ended on January 18, 2019. The data analysis started with an independent review of each survey's answers followed by a comparison of answers to identical questions across all three surveys.

The first survey focused on the existing Graton volunteer firefighters. The goal was to capture individual opinions, beyond just the focus group input, that can sometimes be swayed by those with stronger opinions (Smithson, 2000). This survey confirms and refines the second research question related to current understand and feelings of a possible transition. The participation was excellent with 21 total responses. There are 22 volunteer firefighters on the roster, including the author, which means 100% participated.

The second survey targeted volunteer firefighters from combination departments. The developed survey questions correlate to the third applied research question which asks how other fire departments of a similar size navigated through such transitions and have been able to retain their volunteers. By asking those specific individuals who experienced such transition within their departments, and decided to continue volunteering, it may be possible to identify strategies to implement within Graton Fire. The fire chiefs for all 17 combination departments in Sonoma County received the survey. It is unknown how many chiefs circulated the survey or to how many volunteers within each fire department; however, initial responses were low. The survey was shared with the 16 Executive Development students for distribution within their respective departments, if applicable. Again, it is unclear how many total volunteers received the survey. In the end, 25 volunteer firefighters from other departments completed the survey.

The third survey concentrated on the leadership within the successful combination departments. The survey was sent to fire chiefs to gain a better understanding of what they and

their departments did right to encourage volunteer retention. Not only can they provide input on research question three, but they are also capable of answering question two – identifying typical issues that arise for volunteer fire departments as they transition to combination departments. A total of 10 fire chiefs completed the survey from the same sample size of 17 Sonoma County combination departments and 16 Executive Development classmates.

There were some limitations discovered during this applied research project. Organization retention comprised of both volunteers and career staff is very specific, and minimal literature exists. Fire service journals provided the most published research, but some were older than five years. Focus groups were excellent for stimulating a discussion and gathering input but limit individual opinions from being shared due to the group dynamics (Smithson, 2000). This limitation was mitigated to some extent by the addition of confidential surveys sent to each Graton volunteer firefighter. The number of identified combination fire department chiefs to survey was very small. While there are most likely successful fire departments that have transitioned from volunteer to combination departments across the United States, this demographic was not easily distinguishable. It was beyond the capabilities of this research project to identify these departments on a national scale. This limitation affected both the fire chief interviews as well as the second and third surveys.

Using the results of the literature review, personal interviews, existing volunteer firefighter focus groups, and multiple surveys, the applied research paper can identify and recommend those strategies to optimize the retention of volunteers throughout a transition process and beyond. These results addressed the fourth and most important question of this research project – identify initiatives Graton Fire can implement that will encourage volunteers to continue their service before, during and after the transition to a combination department.

## Results

This applied research paper on retaining volunteers during the transition to a combination department includes four questions. These were developed using both the problem and the purpose statements for this project. The descriptive research model was utilized to identify relevant literature on the topic of volunteer retention. External interviews and internal focus groups followed this. Three surveys were created to understand further the specific factors impacting volunteer retention during the transition using the research completed to date. The culmination of this research forms the results for this applied research paper.

*Research Question #1: What are the typical issues that arise for volunteer fire departments as they transition to combination departments?*

The literature review provided the initial results for answering this question. The Green and Hendershot study (2017) identified a trend that volunteers within combination fire departments were likely to quit four years sooner than their peers in an all-volunteer department. The issue appears to occur when the training of volunteer staff is not to a similar level as the career staff which creates conflict between the two groups. All staff needs to have the same training opportunities and the ability to apply that training through responding to emergencies to mitigate the issue (Green & Hendershot, 2017). Clary et al. (1998) also concluded that the prospect of being hired by the combination department, or at least the opportunity to promote up the ranks, played a critical role in the volunteer's intent to remain.

Two interviews with neighboring fire chiefs provided an excellent level of detail and insight on this research question (Appendix H). Both began as volunteers within their departments and were part of the transition to combination departments. They concurred with the literature review that volunteers need to have the ability to advance within the respective



departments, including a career position if desired. Volunteers should have the first opportunity for any career opening before considering outside candidates. When hiring staff, whether internal or external, the chiefs suggested asking interview questions to root out any possibility that career staff may treat volunteers as second-class citizens in the department. The chiefs also recommended offering as much training as possible to all staff, regardless of type. Volunteer and career firefighters have very similar requirements for promotion, such as engineer and captain. These requirements are clearly defined, objective, and financially supported by the departments. A mutual level of respect is promulgated department-wide, regardless of volunteer or paid status.

The focus groups revealed current Graton volunteer firefighters who had experienced the transition at other departments (Appendix H). The common concern raised was moving too quickly from all volunteers to a paid crew of three on duty at all times. A rushed transition left the volunteers feeling immediately unnecessary and unsure how to fit within the new department structure.

*Research Question #2: What are the present understandings and feelings of Graton volunteer firefighters regarding the possible transition to a combination department?*

The first survey completed included the current Graton Fire volunteer firefighters (Appendix A). Participation was 100%. Demographic questions provided some background on the respondents. The majority (73.7%) found the department through word of mouth, followed by drop in (10.5%), advertising on the front sign (10.5%), and finally family connection (5.3%) (Figure 2). Currently, 10 of the 21 (47.6%) volunteers neither live nor work in the district boundaries (Figure 3). Seven volunteers (33.3%) live and three others (14.3%) work within the district. Only one volunteer (4.8%) lives and works in the district. The volunteer tenure is varied, ranging from one year to over 30 (Figure 4). Most (55.0%) joined in the last five years.

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A few (25.0%) have been on the department for five to 10 years, two (10.0%) for 15-20 years, and another two (10.0%) exceed 30 years of service. When asked for their current level of satisfaction, the rating was 7.7 out of 10 (Figure 5). The Graton volunteer firefighters shared what they feel are the challenges with keeping volunteers (Figure 6). The greatest challenge cited was the lack of free time (6.2/10). Lack of recognition by the department or leadership (5.2), excessive training requirements (4.6), lack of family support (4.4), and poor public image (3.6) completed the list of challenges. Respondents were able to enter other challenges to keeping volunteers. These included minimum call and training volume, afraid of the commitment, lack of professionalism, negative attitudes, grooming standards, unfair promotions, and finding a balance between volunteering and life. Current volunteers were also asked to value different reasons for volunteering, some tangible and others intangible (Figure 7). The top five included serving people in need (9.7/10), serving my community (9.0), quality of fire station (8.5), quality of fire engines and equipment (8.0), and educational opportunities (8.0). Those rated with the least value include laundry (4.3/10), Internet access (4.7), ice (5.1), service awards (5.1), and computer use (5.1). When asked why volunteers are leaving Graton Fire, their peers rated some reasons (Figure 8). Becoming a career firefighter elsewhere was rated highest (6.5/10), followed by lack of free time to volunteer (6.2), lack of recognition by department or leadership (5.6), lack of compensation for time involved (5.3), lack of family support (3.4), excessive training requirements (2.9), and poor public image (2.1). Other reasons for leaving included internal conflict, inconsistent discipline, lack of high-quality training, and lack of support for improvements suggested. The current volunteers provided their input on how Graton Fire could encourage volunteering as it considers hiring career staff (Figure 9). Obtaining experience to apply for a career position was rated highest (8.5/10), followed by obtaining

experience to apply for a Graton career position (8.3), obtaining their Firefighter I certification (8.0), ability to work (paid) day stipend shifts (7.9), and ability to work (paid) sleeper shifts (7.5). Other suggestions included bringing in high-quality teachers, starting an internship program, offering Firefighter I internally, and consider reducing call and training minimums. Finally, all survey respondents had the opportunity to answer an open-ended question about ways to retain volunteer firefighters (Figure 10). The suggestions included hiring competent staff that volunteers can trust, consistency, increased safety, better training, ensure integrity, clear path for promotion, use social media to recognize volunteers, recognize the family support required, increase day and night stipend pay, and increased transparency.

During the internal focus groups, discussion suggested that any type of mutually-beneficial partnership between the volunteer and career staff would be most advantageous. That is, if there are not enough volunteer or paid firefighters to staff an engine independently, then both groups need each other to respond to a fire or medical emergency. The relationship between volunteers and career staff becomes one of synergy, not acrimony. An additional recommendation was made by the group that all ranks should have clear definitions and similar standards for promotion regardless of volunteer or paid status.

*Research Question #3:* How have other fire departments of a similar size navigated through such transitions and been able to retain their volunteers?

The literature review suggested that all staff need to have the same training opportunities and the ability to execute that training when responding to emergencies (Green & Hendershot, 2017). Clary et al. (1998) also concluded that the prospect of being hired by the combination department, or at least the opportunity to promote up the ranks, played a critical role in the volunteer's intent to remain.

A survey of volunteers at current combination departments revealed perspectives on what encouraged them to stay (Appendix E). The volunteer firefighter demographics ranged from up to five years (40.0%), six (24.0%) having over 25 years, and a range in between (Figure 11). Overall, they rated their satisfaction at 7.5 out of 10 (Figure 12). The respondents were asked to identify their perceptions related to the challenges of keeping volunteers (Figure 13). Respondents cited excessive training requirements as the greatest challenge (5.6/10). Subsequent concerns included lack of free time (5.5), lack of recognition by the department or leadership (4.7), no respect from career firefighters (4.5), lack of family support (3.9), and finally poor public image was rated lowest (3.1). Respondents were able to enter other challenges to keeping volunteers. These included a lack of funding for volunteers to work shifts and age. The top-rated values for why volunteer firefighters choose to remain with a fire department include serving my community (9.3/10), serving people in need (9.1), quality of fire engines and equipment (8.0), educational opportunities (7.1), and meeting my neighbors (6.7) (Figure 14). The least important drives of volunteering included sleeper shift pay (3.5), experience for an internal career position (3.6), getting away from home (4.1), access to television (4.2), and laundry use (4.2). Another concern shared was the station layout and accommodations. When asked why volunteers choose to leave their respective combination fire departments, lack of free time to volunteer was the top reason (6.2/10) (Figure 15). Additional reasons included becoming a career firefighter elsewhere (5.0), minimal respect from career firefighters (4.1), excessive training requirements (4.1), little recognition by department or leadership (3.9), lack of compensation for time involved (3.8), lack of family support (3.4), and poor public image (2.1). Age was also written in as a reason why some leave. An open-ended question requested input on how each department could encourage retention of volunteers (Figure 16). Responses included

opportunities to deploy on strike teams, flexibility with training requirements, holding paid staff accountable, respect from career staff, reimbursement for out-of-pocket costs to volunteer, greater training opportunities, recognition, some financial benefits, paid training, and ease training requirements.

Fire chiefs from combination departments provided further insight (Appendix F). The departments varied from minimal to almost full career staffing (Figure 17). Sixty percent have volunteer firefighters working side by side with paid firefighters for over 30 years (Figure 18). All departments have more than 11 volunteers, and 40% noted over 30 volunteers currently (Figure 19). When the fire chiefs were asked to identify the challenges with keeping volunteers, lack of free time to volunteer (7.3/10) was the greatest issue (Figure 20). Survey respondents ranked additional issues that included excessive training requirements (7.1), lack of family support (5.3), lack of recognition by department or leadership (3.6), lack of respect from career firefighters (3.1), and poor public image (2.8). The fire chiefs rated the value of different benefits to retain volunteer firefighters within their respective departments (Figure 21). They scored educational opportunities the highest (8.0/10), followed by serving my community (7.4), serving people in need (7.3), social events (7.2), and strike team possibilities (7.1) as the top five. Least valuable according to the fire chiefs were access to ice (2.7), laundry use (2.8), affordable housing (2.9), computer access (3.3), and television (3.5). The fire chiefs evaluated seven reasons why volunteers typically quit (Figure 22). Their results indicated that a lack of free time to volunteer was the most common (7.4/10). Subsequent reasons for leaving included becoming a career firefighter elsewhere (5.2), excessive training requirements (5.2), lack of family support (3.3), lack of compensation for the time involved (2.9), lack of recognition by department or leadership (2.6), and lack of respect from career firefighters (2.3). Additional reasons suggested

were the high cost of living in the community and age. Finally, the fire chiefs provided other thoughts about what may encourage volunteers to stay with their departments (Figure 23). One department offers small retirement, mental health care, and long-term disability benefits. Another department recommended education reimbursements and paid shifts for volunteers. Coordination of department projects with both volunteer and career firefighters, such as engine design, was suggested. A fire chief mentioned flexibility with policies such as call and drill attendance that could be excessive and drive quitting. Multiple respondents recommended setting realistic expectations for older firefighters, that could include non-interior firefighter and support positions.

*Research Question #4:* What initiatives can Graton Fire implement that will encourage volunteers to continue their service before, during and after the transition to a combination department?

Initiatives exist that may support the Graton Fire transition in the short and long-term. The literature review suggests that clear definition of expectations helps with not only recruitment, but also the long-term retention of volunteers (Harp, Scherer, & Allen, 2017; Maltbie, 2015; Taylor, Darcy, Hoye, & Cuskelly, 2006; Walker, Accadia, & Costa, 2016). Documentation of expectations is possible through standard operating guidelines, volunteer recruitment advertising, and verbal reinforcement by the fire department leadership. Recognition for years of service is a strong motivator (Green & Hendershot, 2017; Maltbie, 2015). Initiatives could take the form of public acknowledgment of service to tangible gifts for years of service. Personal satisfaction appears to be a strong contributor to volunteer retention (Geis, 2015; Henderson & Sowa, 2018). Opportunities to serve others, learning a complex skill, and overcoming challenges may reduce volunteer firefighter turnover. Multiple literature sources

identified training as influential to keeping volunteers engaged (Green & Hendershot, 2017; Henderson & Sowa, 2018; Maltbie, 2015). Initiatives that offer high-quality training by qualified instructors for volunteer and paid firefighters alike may further support volunteer retention.

Comparing the surveys completed by Graton Fire volunteers, other volunteer firefighters, and fire chiefs from combination fire departments offer specific initiatives worth consideration (Appendix H). The surveys revealed that both groups of volunteer firefighters strongly empathize with serving the community and people in need. Initiatives around recognizing this commitment to public service, such as public recognition and acknowledgment, may support long-term retention. The quality of the fire engines and equipment appear to be important as well. Ensuring high-quality tools of the trade may encourage continuing volunteering. All survey groups support the value of educational opportunities and tuition reimbursement for fire training. A review of current training initiatives is necessary and additional time and financial resources considered to bolster the existing firefighter training and encourage external education. The Graton firefighters identified the quality of the fire station, gym access, meeting neighbors, experience for a career position, and recommendation letters as more valuable than the other survey respondents. When specifically asked how Graton Fire can encourage volunteer retention, obtaining experience for an external or internal fire career position was ranked at the top of the list (8.5/10 and 8.3, respectively). Any initiative that allows the volunteers to work shifts and run calls may be valuable. Another positive attribute included helping volunteers obtain their Firefighter I certification (8.0). Firefighter internships may be one type of initiative to support this objective. Finally, current volunteers want the opportunity to work day and night

shifts (7.9 and 7.5, respectively). This desire fits with the top-ranked value and initiatives to gain firefighter experience would likely provide some level of financial compensation.

### Discussion

The purpose of this applied research paper is to determine how best to retain volunteer firefighters before, during, and after an anticipated transition to a combination fire department that would include the use of career staffing. As a small district, Graton Fire does not have the financial means to pay for all career firefighters. However, the demand for service continues to increase, and volunteers alone will not be able to sustain the current high level of fire and medical calls without help. The Graton Fire Chief and Board of Directors believe a combination fire department is an optimal solution, in theory. It is critical to understand how to transition without losing the core component of Graton Fire from the last 70 years – the volunteer firefighters. Studies revealed that volunteer firefighters are likely to leave four years sooner in combination departments than those that are 100% volunteer (Green & Hendershot, 2017). The completion of significant research included a literature review, interviews, focus groups, and surveys to understand strategies for mitigation of volunteer firefighter turnover. The compilation of this research revealed current volunteer firefighter perceptions, factors most important to volunteers, and some strategies to encourage retention through the transition process and beyond.

The surveys identified that volunteer firefighters have a motivation to help their community and people in need. This concept is supported by Clary et al. (1998) as their study identified that volunteers are primarily concerned for the welfare of others and personal engagement such as self-improvement, increased self-esteem, and improved self-confidence. Green & Hendershot (2017) advocated that a volunteer's values orientation is the greatest influencer of long-term service within the fire department. Other journal articles referenced



similar intrinsic motivators for volunteering that include helping others, civic responsibility, a feeling of accomplishment, valuing public service, pride serving others, and overcoming personal challenges (Geis, 2015; Green & Hendershot, 2017). Maltbie (2015) suggested that department leadership and peers need to help newer volunteers find a balance between volunteering, personal life, and work to prevent burnout and premature departure. His study also recommended incorporating volunteer firefighters into organizational decision-making and offering them opportunities to lead, such as special projects and rank advancement. Volunteers may arrive with preconceived psychological contracts (Walker, Accadia, & Costa, 2016) with these expectations, even though they may never be voiced to fire leadership, and the research suggests breaching this contract causes a 30% impact on volunteer turnover.

Training and education are important to the fire service. Both the surveys and literature reinforced this position. The survey results indicate educational opportunities are in the top five most important factors for volunteer firefighters and fire chiefs followed by tuition and school reimbursement for outside fire courses. A study completed by Henderson & Sowa (2018) suggested a stronger training plan, greater opportunities to learn, and better support of volunteer education would positively impact retention. Green & Hendershot (2017) recommended that all training be consistent and similar between both volunteer and career firefighters to mitigate internal conflict and strengthen peer relationships.

The literature review mentioned that recognition and service awards are valuable to volunteer retention (Green & Hendershot, 2017; Henderson & Sowa, 2018; Holman, 1999; Maltbie, 2015). Respondents from all three surveys rated the value of recognition in the bottom half and service awards close to the bottom (i.e., fourth least valuable). The survey results may

not truly reflect the full value and benefit to volunteer retention due to the influence of personal modesty by survey participants.

While important to know what motivates retention, it is just as critical to know what does not. Some possible contributors to volunteer retention were determined to be less important by the literature review as well as the surveys conducted. Making friends, social events, and financial compensation were all rated low by the literature and the surveys completed for this research project (Green & Hendershot, 2017; Maltbie, 2015).

Regardless of the initiatives considered, multiple authors stated that clearly defined expectations are vital for both the volunteer and the volunteer organization (Harp, Scherer, & Allen, 2017; Maltbie, 2015; Taylor, Darcy, Hoye, & Cuskelly, 2006; Walker, Accadia, & Costa, 2016). Well-defined expectations should start before the volunteer firefighter joins the department and may even dispel some myths hampering recruitment (Maltbie, 2015). The continued sharing of objective expectations, such as call and drill minimum attendance, should minimize confusion and support greater volunteer retention long-term.

### Recommendations

The problem statement asks how Graton Fire can best retain volunteer firefighters during an anticipated transition to a combination fire department. Four research questions governed the collection of data to address this problem. They included (a) identifying the typical issues that arise for volunteer fire departments as they transition to combination departments, (b) the present understandings and feelings of Graton volunteer firefighters regarding the possible transition to a combination department, (c) how other fire departments of a similar size navigated through such transitions and been able to retain their volunteers, and (d) what initiatives can Graton Fire implement that will encourage volunteers to continue their service before, during and after the

transition to a combination department. Using the knowledge gained from the Executive Development course and the results of this applied research paper, the following recommendations are brought forward for the consideration of the Graton Fire Board of Directors and the department's senior leadership:

1. When it is time to implement career firefighters, they should augment the volunteer firefighters not supplant them. The hiring process should include screening firefighter candidates for attitudes towards volunteers carefully. Existing Graton Fire volunteers should have the first opportunity for career positions, assuming they meet the standards for the position. Every scheduled shift should include both career and volunteer firefighters working together to promote internal harmony and reduce animosity. Volunteers should be eligible for stipend pay when fulfilling this role.
2. Establish an intern program to attract recruits interested in a career in the fire service. Interns partnered with volunteer or career mentors would support the completion of the Firefighter I task books. Interns increase staffing levels at no cost to the department while promoting training for all firefighters.
3. Clearly define the promotion process. Every rank, both paid and volunteer should have objective criteria that define the standards for that position. Ideally, the requirements should be very similar or the same for volunteers and career staff.
4. Training needs to become an even higher priority for Graton Fire. New, high-quality subject matter experts from outside Graton Fire need to be identified and recruited to educate all firefighters. The department should offer education reimbursements for courses unavailable in-house.

5. Formalize a recognition program. Volunteer firefighters should be recognized promptly and often for completing training, additional education, certifications, and any accomplishment. Years of service pins, personalized name tags with “since 20xx” included, reward gifts at different anniversary milestones, social media posts, and newspaper articles are ways to recognize years of service.
6. Complete a review of volunteer firefighter expectations. The review would begin with recruitment messaging and continue through the standard operating guidelines that govern the department management. An analysis of existing call and training minimum requirements is necessary. Through well-defined expectations that are verbally reinforced by fire department leadership, not only will volunteer firefighter retention improve, but also recruitment of new candidates.

These six recommendations form the first steps to achieving a combination department.

In the future, satisfaction levels of Graton’s firefighters should be checked regularly and compared to the current value from the survey. Other survey questions may be repeated to see if the values of the volunteer firefighters change over time, such as why volunteers are leaving. Success will be measured based on the average volunteer tenure and satisfaction levels over the next five years. Graton Fire will need to review these new findings and adjust initiatives to best match the motivators for the current volunteers.

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Appendix A: Graton Volunteer Firefighter Survey Questionnaire

**How did you learn about Graton Fire?**

- Drop in
- Family
- Word of mouth
- Advertising
- Other (specify)

**Do you live or work in our fire district?**

- Live
- Work
- Both
- Neither
- Other (specify)

**How long have you been a firefighter with our department?**

- 0-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10-15 years
- 15-20 years
- 20-25 years
- 25-30 years
- 30+ years

**How satisfied are you as a volunteer with our department?**

1 (low) – 10 (high)

**What do you feel are some of the challenges with keeping volunteers?**

- 1 (low) – 10 (high)
- Excessive training requirements
- Lack of recognition by the department/leadership
- Lack of respect from career firefighters
- Lack of free time to volunteer
- Lack of family support
- Poor public image
- Other (specify)

**Rate the value of each as a volunteer firefighter:**

- 1 (low) – 10 (high)
- Experience for career position, internal
- Experience for career position, external
- FF1 completion
- Call/drill reimbursement
- Sleeper shift reimbursement



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Stipend shift pay  
Strike team possibilities  
Service awards  
School reimbursement  
Recognition  
Social events  
Affordable housing  
Serve my community  
Serve people in need  
Meet my neighbors  
Letter of recommendation  
Quality of fire station  
Quality of fire engines/equipment  
Education opportunities  
Tuition/class reimbursement  
Laundry  
Ice  
Internet  
PCs  
TV  
Get away from home  
Gym access  
Other (specify)

### **Why do you think volunteers decide to leave our department?**

1 (low) – 10 (high)  
Became a career firefighter elsewhere  
Lack of compensation for time involved  
Excessive training requirements  
Lack of recognition by the department/leadership  
Lack of free time to volunteer  
Lack of family support  
Poor public image  
Other (specify)

### **How can our fire department encourage you to continue volunteering?**

Comments:

Appendix B: Volunteer Firefighter Survey Questionnaire

**How long have you been a firefighter with your department?**

- 0-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10-15 years
- 15-20 years
- 20-25 years
- 25-30 years
- 30+ years

**How satisfied are you as a volunteer with your department?**

1 (low) – 10 (high)

**What do you feel are some of the challenges with keeping volunteers?**

- 1 (low) – 10 (high)
- Excessive training requirements
- Lack of recognition by the department/leadership
- Lack of respect from career firefighters
- Lack of free time to volunteer
- Lack of family support
- Poor public image
- Other (specify)

**Rate the value of each as a volunteer firefighter:**

- 1 (low) – 10 (high)
- Experience for career position, internal
- Experience for career position, external
- FF1 completion
- Call/drill reimbursement
- Sleeper shift reimbursement
- Stipend shift pay
- Strike team possibilities
- Service awards
- School reimbursement
- Recognition
- Social events
- Affordable housing
- Serve my community
- Serve people in need
- Meet my neighbors
- Letter of recommendation
- Quality of fire station
- Quality of fire engines/equipment
- Education opportunities
- Tuition/class reimbursement

RETAINING VOLUNTEERS DURING TRANSITION TO COMBINATION DEPARTMENT 43

- Laundry
- Ice
- Internet
- PCs
- TV
- Get away from home
- Gym access
- Other: (specify)

**Why do you think volunteers decide to leave your department?**

- 1 (low) – 10 (high)
- Became a career firefighter elsewhere
- Lack of compensation for time involved
- Excessive training requirements
- Lack of recognition by the department/leadership
- Lack of free time to volunteer
- Lack of family support
- Poor public image
- Other (specify)

**How can your fire department encourage you to continue volunteering?**

Comments:

Appendix C: Combination Department Fire Chief Survey Questionnaire

**Please describe your department:**

Almost all career, 75-100%

Mostly career, 50-75%

Some career, 25-50%

Few career, 0-25%

**How long has it been a combination department?**

0-5 years

5-10 years

10-15 years

15-20 years

20-25 years

25-30 years

30+ years

**How many volunteers do you currently have?**

0-5

6-10

11-15

16-20

21-25

26-30

31+

**What do you feel are some of the challenges with keeping volunteers?**

1 (low) – 10 (high)

Excessive training requirements

Lack of recognition by the department/leadership

Lack of respect from career firefighters

Lack of free time to volunteer

Lack of employer support to leave work

Lack of family support

Poor public image

Other (specify)

**In your opinion, what encourages volunteers to stay with your department?**

1 (low) – 10 (high)

Experience for career position, internal

Experience for career position, external

FF1 completion

Call/drill reimbursement

Sleeper shift reimbursement

Stipend shift pay

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Part-time shifts  
Strike team possibilities  
Service awards  
School reimbursement  
Recognition  
Social events  
Affordable housing  
Serve my community  
Serve people in need  
Meet my neighbors  
Letter of recommendation  
Quality of fire station  
Quality of fire engines/equipment  
Educational opportunities  
Tuition/class reimbursement  
Laundry  
Ice  
Internet  
PCs  
TV  
Get away from home  
Gym access  
Other (specify)

### **Why do you think volunteers decide to leave your department?**

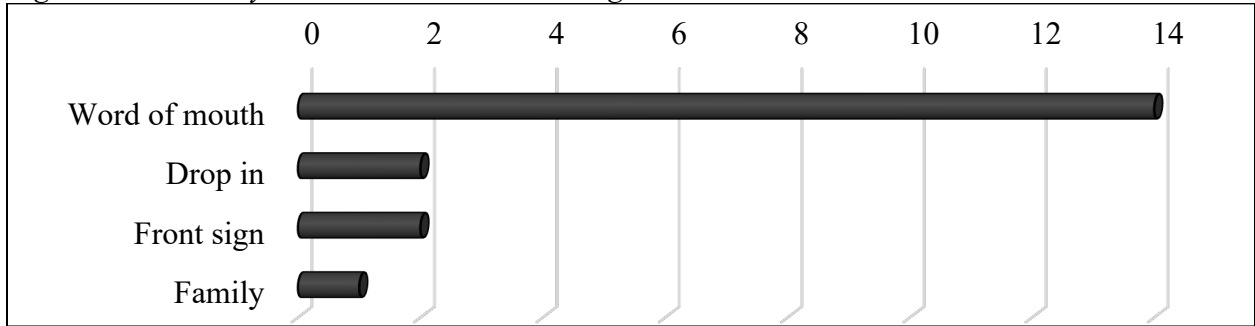
1 (low) – 10 (high)  
Became a career firefighter elsewhere  
Lack of compensation for time involved  
Excessive training requirements  
Lack of respect from career staff  
Lack of recognition by the department/leadership  
Lack of free time to volunteer  
Lack of family support  
Poor public image  
Other (specify)

### **What are your other thoughts to encourage volunteers to stay with your department?**

Comments:

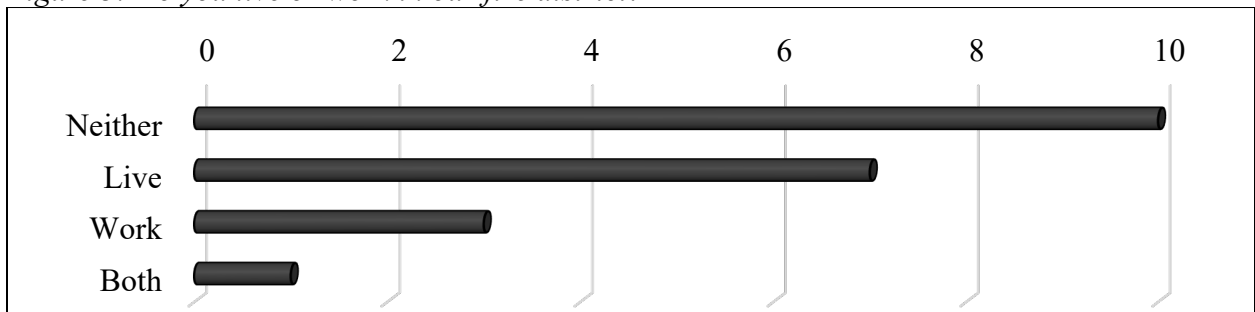
Appendix D: Graton Volunteer Firefighter Survey Results

Figure 2: How did you learn about volunteering with Graton Fire?



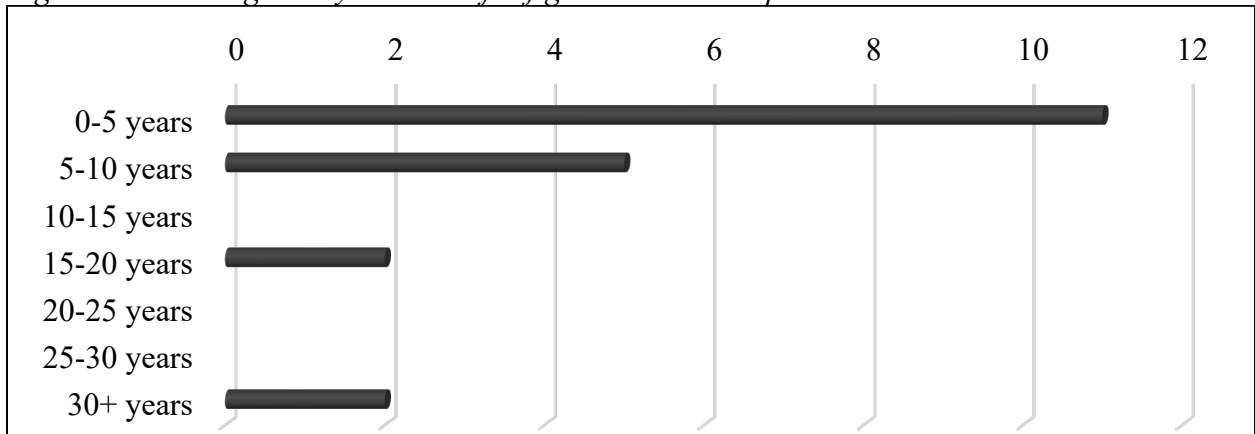
Answer	Count	Percentage
Word of mouth	14	73.7%
Drop in	2	10.5%
Front sign	2	10.5%
Family	1	5.3%
Newspaper		0.0%
Total	19	100.0%

Figure 3: Do you live or work in our fire district?



Answer	Count	Percentage
Neither	10	47.6%
Live	7	33.3%
Work	3	14.3%
Both	1	4.8%
Total	21	100.0%

Figure 4: How long have you been a firefighter with our department?



Answer	Count	Percentage
0-5 years	11	55.0%
5-10 years	5	25.0%
10-15 years		0.0%
15-20 years	2	10.0%
20-25 years		0.0%
25-30 years		0.0%
30+ years	2	10.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Figure 5: How satisfied are you as a volunteer with our department?

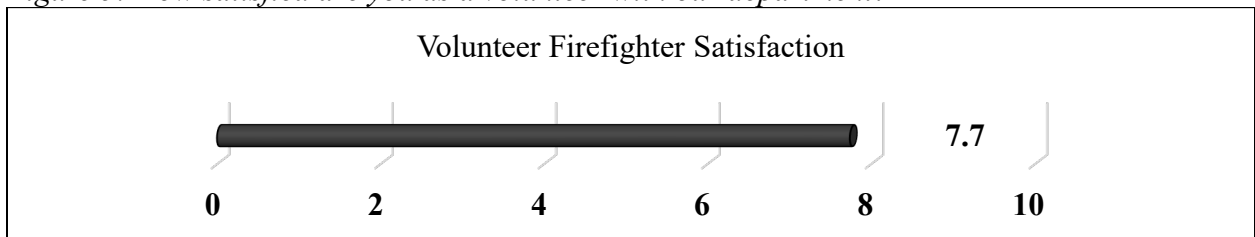
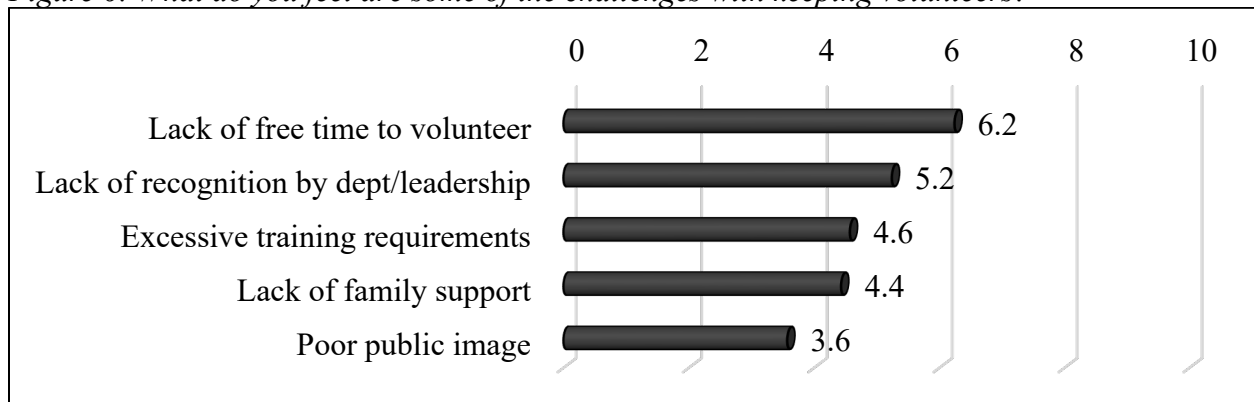


Figure 6: What do you feel are some of the challenges with keeping volunteers?

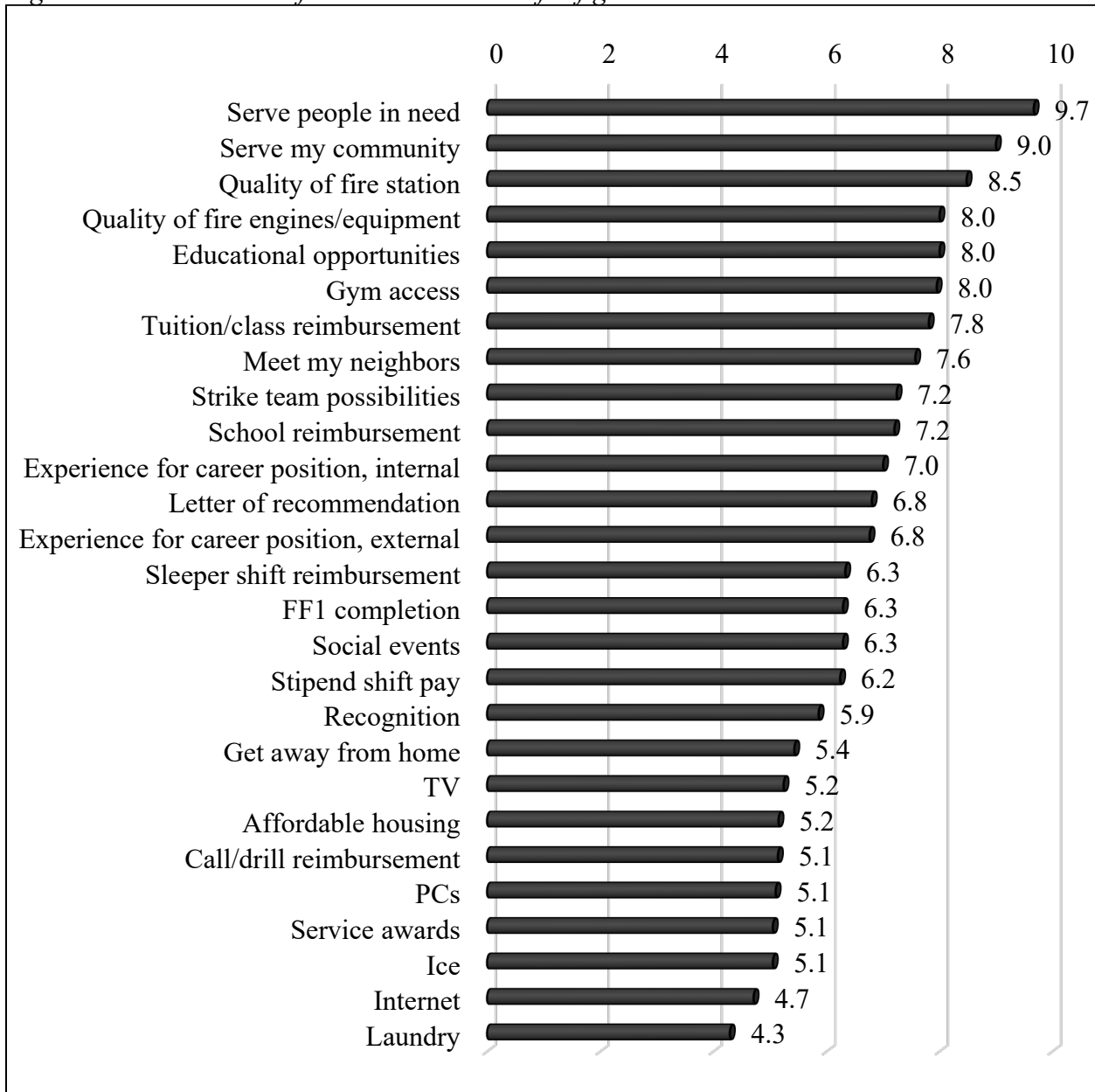


Other answers

- Amount of call volume required
- I think people are afraid of the commitment; I certainly was before I joined. They are afraid that they don't have the time.
- Lack of professionalism
- Negative attitudes of a couple of volunteers
- Not allowing beards is a small challenge
- People receiving promotions biased upon friendships/time at department versus actually being a well-rounded leader or mentor. Showing promotions in outside work force not just ability to be available for any assignment at FD. Giving others an opportunity to promote and learn.
- Understanding the priority that volunteering takes at different times in our lives and acknowledging contributions outside of running calls



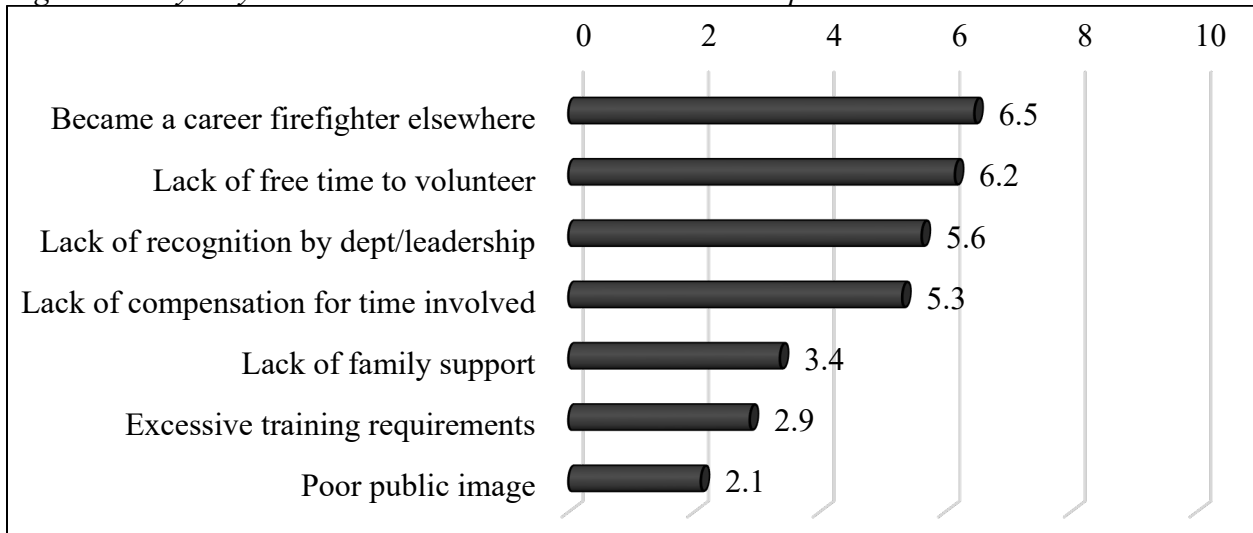
Figure 7: Rate the value of each as a volunteer firefighter:



Other answers

- Life skills
- People volunteer for two reasons; serving the folks in their community, and to use it as a stepping stone into the career world. Having a well-balanced combo department can accomplish both of those tasks. With keeping volunteers who do it strictly community based as involved as possible.

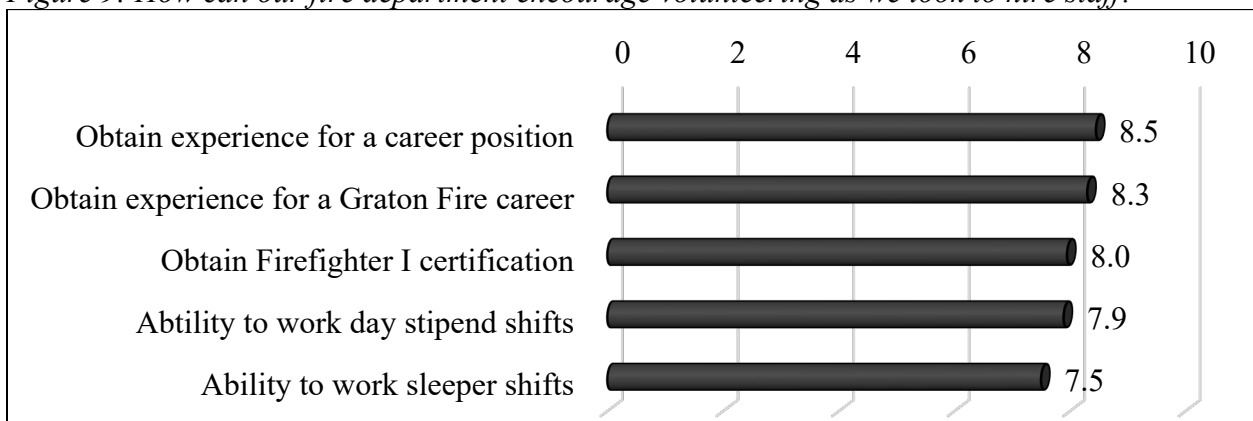
Figure 8: Why do you think volunteers decide to leave our department?



Other answers

- Internal conflicts
- Internal issues/ not enjoyable environment
- Lack of consistent discipline
- Lack of emphasis on high-quality training and networking opportunities for those looking to have a stepping stone into a paid position.
- Others left because they were on a different career path. That is the struggle in this age. With two types of people who volunteer. The career path folks forget that community volunteers make up the department also and we need everyone at different times. That is the recipe for success in a volunteer company. Getting folks to recognize that and preach that is a hard task to accomplish but must be done for department harmony
- People complained that their suggestions for improvement and concerns about how things were done weren't considered and/or addressed.

Figure 9: How can our fire department encourage volunteering as we look to hire staff?



Other answers

- Bring in high-quality teachers who effectively utilize our time, bring excitement and pay volunteers adequately for their time and efforts
- Bring in interns
- If the department could find some way to help people get FF1 in-house that would be a huge benefit. The SRJC academy is a big roadblock for some people.
- New trainees should be issued state FF1 task books, and trainings/drill nights that relate to tasks in the book can get signed off as they go along.
- Reiterate the fact that community volunteers are needed and that only two people on duty cannot complete multiple calls at once. The challenge will be maintaining engagement. Maybe decreasing the call percentages and increasing the drill percentage. This could put more focus on training while we have FF'S in house daily

*Figure 10: Please share other thoughts about ways to retain volunteer firefighters*

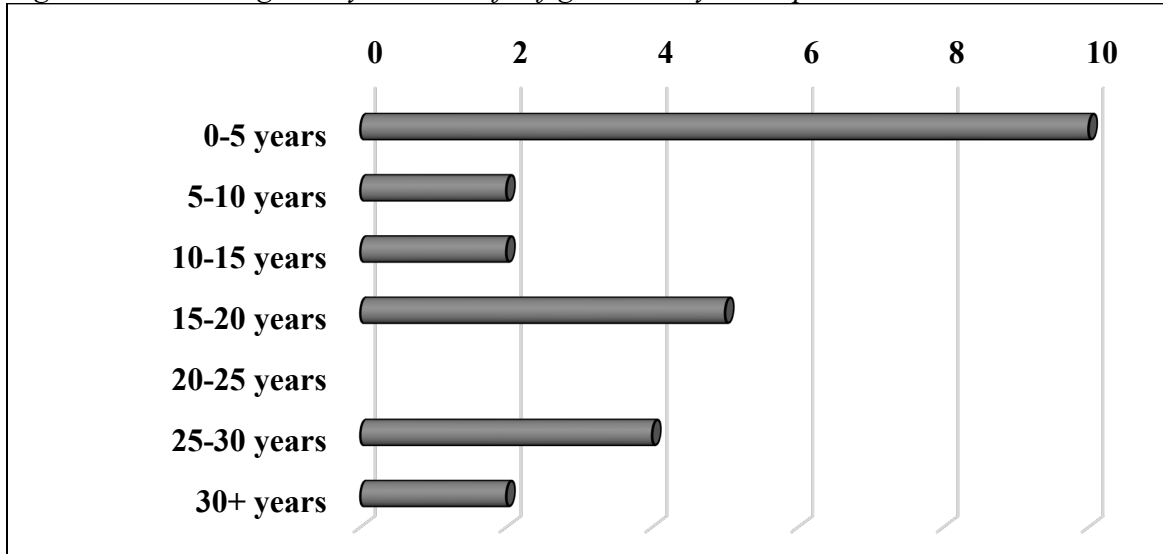
- As someone who likely will not apply for the upcoming engineer spots, I feel I can somewhat objectively say that more weight should be placed on the candidate's ability to pull someone out of a burning building and confidently lead and pump an engine during a wildland or structure fire event, rather than just looking at what certs the person has on paper. If someone like that were hired over other more competent applicants than I could see volunteers leaving the department.
- Be consistent
- During my time spent at Graton Fire, the volunteer attrition rate has always been an issue, however, in the recent years attrition has become so severe it has been difficult to keep a roster. Generally, firefighters move on from Graton for various reasons such as pursuing careers elsewhere, moving out of the area or unable to keep up with the commitment. However, more recently firefighters have expressed concern in safety, training and integrity. I personally feel these three items are hugely important to process as a firefighter but more importantly a department as a whole. Many firefighters have come and gone in the past years because of these three reasons alone were not demonstrated as core values of Graton Fire. Poor safety is a direct result of poor training. Poor training is a direct result in lack of integrity. Expectations are generally low and rarely measured and Accountability is rarely enforced. This issue needs to be addressed. If it is not, firefighters will continue to come and go and worse, someone could be injured or killed.
- I think that the officers need to find away to recognize that call volume is not the only way to measure involvement and dedication. I also think there needs to be a clear way of promoting up the ranks. We have almost more chiefs than captains and engineers.
- I think the idea of highlighting the folks we have who dedicated so much for so little is hard to capture. With the use of social media, I believe this can be done. We have so many wonderful special individuals that all come together to accomplish a unified task, that our community needs to know those stories. We have students, chiefs, farmers,

carpenters you name it. By showcasing a monthly/ quarterly individual and sharing their story could gain publicity for them and our department. It will also remind that person why they are down here and what they are trying to accomplish, whether it be career or community service. Everyone loves something nice said about them in the spotlight. This way everyone on our department will get the recognition they deserve

- In regard to volunteers, I think the key is recognition and family involvement. After time, the day-to-day demands wear down the enthusiasm of family members. We should recognize the firefighters as well as their families.
- No matter where people come to work, they stay when they are adequately compensated for their time and they buy into the mission/ culture of the organization. I know many people before have not felt a sense of purpose because there wasn't a strong cohesive culture from top to bottom and this has caused a sense of division and has led to the loss of many valuable firefighters. I know some new recruits who have gone to Sebastopol and Forestville because they identify with the strong cultures there. This is a huge commitment as we all know and it makes it worthwhile when we all feels like a team working towards a CLEAR and COMMON goal.
- Offer more \$ for sleepers and stipends
- One thing I have heard on a couple of occasions, that I have not myself experienced, is lack of transparency. In my opinion I think communication is most important, on everyone's behalf, and is what will set us apart from other departments. Our environment is great, atmosphere is great, people are great.
- Providing more proof and information on how the departments training is ran. How beneficial it can be for a desired career firefighter and how you have possibilities to receive some compensation.

Appendix E: Volunteer Firefighter Survey Results

Figure 11: How long have you been a firefighter with your department?



Answer	Count	Percentage
0-5 years	10	40.0%
5-10 years	2	8.0%
10-15 years	2	8.0%
15-20 years	5	20.0%
20-25 years		0.0%
25-30 years	4	16.0%
30+ years	2	8.0%
Total	25	100.0%

Figure 12: How satisfied are you as a volunteer with your department?

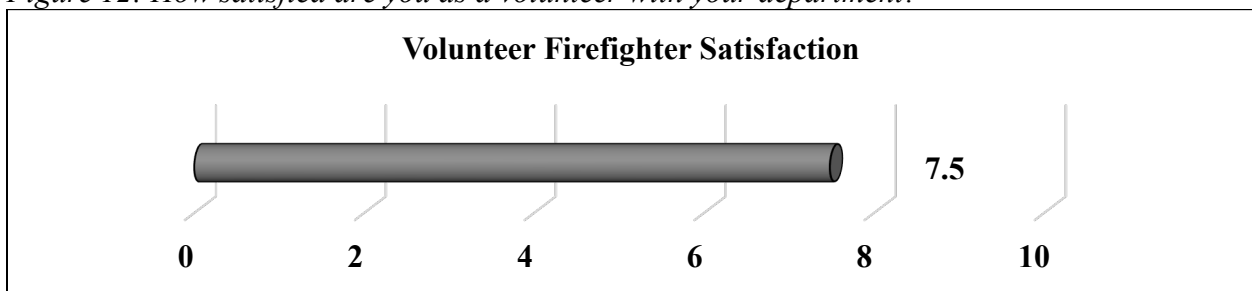
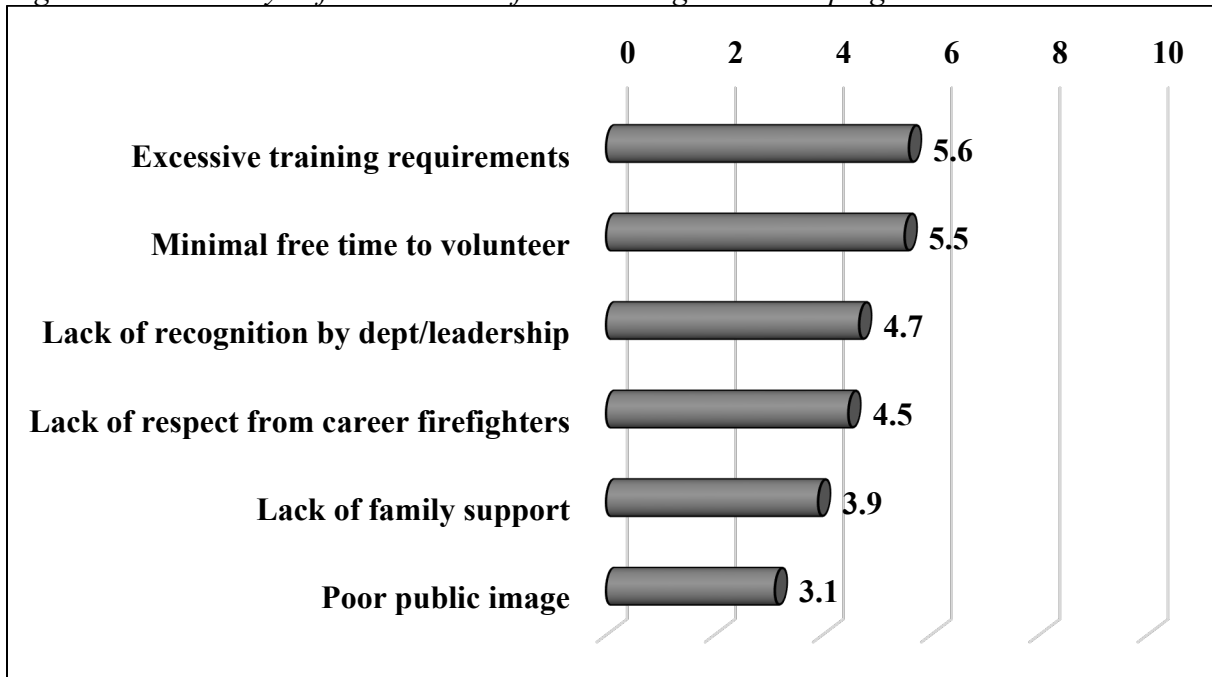


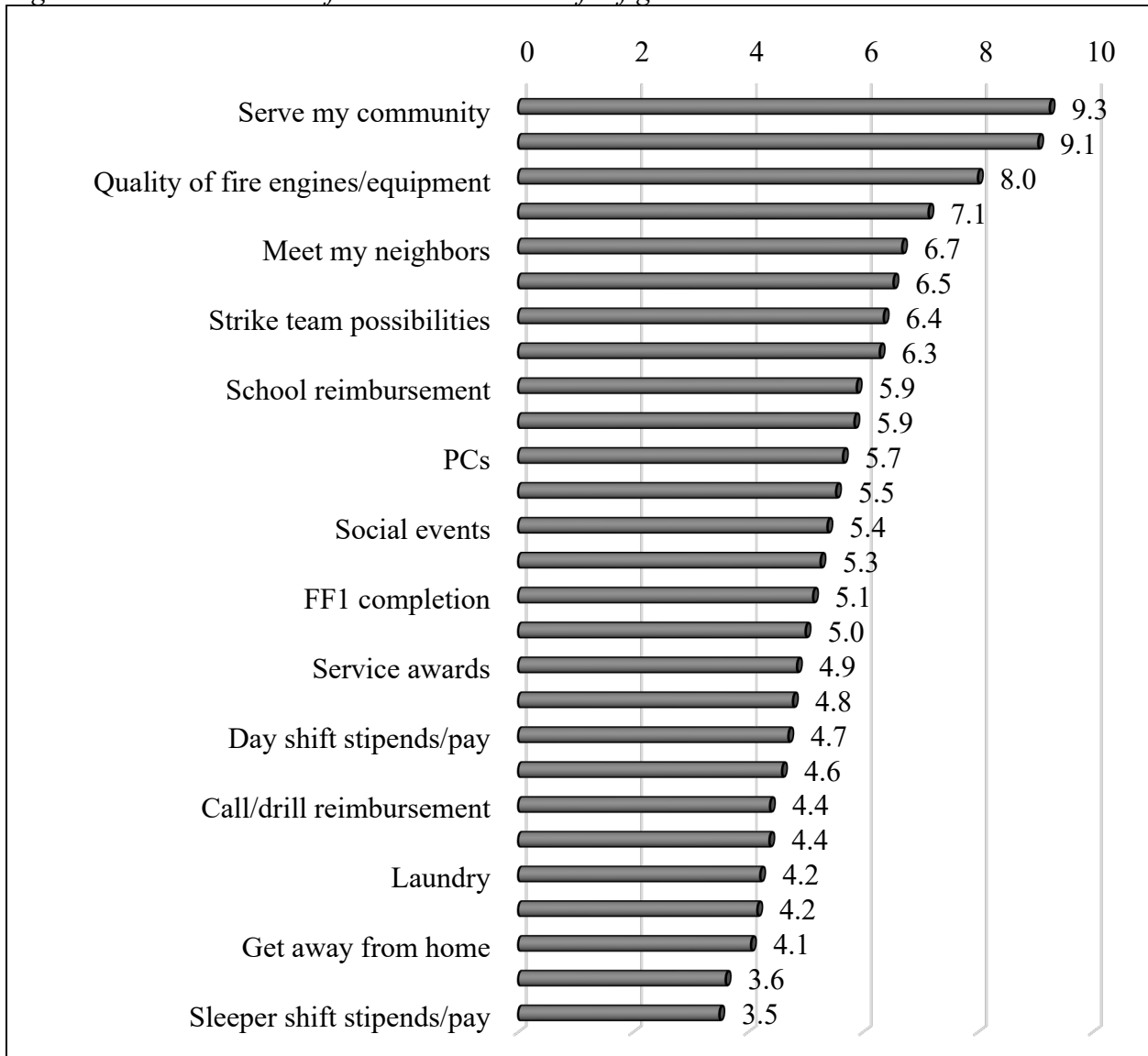
Figure 13: What do you feel are some of the challenges with keeping volunteers?



Other answers

- Volunteers are entitled and hand holding is prevalent to keep volunteers that are not meeting the standard. Training is the same regardless of job type. Fire doesn't care whether a volunteer firefighter or a career firefighter shows up. The career firefighter will be better equipped to manage challenges that are presented at emergency scenes. They will deal with it in a professional manner because it is their PROFESSION
- Our department is going through a change-from a 90%+ volunteer to a paid department with volunteers. Although i understand the reasons to make this change, blending is very difficult. The challenge will be to balance the personalities i.e. paid staff thinks they are better than the volunteers; volunteers create ill-will for the leadership etc. This will be up the Board and leadership to figure this out.
- Finding the right people is the challenge. Demographics is out of our hands.
- Lack of additional funding for volunteer shift work
- A majority of volunteers fail to identify that OSHA requires training to meet minimum standards in CA. It's not like what it used to be here in Sonoma County where volunteers were not held as accountable as career members. Volunteer firefighters are no different as far as required services we provide to a community.
- Age, and location. Most of the full-time residents near the main station are seniors. Our longevity as volunteers is limited as a result. Departments need to solicit nonfirefighting volunteers for other needed activities.

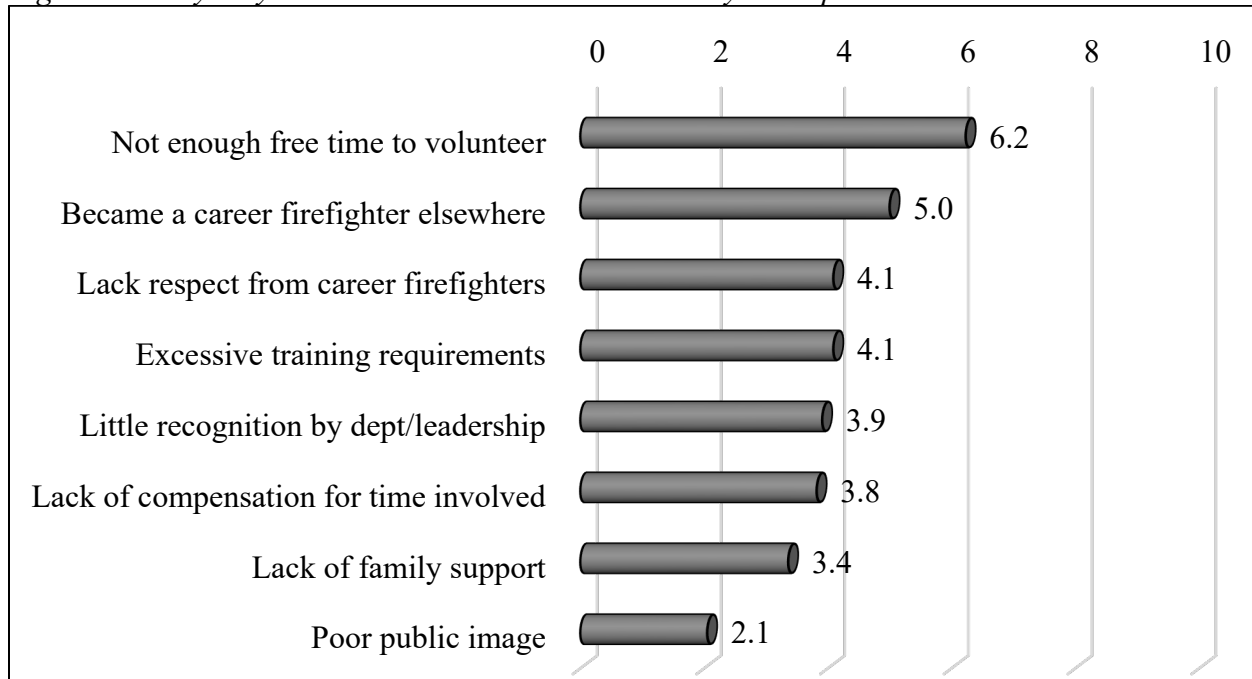
Figure 14: Rate the value of each as a volunteer firefighter:



Other answers

- My volunteer station has transitioned to a combination agency overnight. Our board has career members making minimum wage, sleeping in retrofitted closets and no PT facility for them to maintain adequate health and fitness. It starts at the top. If the chief of Department can't identify the issues at hand or they think conditions are ok, nothing will change. A good board and Chief will assess the needs to be a productive and effective fire agency and fight night and day for the members assigned to that house so they may better serve the community. When the staff, either career or volunteer has engines that don't work, facilities that are outdated or poor compensation, the community suffers. Also, with more volunteers traveling out of their area for work, the only people to rely on for service are the career members at the fire house. Volunteers can come and go as they please with very little care factor regarding the facility or living conditions
- Station layout and accommodations

Figure 15: Why do you think volunteers decide to leave your department?



Other answers

- Volunteer firefighting isn't effective for this growing county. We need career staff to maintain the bottom line and they can be supported by volunteers that selflessly dedicate themselves to service. Sonoma Valley is a great example. Training is not excessive. It's almost insulting that someone would say that. Training is the only way to be effective on the fire ground. We train for the public, to serve them. Training isn't punishment. Preventing a firefighter's death isn't punishment. Not being able to answer the call for the community, that's the biggest issue.
- Age

Figure 16: How can your fire department encourage you to continue volunteering?

- A duty to act and serve must be from within the individual. If you are doing it for yourself and wanting recognition, you are doing it for the wrong reasons. If you don't want to continue to volunteer, Leave. No encouragement needed to stay
- Allow for strike team availability and encouragement to stay engaged. Make Training fun. Not ha ha fun but fun.
- Be flexible with training requirements
- By supporting on and off duty personal equally. Providing adequate environment to promote participation at all ranks
- Don't need encouragement
- Hold the paid staff accountable. Hire qualified employees to perform the job they were hire to do. Hold the chief accountable for the lack of progressive discipline.

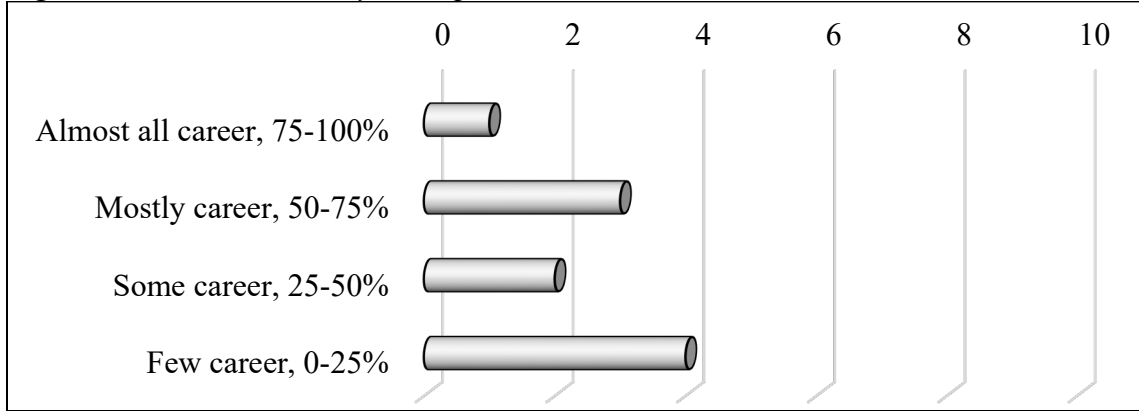


## RETAINING VOLUNTEERS DURING TRANSITION TO COMBINATION DEPARTMENT 57

- I will continue until I can no longer do it. I am most concerned and interested in the Board and leaderships approach to creating a balance.
- I will volunteer as long as I am able to. I have done it my entire Adult life and don't plan on changing that
- More respect from newer career staff. Not being talked down to/upon by newer career staff.
- Paid staff needs to stop treating volunteers like they're lower ranking.
- Paying for services rendered. It cost money to volunteer whether that be gas and insurance for cars, lost wages.
- Provide opportunities for positive experiences via training and other activities.
- Provide recognition, health care benefits, utility benefits, pay for training and education.
- Recognize that the old ways of volunteering no longer apply, and volunteers need to be compensated in a fashion that allows personal bills to be paid (i.e.: increased cost of living).
- The board needs to understand that this isn't 1965 anymore. Spend the 3 million dollars in savings to have an effective fire Dept.
- Training appropriate to ability, easing of training requirements
- Try to be flexible. We do this to help our community. Not for the money.

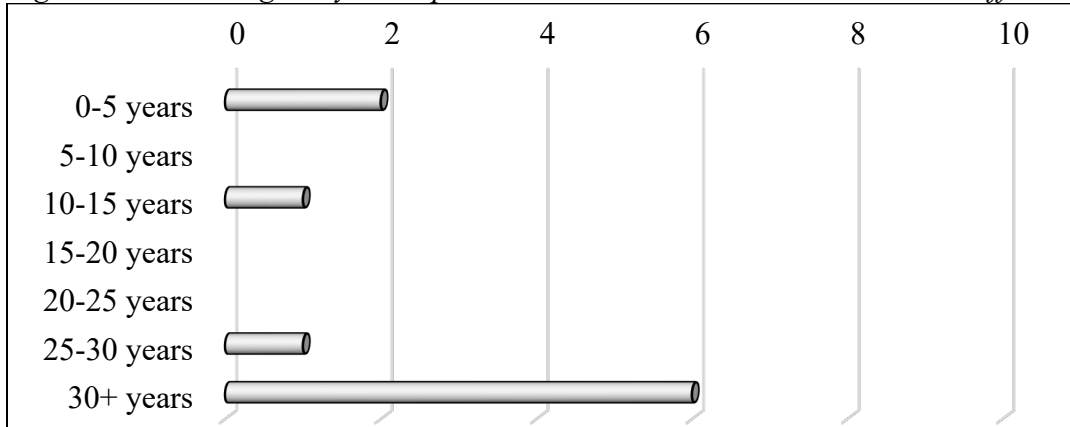
Appendix F: Combination Department Fire Chief Survey Results

Figure 17: Please describe your department:



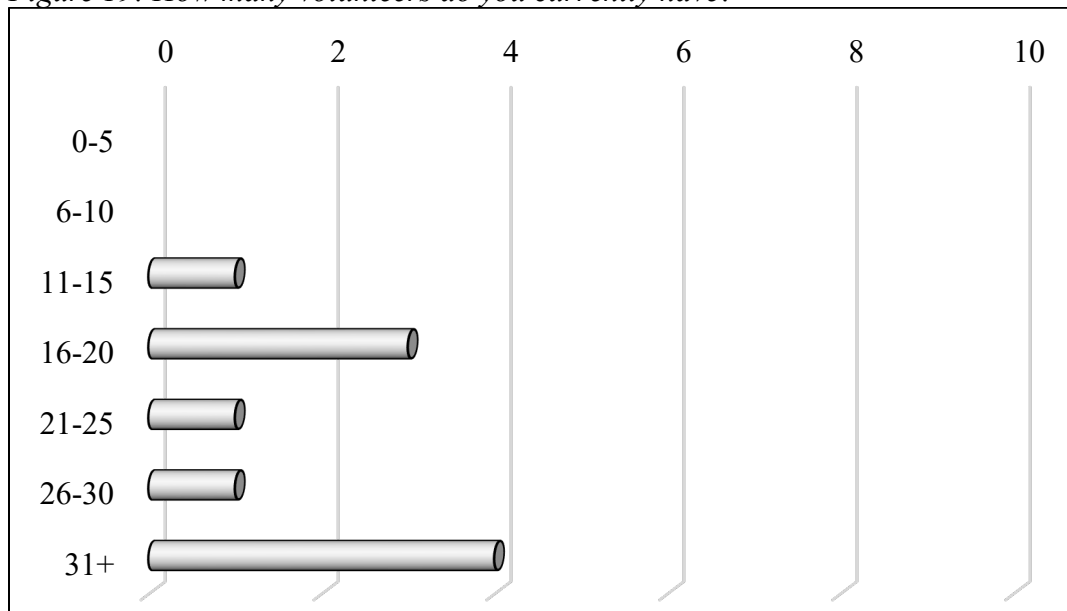
Answer	Count	Percentage
Almost all career, 75-100%	1	10%
Mostly career, 50-75%	3	30%
Some career, 25-50%	2	20%
Few career, 0-25%	4	40%
Total	10	100%

Figure 18: How long has your department had both volunteer and career staff?



Answer	Count	Percentage
0-5 years	2	20%
5-10 years	0	0%
10-15 years	1	10%
15-20 years	0	0%
20-25 years	0	0%
25-30 years	1	10%
30+ years	6	60%
Total	10	100%

Figure 19: How many volunteers do you currently have?



Answer	Count	Percentage
0-5		0%
6-10		0%
11-15	1	10%
16-20	3	30%
21-25	1	10%
26-30	1	10%
31+	4	40%
Total	10	100%

Figure 20: What do you feel are some of the challenges with keeping volunteers?

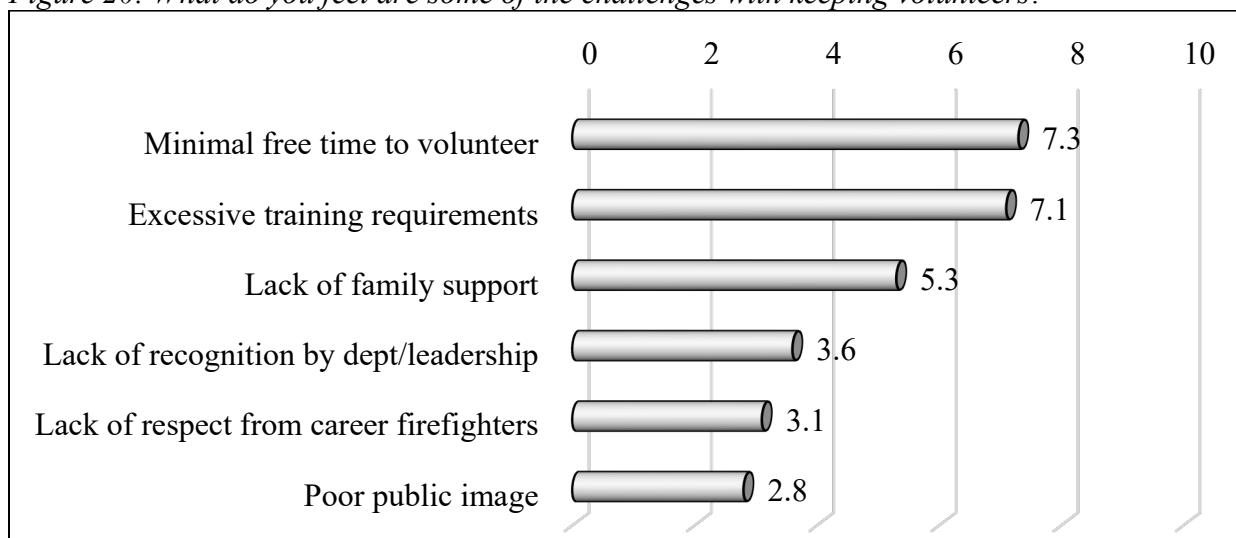
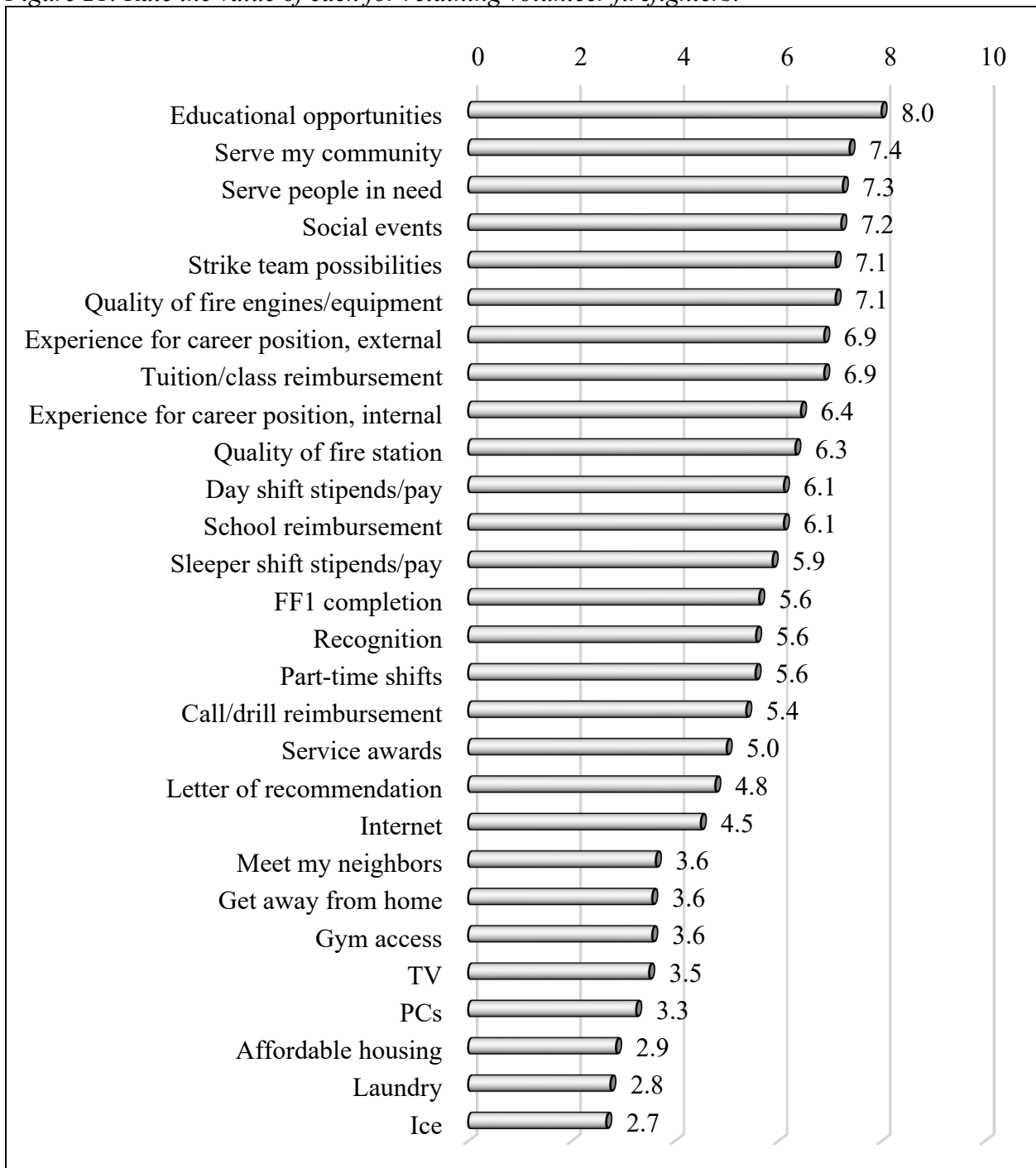


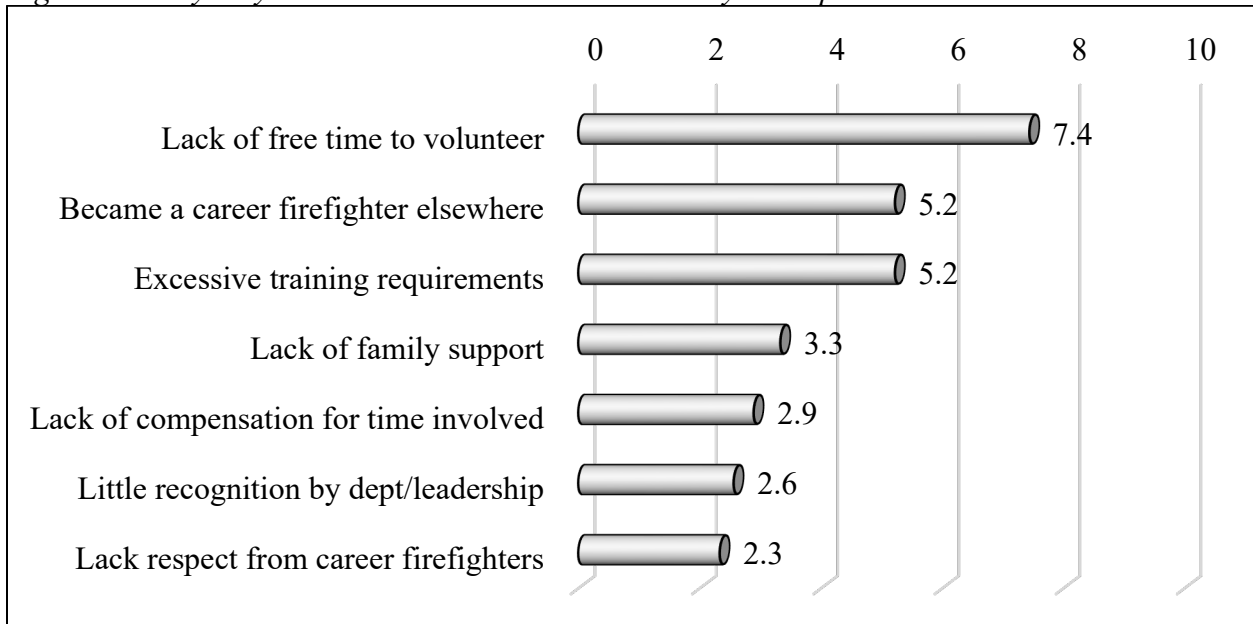
Figure 21: Rate the value of each for retaining volunteer firefighters:



Other answers

- camaraderie, respect, challenges

Figure 22: Why do you think volunteers decide to leave your department?



Other answers

- High cost of living/ inability to afford a home in the community.
- Age

Figure 23: What are your thoughts to encourage volunteers to stay with your department?

- Addressing many of the aforementioned considerations is worthwhile! Not all volunteers have the same motivations or considerations, so being open and able to address many of these gives a better opportunity for successfully retaining them. We also provide small retirement benefits as well as income protection, EAP and LTD benefits.
- Good pay, educational reimbursements, paid shifts, great experience.
- Involve them in department projects with the paid staff such as spec'ing out engines, exercise programs etc...
- Must be very flexible with policies. Call attendance, drill attendance. If you push too hard, they will leave. Combination depts are the hardest to manage.
- Pay for training and/or emergency response, better recognition by department, service awards, etc.
- Realistic expectations for older FF's
- The provision of good training, high value within the organization, and opportunity to serve in an operational capacity helps maintain volunteer tenure.
- We are working on the definition of a support position or non-interior firefighter.

Appendix G: Combined Survey Results

Figure 24: How long have you been a firefighter with your department?

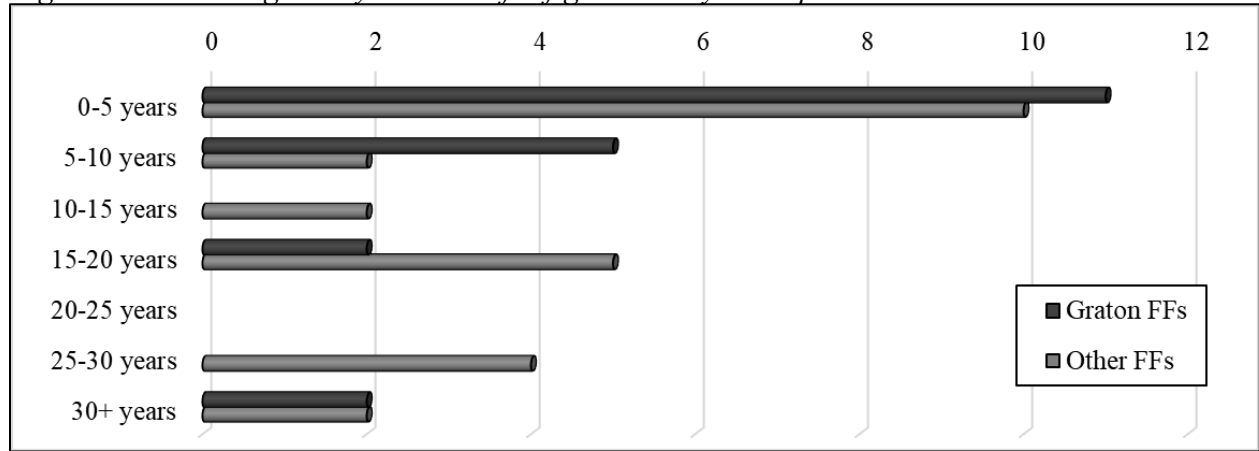


Figure 25: How satisfied are you as a volunteer with your department?

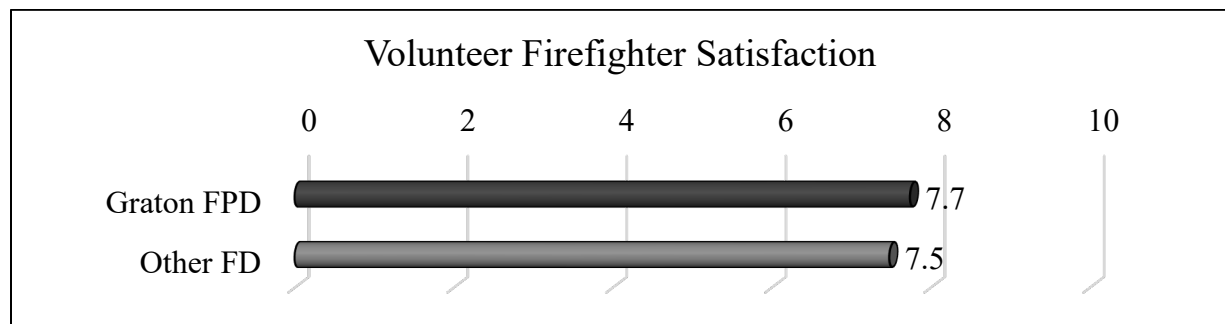
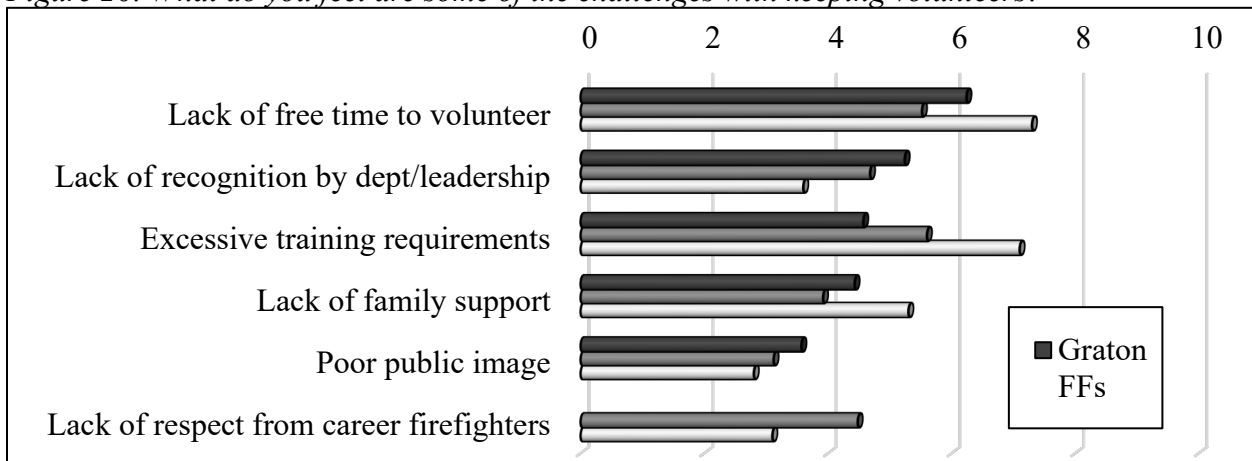
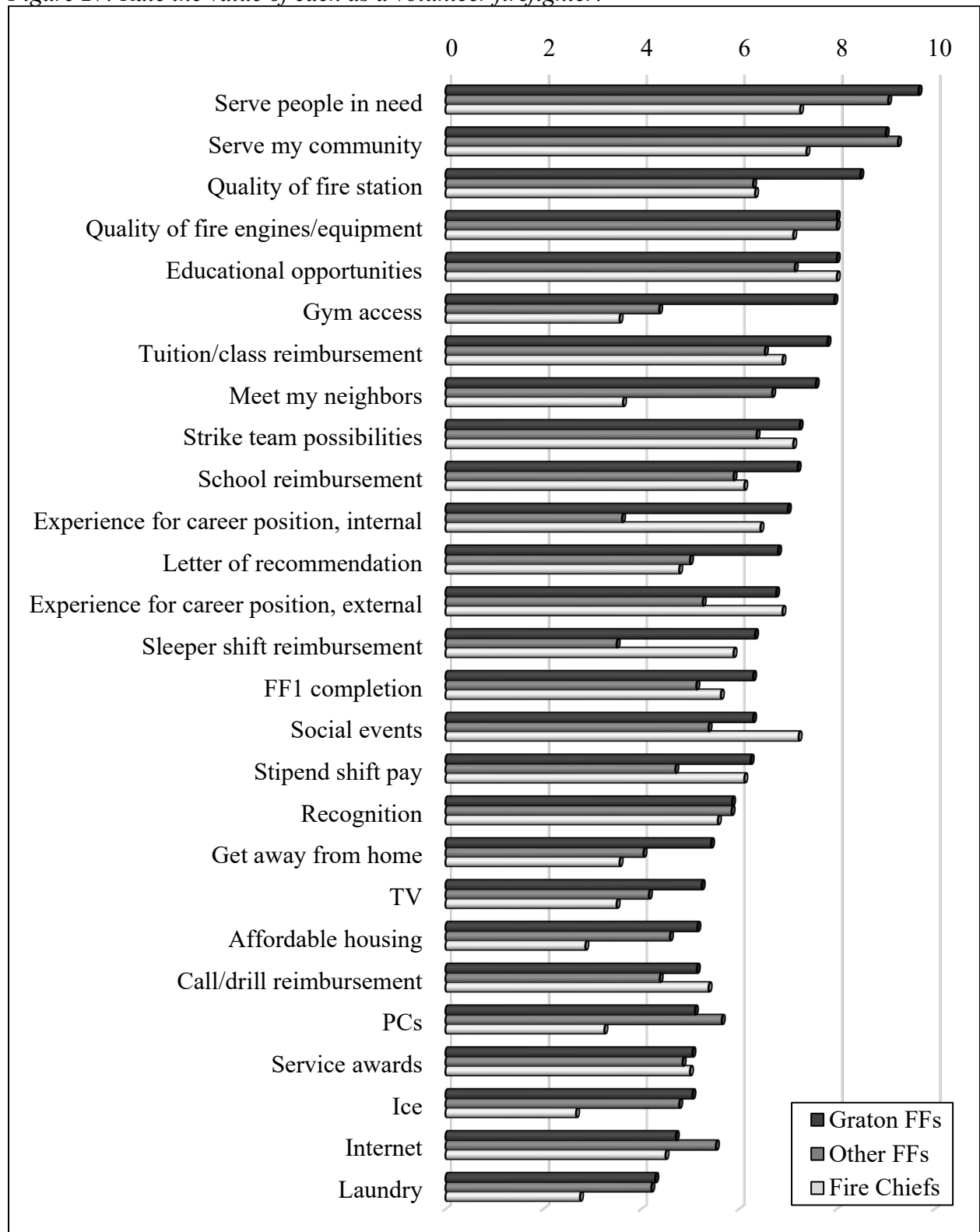


Figure 26: What do you feel are some of the challenges with keeping volunteers?



Answer	Graton FFs	Other FFs	Fire Chiefs
Lack of free time to volunteer	6.2	5.5	7.3
Lack of recognition by dept/leadership	5.2	4.7	3.6
Excessive training requirements	4.6	5.6	7.1
Lack of family support	4.4	3.9	5.3
Poor public image	3.6	3.1	2.8
Lack of respect from career firefighters	N/A	4.5	3.1

Figure 27: Rate the value of each as a volunteer firefighter:

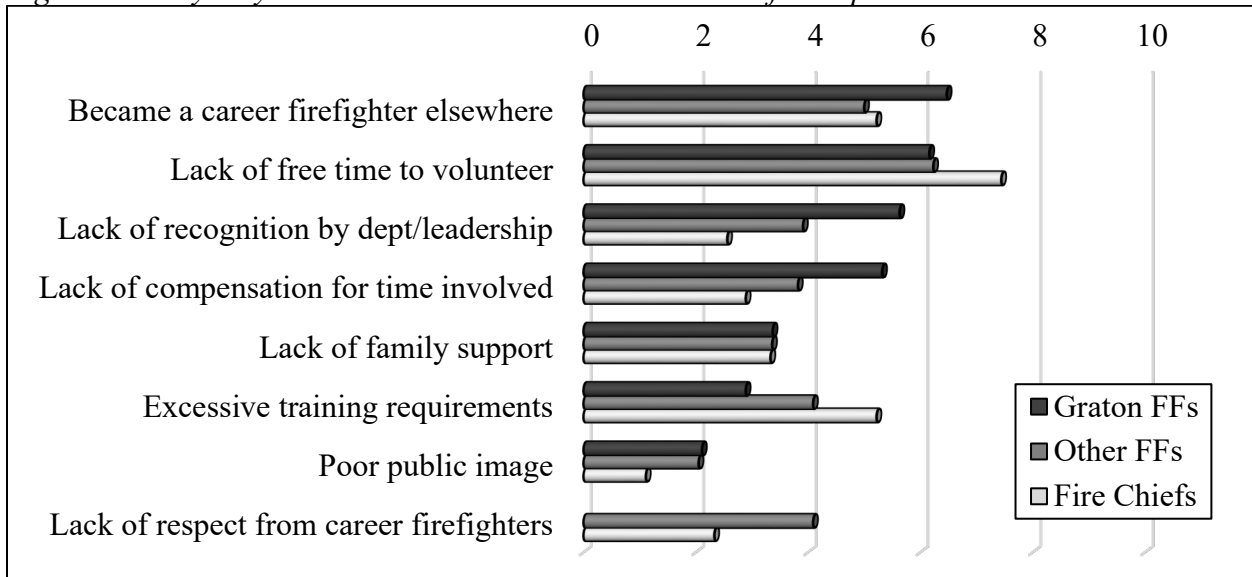




RETAINING VOLUNTEERS DURING TRANSITION TO COMBINATION DEPARTMENT 65

Answer	Graton FFs	Other FFs	Fire Chiefs
Serve people in need	9.7	9.1	7.3
Serve my community	9.0	9.3	7.4
Quality of fire station	8.5	6.3	6.3
Quality of fire engines/equipment	8.0	8.0	7.1
Educational opportunities	8.0	7.1	8.0
Gym access	8.0	4.4	3.6
Tuition/class reimbursement	7.8	6.5	6.9
Meet my neighbors	7.6	6.7	3.6
Strike team possibilities	7.2	6.4	7.1
School reimbursement	7.2	5.9	6.1
Experience for career position, internal	7.0	3.6	6.4
Letter of recommendation	6.8	5.0	4.8
Experience for career position, external	6.8	5.3	6.9
Sleeper shift reimbursement	6.3	3.5	5.9
FF1 completion	6.3	5.1	5.6
Social events	6.3	5.4	7.2
Stipend shift pay	6.2	4.7	6.1
Recognition	5.9	5.9	5.6
Get away from home	5.4	4.1	3.6
TV	5.2	4.2	3.5
Affordable housing	5.2	4.6	2.9
Call/drill reimbursement	5.1	4.4	5.4
PCs	5.1	5.7	3.3
Service awards	5.1	4.9	5.0
Ice	5.1	4.8	2.7
Internet	4.7	5.5	4.5
Laundry	4.3	4.2	2.8

Figure 28: Why do you think volunteers decide to leave the fire department?



Answer	Graton FFs	Other FFs	Fire Chiefs
Became a career firefighter elsewhere	6.5	5.0	5.2
Lack of free time to volunteer	6.2	6.2	7.4
Lack of recognition by dept/leadership	5.6	3.9	2.6
Lack of compensation for time involved	5.3	3.8	2.9
Lack of family support	3.4	3.4	3.3
Excessive training requirements	2.9	4.1	5.2
Poor public image	2.1	2.1	1.1
Lack of respect from career firefighters	N/A	4.1	2.3

Appendix H: Interviews and Focus Groups

Interviews

Jason Jenkins, Fire Chief, Cloverdale Fire Protection District, interviewed 10/15/2018

Dave Franceschi, Fire Chief, Forestville Fire Protection District, interviewed 9/28/2018

Max Ming, Fire Chief (retired), Forestville Fire Protection District, interviewed 8/28/2018

Graton Fire Focus Groups

16 attendees, conducted 11/15/2018

5 attendees, conducted 12/06/2018