

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The recruiting and retaining of trainable, qualified, and motivated volunteer firefighters is a problem for the O'Fallon Fire Protection District. While the need for these firefighters has grown steadily, the Fire District's ability to attract and retain volunteer firefighters has become increasingly difficult. The purpose of this research paper was to produce a guideline to improve recruitment and retention of qualified, motivated, and trainable volunteer members while providing a personnel pool for promotion to the career ranks. This included identifying the major challenges associated with recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters in volunteer or combination fire departments.

This research project employed an action research methodology to develop a guideline designed to make suggestions and recommendations to the Recruitment/Retention Committee to create a quality recruitment and retention program for the O'Fallon Fire Protection District. The complete guideline is found in Appendix B. The literature review provided information used to answer the following research questions. What are the leading causes for the decline in volunteerism in the United States Fire Service? What elements of recruitment programs attract qualified volunteer members? What are the best sources for recruiting volunteer firefighters? What retention programs are available to entice qualified people to remain volunteer firefighters? The literature reviewed indicated the necessity of understanding volunteers' expectations, the importance of a well-defined recruitment plan, and the need for a quality retention program.

This researcher recommended that the Membership, Retention/Recruitment, and Training Committees follow the guideline listed in Appendix B to develop and implement a quality retention and recruitment program for the O'Fallon Fire Protection District.

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INTRODUCTION

The O'Fallon Fire Protection District is currently suffering from a problem that is affecting many fire departments and fire districts throughout the United States. Combination fire service organizations, such as O'Fallon's, rely heavily on volunteer firefighters to provide personnel to staff additional equipment. These volunteers receive the first opportunities to choose firefighting as a career with the department. A sharp decline in new membership applications and an inability to maintain overall membership will require more mutual aid fire companies to be added to emergency responses. The Fire District's ability to promote adequate numbers of qualified persons from the volunteer ranks to career positions will also be limited.

The purpose of this research project is to develop a guideline for the O'Fallon Fire Protection District's Membership Committee to improve recruitment and retention of qualified, motivated, and trainable volunteer members while simultaneously providing a personnel pool willing to wait for promotions to the career ranks. This is an action research project. The research questions answered are as follows:

1. What are the leading causes for the decline in volunteerism in the United States Fire Service?
2. What elements of recruitment programs seem to attract qualified volunteer members?
3. What are the best sources for recruiting volunteer firefighters?
4. What retention programs are available to entice qualified people to stay highly trained and motivated volunteer firefighters?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The O'Fallon Firemen's Association has seen a steady decline in its ability to supply sufficient membership to staff fire stations adequately. In 1975, the Firefighters' Association provided the O'Fallon Fire Protection District with volunteer firefighters to staff three fire stations with strictly volunteer firefighters. Station 1 boasted a membership of 50 volunteer firefighters. Station 1 responded two pumpers, a tanker, a brush firefighting unit, and a medium duty rescue squad. Stations 2 and 3 each had 20 volunteer firefighters on their stations' rosters and responded a pumper and brush firefighting unit. The total number of volunteer firefighters has not greatly diminished, but the need for additional volunteers has grown with the addition of two more fire stations and a population increase from just under 1,800 people in the early 1970s to over 50,000 at the start of the new millennium.

The O'Fallon Fire Protection District now has five fire stations and has set the staffing levels for each fire station dependent on whether the station is a combination career/volunteer station or is staffed strictly by volunteers. If the fire station is a combination station, staffing is set at 12 career persons and 16 volunteers. The career persons are divided into three shifts covering 24-hour periods with four persons to a shift. The volunteers are divided into four crews of four persons referred to as a duty crew. Fire stations staffed strictly by volunteers are to have 20 volunteer members divided into four duty crews with five members assigned to each crew. Each duty crew is assigned one weekend a month during which the members are required to remain in the Fire District proper and preferably in their station's still alarm area. Duty crews are

responsible for performing weekly apparatus and equipment checkouts. These crews are also responsible for responding their apparatus during the week.

Only Station 3, an all volunteer station, and Station 5 are staffed above minimum staffing levels. Station 1 has 14 active volunteers, Station 2 has 10, and Station 4 has only 2 volunteer members. All five stations suffer from shortages of volunteer firefighters who have the experience and training to be promoted to the engineer and company officer ranks. The supervisory roles for the volunteer crews are currently filled by on-duty career firefighters in an acting capacity or the on-duty shift company officer.

Reduction in volunteer firefighters has severely impacted the department in several ways. Apparatus that is normally responded by volunteers does not respond or is listed as out of service due to staffing shortages. In the past, the Fire District has promoted its volunteers to career positions. With the staffing of two more stations in the near future, having a pool of qualified professional volunteers to promote is imperative. With the steady decline in the number of experienced volunteer firefighters, there is a real concern that there will be an insufficient pool of qualified and interested volunteers to promote to the career ranks.

Recruitment and retention problems require strong leadership and sound management principles to overcome these problems. The Executive Development Course's major emphasis is teamwork, leadership, and management. The O'Fallon Fire Protection District believes that recruitment and retention problems are resolved by teamwork, by quality leadership and management throughout the ranks, and by a

sound recruitment and retention program. This research paper supports this philosophy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to glean pertinent information to improve the recruitment and retention programs of the O'Fallon Fire Protection District. Out of the 22 articles and 3 manuals researched for this paper, 6 articles and 1 manual directly addressed the leading causes for the decline in volunteerism in the United States Fire Service.

In the May 1992 issue of *Fire Engineering*, Mr. William Goldfeder gave the following reasons for the decline in volunteerism: (a) low morale, (b) poor leadership, (c) improper management, (d) greater training demands, (e) greater family obligations, (f) increased number of incidents, (g) increased financial needs requiring two incomes, (h) increased standards - National Fire Protection Association (N.F.P.A.), and (i) Generation Xer's (Goldfeder, 1992, p.10). In a report written in 1998 for the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) and the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) titled *Retention and Recruitment on the Volunteer Fire Service: Problems and Solutions*, Reade Bush, Philip Schaenman, and Katherine Thiel of TriData Corporation listed like causes for the decline in volunteer numbers.

Knowing these causes of decline as well as volunteers' expectations may, however, allow for improved recruitment. David Ross, for example, introduced the demographics of Generation X, also known as the Xer's. Mr. Ross stated in the *Fire Service Journal* that members of this generation expected to be told why they were

doing things, and they flourished in a more participatory management style (Ross, 2000, p. 20).

Another element of an effective recruitment program is to appeal to the community's social and personal needs. The American Red Cross has a history of successfully recruiting volunteer members. The American Red Cross believes that certain expectations attract volunteers. These expectations include: (a) socializing and the opportunity to meet new people, (b) altruistic and personal gains, (c) excitement, (d) enhancement of college and employment applications, (e) opportunity to gain experience that strengthens resumes, and (f) activities that address community needs (American Red Cross, 1997). Addressing such expectations should enhance recruitment.

Furthermore, sound recruitment programs need a formalized recruitment plan created by a diverse group of individuals who are willing to work as a team. A key component of this team is a person who has a background in human resource management. This key person should chair the committee, schedule activities, evaluate the team's progress, delegate assignments, coordinate committee activities, and maintain control of the effort. This team should design an organized recruitment program that develops specific goals and objectives for recruiting persons interested in the different aspects of emergency services. Some areas of interest may be responding to emergencies, providing apparatus/equipment maintenance, fire prevention, public fire safety education, and areas of specialized training (White, 1998, p.10).

Another consideration is to target groups of people who will provide the types of talent needed. Recruiting campaigns are often more successful when a target audience is selected for a specific volunteer job (American Red Cross, 1997). A sound recruitment program will look at non-traditional groups as sources for additional help. Many non-firefighting activities take up enormous amounts of volunteer time. Support positions such as bookkeeping, fundraising, fire prevention, and apparatus maintenance can all be completed by people who are not firefighters (White, 1998).

A successful recruiting program requires a positive and professional image that allows the department to be looked upon as being a competent and well-trained organization (Marinucci, 1991, p.10). Other key items are instilling pride in the uniform, equipment and stations. Training in highly visible places and being involved in the community illustrate professionalism and pride (Bush et al., 1998).

A winning recruitment program will promote and advertise professionalism and the need for competent individuals to help fill important volunteer vacancies within the department. In 1994, a committee of volunteer fire service leaders from New Jersey met for the purpose of developing a recruiting program. These leaders felt that the major cause of failed recruitment was a lack of communication. The committee established the toll free number 1-800-FIRE LINE with a statewide answering point where interested individuals received information regarding volunteering. Additionally, this group distributed a professionally made recruitment video targeting high school students. This committee also designed trayliners for fast food restaurants, road signs, brochures and posters for distribution across the state (Bush, 1998, p.52).

In order to target the best sources for recruiting volunteer firefighters, one should consider breaking the recruitment effort into pieces and targeting groups of people. The American Red Cross divides its volunteers into age groups: youth and young adults, working age adults, and retirees and pre-retirees. The Red Cross uses these groupings to target particular ages for different volunteer projects. When attracting the youths and young adults, the Red Cross places recruitment materials on campuses, establishes Red Cross Clubs on campuses, asks principals, teachers, and guidance staff to serve as “ambassadors,” and places materials in fast-food outlets, music stores, and other sites frequented by young adults. However, when trying to attract working adults, the Red Cross promotes volunteer opportunities through corporations and labor unions, distributes materials in paycheck envelopes, new hire packets, at civic and religious organizations, and asks clergy to distribute items in bulletins. And finally, when attracting retirees and pre-retirees, the Red Cross appeals to the social side of the organization by placing promotional materials in retirement condominiums, community centers, and long established residential neighborhoods (American Red Cross, 1997). A similar effort may be needed in an area that has seen a steady influx of new residents. These people may not understand what it truly means to be a volunteer on a fire department (White, 1997, p.15).

Once sound recruiting practices such as these are in place, retention must be the focus. Existing perceptions and problems of the department must be addressed. One recurring theme in several of the research articles suggested high morale and pride in the department as important parts of a recruitment and retention program. “In formulating your recruiting efforts, you should pause and ask yourself why you joined

the department and would you join now, knowing what you know? If you are not satisfied as a member, how do you expect to interest others” (White, 1997, p. 14).

Internal conflicts are another problem that will cripple pride and destroy morale of the department. This will drive members away and cause the image of the fire department to look less than professional. Quality leadership improves a department’s morale and its professional image and is an excellent tool to combat conflict. “Effective leadership helps retain members as well as reduce dissatisfaction. Ineffective leadership is a common reason for a decline in membership” (Bush, Schaenman, and Thiel, 1998, p.17).

Besides addressing current difficulties, a department must take other steps for retention. Numerous retention and incentive programs have been designed to help retain volunteer firefighters. The types of programs can be as different as the departments that use them. “Given the wide diversity of Emergency Services Organizations (ESO), there is no “one size fits all” answer” (Glatfelter, 1999, p.24). Quality recognition is perhaps the most important short-term incentive any organization can give to its members (Glatfelter, 1999, p.24). At the workshops held for the National Volunteer Fire Council and the U. S. Fire Administration, there was a very strong feeling that recognition plays a vital role in the retention of volunteer firefighters. Many small and easily given recognition ideas are listed in Appendix A. The research article also listed as retention ideas suggestions for small monetary awards. In many of these programs, members earn points for training, committee assignments, responding to emergencies, and public fire safety education (Windisch, 1999, p. 10). Points can then be redeemed for cash. Another retention program was

referred to as a “Length of Service Awards Program” (LOSAP). LOSAP resembles a retirement program. Firefighters earn points for training, emergency responses, committee work, public fire safety education, and other fire department related activities. If members participate and receive enough points, their names are placed on the roles as active members. Some plans require that members be active for twenty to thirty years before they can receive the full monthly payment.

In summary, the information in this literature review indicates the necessity of understanding volunteers’ expectations, the importance of a defined recruitment plan with goals, objectives, and milestones, and the need for a quality retention plan.

PROCEDURES

This research project employed an action research methodology to (a) develop guidelines to improve recruitment and retention of qualified, motivated, and trainable volunteer members while (b) providing a personnel pool for promotion to the career ranks. The procedures used to complete this research project were a literature review and the development of a department Guideline for Recruitment and Retention.

Guideline Form

The author developed the guideline (Appendix B) for the O’Fallon Fire Protection District Membership Committee for two reasons. The first reason was to insure that the current recruitment and retention programs in place were being followed. The second reason was to give the committee fresh ideas for improving the current retention and recruitment programs. In addition, the guideline will be given to the O’Fallon Fire Protection District Membership Committee to be reviewed for possible

submittal as an official fire district document to be used for the purpose of recruitment and retention.

Limitations

The author designed this guideline solely for the purpose of infusing new ideas into the Fire District's existing membership program and to insure that those policies in place were being followed.

The literature review for this paper used some dated materials. Retention and recruitment are not new problems; therefore, the information in the dated material was still found to be accurate.

RESULTS

A sample Guideline for Recruitment and Retention produced for the O'Fallon Fire Protection District can be found in Appendix B.

Answers to Research Questions

Research Question 1. What are the leading causes for the decline in volunteerism in the United States Fire Service? The leading causes for a decline in volunteerism in the United States Fire Service were found to be poor leadership, low morale, improper management, greater training demands, greater family obligations, increased numbers of emergency incidents, financial needs requiring two incomes, increased standards, and Generation Xer's. "Increased incident loads, more stringent training standards, poor leadership, improper management, the cost of belonging, family responsibilities,

changes in societal structure, and the lack of serious interest in recruiting “outsiders” into some volunteer companies all contribute to the dilemma” (Goldfeder, 1992, p.10).

Research Question 2. What elements of a recruitment program seem to attract qualified volunteer members? There is no one answer to this question; however, there are several recurring themes in the research material. The American Red Cross is an organization which has long used volunteers. The Red Cross’s successful history in recruiting volunteer members has been in knowing the volunteers’ expectations. Socializing, altruism, excitement, enhancement of employment applications, gaining experience and addressing the community’s needs are some of the reasons why people volunteer (American Red Cross, 1997). Sound recruitment plans with established goals, objectives, and milestones that look at non-traditional recruiting ideas will attract qualified people.

Research Question 3. What are the best sources for recruiting volunteer firefighters? Several magazine articles and the American Red Cross’s Volunteer Administration Manual addressed this question. The American Red Cross divides its prospective volunteers into age groups. These groupings are youth and young adults, working age adults, and retirees and pre-retirees. The Red Cross uses these age classifications to target particular ages for different volunteer projects. This targeting allows the Red Cross to focus its energies where it has had the most success for each particular grouping. College campuses, high-visibility events, web sites, churches, synagogues, and other volunteer organizations are the most frequently used sources for recruiting members.

Research Question 4. What retention programs are available to entice qualified people to stay highly trained and motivated volunteer firefighters? Improving the department's morale and image through effective leadership will help reduce internal conflicts and provide a professional image. Many plans exist to entice qualified persons to stay in the fire service. These plans are as diverse as the organizations that created them. At the workshops held by the National Volunteer Fire Council and the U. S. Fire Administration, there was a very strong feeling that recognition plays a vital role in the retention of volunteer firefighters. Quality recognition is perhaps the most important short-term incentive an organization can offer. "Quality" means not just giving a plaque, but ensuring the borough mayor or town council member is there to present it, and the local newspaper is there to cover it. The event should be a catered recognition dinner, not requiring volunteer members to pay their way or bring their own food (Glatfelter, April 1999, p.24).

Incentives must be important, meaningful, and sought after by department personnel to be effective. A department newsletter is an excellent way not only of communicating with members of the department, but also of giving firefighters recognition from their peers for a job well done. A press release issued to the local newspapers about tasks or emergencies handled well, special training, or promotions is an excellent recognition opportunity for department members. "Walls of Honor" recognizing members for years of service with a name plaque, pictures of members receiving awards from dignitaries, and photo albums of members working on successfully completed projects are also good ideas.

Some incentive plans included monetary benefits based on a point system that awards points for each qualified emergency response, each regularly scheduled training meeting, and each hour of training. These plans may include a bonus for longevity. The March 1993 issue of *Firehouse* presented a more elaborate monetary retention program. This point system worked on a point-per-hour basis. The total money available can be invested in CDs or through a financial institution in mutual funds or stocks.

The author's department participates in a program called the "Length of Service Awards Program" (LOSAP). This program uses a point system derived by the membership. Hours spent for training, department committee work, public fire safety education, and the like earn points. The District budgets specific dollars each year and invests the money in an insurance plan. Members with thirty years of service will receive approximately \$150.00 per month, or they may choose a one-time lump sum pay out. This program currently costs the fire district approximately \$23,000 a year.

Guideline Rationale

The purpose of this document is to be a reference source for the members of the Volunteer Recruitment/Retention and the Membership Committees of the O'Fallon Fire Protection District. It should be used to study and investigate the current programs with the intention of improving recruitment and retention. This guideline has six sections. Each section deals with separate recruitment and retention issues faced by this Fire District. The first section gives the committee members a list of nine factors that researchers feel have led to the decline of volunteer firefighters in the United States. By understanding these elements, the Recruitment/Retention Committee will

have a better insight into developing recruitment and retention programs that will specifically address these factors.

The second section lists six common expectations of persons who volunteer. These expectations are areas that the Training, Recruitment/Retention, and Membership Committees can use to improve the benefits offered by the Fire District for both career and volunteer members. Knowing the expectations will influence planning goals and objectives.

The third section investigates current policies and practices. This allows the committees the opportunity to review the policies and practices. The committees can compare what the current practices are, what is done well, what needs improvement, and what new ideas can be instituted.

The fourth section gives the elements needed for a quality recruitment program. Committee members are encouraged to use the tools they currently have, such as the uniform, training, and high visibility to insure the quality of the organization. This section also provides suggestions for planning a total recruitment program for the department.

The fifth section lists a number of ideas gleaned from the American Red Cross and the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) to spark a concerted communication (advertising) campaign to improve recruitment. The author details practical ways to enlist volunteers, along with places to and means of recruiting the various sections of the population.

The sixth section describes the LOSAP used to help maintain members currently enrolled on the department. This final section lists ideas for incentives and rewards

programs to help the committee members design a workable retention program for the department.

DISCUSSION

The results of this research and the specific problems concerning declining membership experienced by the O'Fallon Fire Protection District are almost identical. When Mr. Goldfeder wrote, "Increased incident loads, more stringent training standards, poor leadership, improper management, the cost of belonging, family responsibilities, changes in societal structure, and the lack of serious interest in recruiting "outsiders" into some volunteer companies all contribute to the dilemma" (Goldfeder, 1992, p. 10), he could have been talking directly to the members of the O'Fallon Fire District. When members submit letters of resignation, the letters contain at least one if not several of these items.

In writing about the elements of a sound recruitment program, Mr. White listed items that might have improved the results of several of the department's recruitment drives. The department uses goals and objectives when creating master plans, other policies, and procedures. Why is it, then, that the recruitment programs do not follow the same logical path? Mr. White also wrote about developing a road map for a recruitment campaign. The use of a step by step process will help guide committee members. Planning for the campaign includes developing goals and objectives, developing milestones to measure progress against the individual objectives, identifying types of members to be recruited, identifying sources of potential members, and identifying internal or external resources to help with the campaign (White, 1998).

The American Red Cross manual described the importance of knowing the expectations of volunteers. The fire service has the unique ability to fulfill every one of the volunteers' expectations. It is a very social organization. Firefighters refer to themselves as a brotherhood and consider members to be an extended family. Whether one is a career member or volunteer, the activities are the same. Firefighters eat, sleep, work, live and sometimes die with one another. The very nature of the fire service is altruistic. The mission is to be role models for the community and to act for the good of others. In doing so, members become better people. Members routinely work for the betterment of their communities. What job is more exciting than firefighting? Firefighters have a reputation for being honest, hard working, and compassionate people who always give the best of themselves. This very service strengthens college and employment applications as well as resumes and allows firefighters to address safety and other community needs.

Quality people want to be involved in quality professional organizations. If one hopes to recruit and retain high-quality motivated people, one's image has to be positive and professional. Marinucci stated that a positive and professional image, along with being a competent and well-trained organization that is looked upon as being professional, is a key element of a successful recruitment program (Marinucci, 1991, p.10).

An area in the O'Fallon Fire District that truly needs improvement is the ability to talk about its professionalism. The research indicates that winning recruitment programs must promote their professionalism and the need for help to fill important

vacancies. Recruitment programs must be aggressive and professionally advertised or the word will not get out to the public (Bush, 1998).

Research shows the benefit of recruiting non-traditional members for a department. For years this department's membership has talked about recruiting targeted groups of people to provide support functions which can take hours of volunteer time, but the department has never taken the time to develop a program or a policy in this regard. These tasks are important and often require special training or knowledge. Items such as record keeping, accounting, vehicle maintenance, and teaching adults are all areas that require both quantities of time and specific knowledge (White, 1998). This is an area in which O'Fallon's recruitment policy should be improved.

This department's membership has always shown that simple praise and a thank-you sincerely given is the most effective retention program designed. Quality retention programs have to be devised with details that the members feel are important. Praise, a thank-you, or an award that has little or no meaning is of little value.

In addition to the current LOSAP program, several members of the Recruitment/Retention Committee have suggested a points program that would give monetary rewards. This may be an area that needs to be investigated. It may not work for everyone but several thousand dollars split between sixty to eighty people and given out near Christmas may help to hold onto members.

Simply stated, the results of this research will help improve the overall recruitment and retention of members to the O'Fallon Fire District. A policy that lays the groundwork to improve the professional image and competence, develops a plan with

objectives, goals, and milestones, and reflects an intention to promote sincere incentives will only improve District's image to the public and to its membership.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Research indicated that many of the reasons for the decline in volunteerism can be attributed to low morale, poor leadership, improper management, greater training demands, greater family obligations, an increased number of incidents, increased financial needs requiring two incomes, increased standards - National Fire Protection Association (N.F.P.A.), and Generation Xer's (Goldfeder, 1992, p.10). This organization may not have the capacity to completely cure all of these problems, but it should address those that can be corrected. Morale and leadership can be improved with quality training programs. Leadership problems may be solved by developing accredited training programs that meet the National Fire Protection Association 1021, *Standard for Fire Officers Professional Qualifications*.

The research also revealed the expectations of volunteers. This organization and the Volunteer Fire Service in general are steeped in traditions that mirror these expectations. Time spent socializing, altruistic ideals, and the excitement of answering emergencies are foundations of this service. Today, departments are constantly looking for persons with stronger educational backgrounds to lead their departments. The ability to lead and work with fire departments enhances both job and college applications. These traditions must be exploited and advertised to the fire service's advantage and then be communicated to citizens in an effort to boost enrollment.

A recruitment and retention policy with clearly established goals and objectives along with milestones set to evaluate the progress of recruiting new members and retaining the old does not exist in the department at this time. This research clearly demonstrated the absolute necessity of a quality recruitment and retention policy. Lengthy consideration should be given to the retention portion of the policy. Retaining people once they are recruited is a sizable task. Good leadership, a professional image, high morale, and a little heartfelt thanks and praise go a long way in helping retain good people. It is important to remember these should not be the only retention tools. LOSAP and other monetary programs are available and can be effective in helping to retain people. Age groups vary widely on fire departments; what is important to one group may not be important to another age group. Effective retention programs use a combination of quick short-term rewards that have significance and meaning along with quality long-range programs.

It is recommended that the Membership and the Recruitment/Retention Committees review the guideline attached in Appendix B and use it for discussion and help in designing a well-written Recruitment and Retention Policy. A quality program will be instrumental in recruiting a viable volunteer force while maintaining a pool of qualified personnel for future hiring. It is also recommended that the committee members read the articles and books listed in the reference list of this paper so that they can better understand the ideas for improved recruitment and retention.

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Appendix A

Ways to Recognize Volunteers

- Spotlight the accomplishments of volunteers in departmental or community newsletters.
- Send thank you cards to members for service provided, or greeting cards to new members.
- Request that local media feature pictures of volunteers, fire department events, training, or actual incidents.
- Issue press releases to the media to spotlight the accomplishments of volunteers.
- Seek special state awards.
- Seek special local or departmental awards.
- Hold awards banquets.
- Hold graduation ceremonies when new recruits complete initial training.
- Give a simple pat on the back or kudos.
- Hold an annual volunteer fire department appreciation week.
- Hang a banner on the station to remind the public to thank their volunteer firefighters and EMTs.
- Request that local political bodies issue proclamations to recognize volunteers

(Bush et al., 1998, p. 76).

Appendix B**Guideline for Recruitment and Retention**

Date: June 27, 2001. This document is to be reviewed in January 2002.

Purpose:

The purpose of this document is to act as a reference source for the members of the Volunteer Recruitment/Retention and the Membership Committees.

Scope:

This document will: (a) address the reasons for the decline in volunteerism in the fire service, (b) list known expectations of persons who volunteer, (c) suggest items needed to create a quality recruitment program, and (d) act as a reference for items needed to create a quality retention program.

Introduction:

The O'Fallon Fire Protection District has suffered from a steady decline in volunteer membership for a number of years. Research has shown that people are still willing to volunteer for organizations that have a quality image and a professional manner. Realizing that the O'Fallon Fire Protection District has both the necessary image and professional manner, one can logically conclude that the problem lies with the recruitment and retention programs. If initial contacts with people are not handled promptly, politely, and professionally, the Fire District may lose these persons before they ever become members. Remember, a first impression may be the only impression.

Policy:**I. Causes for a Decline in Volunteerism**

Listed below are the nine leading causes for the decline in volunteerism in the United States Volunteer Fire Service. The Membership, Recruitment/Retention, Awards Banquet and Training Committees should investigate each of these items. These committees should study present programs and the problems listed below and develop a plan to improve recruitment and retention. Reasons for membership decline in the U.S. Volunteer Fire Service:

- A. Poor leadership,
- B. Low morale,
- C. Improper management,
- D. Greater training demands,
- E. Greater family obligations,
- F. Increased number of incidents,
- G. Increased financial needs requiring two (2) incomes,
- H. Increased standards - National Fire Protection Association (N.F.P.A.), and
- I. Generation Xer's.

II. Expectations of Volunteers

The American Red Cross Manual on Volunteer Administration has listed the most common expectations of volunteers. If Fire District members were polled, would the list look any different? Listed below are the six most common expectations of persons who volunteer.

- A. Socializing with the opportunity to meet new people,

- B. Altruistic and personal gains,
- C. Excitement,
- D. Enhancement of college and employment applications,
- E. Opportunity to gain experience that strengthens resumes, and
- F. Activities that address community needs.

III. Current Recruitment & Retention Policy

Is there a written recruitment and retention policy? Who has it? Where is it? The questions listed below are areas that need to be investigated by the Membership and the Recruitment/Retention Committees.

Check current Recruitment Policy for the following:

- A. Is there a written recruitment policy and is it being followed?
- B. Are job descriptions current and updated?
- C. Is the Length of Service Awards Program current and updated?
- D. Is "Welcome Wagon" information being delivered to new homes?
- E. Are applications handled promptly and professionally?
- F. Is there a program in place that insures applications received are properly filed and followed up?
- G. Are the follow-ups done in a timely manner? (One week, one month?)
- H. Are letters sent in a timely manner informing the applicant of the agility test date?
- I. Is applicant made aware of a required company medical examination?

- J. Is the applicant notified promptly of the results of interviews, agility testing, & physical examinations?
- K. Are district time and work requirements discussed with applicants?
- L. Is the probationary period explained?

IV. Developing a Recruitment Campaign

Concrete planning is the key to a successful recruitment campaign. Listed below are the ingredients for a successful and measurable recruitment campaign. It is the Membership and Recruitment/Retention Committees' responsibility to put together a recruitment program to increase the membership roles.

Planning for the campaign will include the following.

- A. Develop goals and objectives.
- B. Develop milestones to measure progress against the individual objectives.
- C. Identify types of members to be recruited.
- D. Identify sources of potential members.
- E. Identify internal or external resources to help with the campaign.

Another piece of the recruitment campaign is to take advantage of the District's favorable image. This is a highly visible organization with a sparkling reputation and positive department image. The leadership of the department and the Training and Recruitment/Retention Committees should at all times work at these items and insure that they are at the forefront of the minds of the membership and the public. People want to be involved in highly respected and professional organizations. Organizations strong in the listed areas will see improvement in both retention and recruitment.

- A. Instill pride in uniform and the department.
- B. Train in highly traveled public places.
- C. Increase exposure through community fire prevention and educational activities.
- D. Keep apparatus and stations well-maintained and clean.

V. Getting the Word Out

One of the biggest hurdles faced in any type of campaign is “How do you get the word out?” A concerted regular communication effort must be adopted. These communication efforts (Ad Campaigns) should be targeted at special age groups. At this time, both the Junior Firefighter program and the regular volunteer program are suffering from shortages. Consideration should also be given to those persons who are not interested in fighting fires or performing EMS duties.

- A. Many hours are spent in administrative duties or safety education that could be completed by non-firefighting members. A few examples follow.
 - 1. Teachers assisting in training firefighters to teach fire safety messages or improving firefighters’ reading, writing, and math skills.
 - 2. A Human Resource Director willing to work on employee handbooks and insure that the recruitment and hiring procedures are done properly.
 - 3. People interested in learning to install infant car seats.

B. Following is a partial listing for ways of “Getting the Word Out” using both high-tech and traditional media; also included are some targeted locations:

- 1. Radio and television public service announcements,

2. Bulletin boards,
3. Press releases,
4. Posters,
5. Brochures,
6. Speaker bureaus,
7. Campus and local radio stations, and
8. Advertisements on theater marquees and sports scoreboards.

C. Targeted locations for Junior Program:

1. Ask principals, teachers, and guidance staff to place recruitment materials in library and offices.
2. Place materials in fast-food outlets, music stores, and other sites frequented by students.
3. Establish a presence at high-visibility events including athletic activities.
4. Speak to student leaders of school groups such as Student Council or Key Club.
5. Host educational booths at community festivals and job fairs.

D. When working with adult volunteers, target these areas:

1. Promote volunteer opportunities through corporations.
 - a. Distribute materials in paycheck envelopes and new hire packets.
 - b. Work with corporate volunteer councils.
2. Recruit through civic and religious organizations.

- a. Supply alumni publications with profiles of alumni who volunteer for the Fire District.
3. Distribute recruitment materials through support services used by working-age adults.
 - a. Display materials in video rental stores, dry cleaners, health and fitness centers, auto dealerships, and doctors and dentists' offices.
 - b. Enlist the support of local banks and supermarkets.
 - c. Provide local churches and synagogues with bulletin or newsletter inserts.
 4. Disseminate messages and materials through technology in services patronized by working-age adults:
 - a. On supermarket video monitors and shopping carts, and
 - b. On electronic bulletin boards.
- E. To target non-firefighting personnel recruits:
1. Involve current volunteers of all ages as promoters of volunteerism among adults.
 - a. Enlist younger volunteers to distribute materials and actively and personally recruit parents and other adults.
 - b. Enlist volunteers to recruit friends and acquaintances.
 - c. Use educational programs on fire safety education, CPR, and other programs to recruit people.

- d. Become active members of other organizations such as the Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, and Kiwanis to promote this organization.

VI. Retention

Retention programs are necessary to entice qualified people to remain in the fire service. The Fire District is presently involved in two retention programs. One is the Length of Service Awards Program (LOSAP) offered through Volunteer Fireman's Insurance Company. The Fire District spends approximately \$23,000 a year contributing to a LOSAP. This program is currently being administered through a committee formed by the O'Fallon Firefighters' Association. The second is the annual awards banquet at which members are given plaques and certificates for years of service. This is a catered event that is offered free to the firefighters and their significant others.

A. Future Incentive ideas:

1. Produce a department newsletter.
 - a. How often will it be produced?
 - b. Who will submit articles?
 - c. Who will be in charge of the publication?
2. Issue press releases:
 - a. On persons who have finished training or other projects.
 - b. When new equipment is purchased.
 - c. After major incidents or life saving rescues.
3. Organize a Wall of Honor:

- a. Who will update the wall?
 - b. What honors will be placed on the wall?
 - c. When the photographs are removed, where do they go?
4. Start photograph albums:
 - a. Fires, rescues, and other emergencies.
 - b. Department events, family picnic, and awards banquet.
- B. The Fire District has never paid money for volunteers to answer emergencies.
1. Should it start?
 2. Should the District develop a point system?
 3. Who will administer the program?
 4. How can it be done fairly?

These are just a few ideas for additional retention programs.