



Homeland Security
and Emergency Services

A photograph of two firefighters in full gear, including helmets and oxygen tanks, working at a fire scene. The scene is filled with smoke and fire, creating a dramatic and intense atmosphere. The firefighters are seen from behind, looking towards the fire.

VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER RECRUITMENT & RETENTION TASK FORCE

REPORT • DECEMBER 2022

The Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention Task Force (Task Force) was created by Chapter 258 of the Laws of 2020 and amended by Chapter 7 of the Laws of 2021 and Chapter 335 of the Laws of 2022, for the purpose of making recommendations to improve volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention. The Task Force was charged with evaluating factors affecting the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters and developing a comprehensive set of recommendations to improve recruitment and retention.

The Task Force is comprised of ex-officio members, members appointed by the Governor, and members appointed by Legislature to include the following members:

Elisha Tomko, Chair / Governor
Karren Bee-Donohoe/David Ferrari / Ex-officio, State University of New York
James Cable / Ex-officio, State Fire Administrator
Donald Corkery / Ex-officio, Association of Fire Districts
John Farrell, Jr. / Ex-officio, Firefighters Association of New York
Donald Forbes / Assembly Minority
Felipe Hernandez, Jr. / Governor
Arthur Hunsinger / Senate Minority
Brittany Kitterman / Ex-officio, State Education Department
Kevin Klein / Senate Majority
Steven Klein / Assembly Majority
Robert Kloepfer, Jr / Ex-officio, Association of Fire Chiefs
Gerald Knapp / Governor
Luci Labriola-Cuffe / Governor
Robert McConville / Assembly Majority
Mary Alice Molgard / Governor
Kelly Murphy / Senate Majority
Scott Palladino / Mark Massaroni / Ex-officio, Department of Taxation and Finance
John Stephens / Governor
Bill Streicher / Ex-officio, County Fire Coordinators Association
Vini Tankasali / Governor
Stephanie Tubbs / Ex-officio, Department of Labor
Jay Wilson / Governor
Dean Yauger / Governor

Executive Summary

The foundation of New York State's fire service is volunteerism – neighbors helping neighbors. The importance of the volunteer firefighters that serve our communities cannot be overstated - from tax savings to community involvement and representation. There has been a steady decline in volunteerism nationwide, which has acutely affected the volunteer fire service. This has created a crisis wherein the lack of capacity is affecting emergency response capabilities. This Task Force recognizes the need to stabilize the fire service and create the conditions under which the provision of fire and emergency response can be successful and sustainable.

Twenty years ago in New York State, there were 20,000 more volunteer firefighters statewide, and wait lists to join the local fire department were common. Today, volunteer fire departments are struggling to recruit new members and retain existing ones, a challenge further compounded by increased operational responsibilities beyond fire protection to include vehicle accidents, medical emergencies, hazardous material spills, and weather-related rescue operations. The training necessary to safely and effectively perform these responsibilities has increased as has the time commitments expected of a volunteer.

While the number of volunteer firefighters across New York State has significantly decreased, the call volume has doubled over the past 30 years, from 750,000 to 1,400,000 (as reported through the National Incident Fire Reporting System).

The decline in volunteerism is not unique to the fire service, however the lack of available volunteer firefighters across the state has real public safety impacts - jeopardizing the protection of people and property in our local communities. Many fire departments across New York State are struggling to maintain minimum staffing levels and are routinely relying upon mutual aid assistance to respond to emergencies safely and effectively.

The Task Force was created to examine volunteerism within the fire service, identify ways to encourage individuals to volunteer for their local fire departments and implement strategies to retain existing members.

The Task Force is responsible for making recommendations on the following:

- (1) Delivery methods to enhance and streamline State firefighter training to include distance learning;
- (2) Utilization of community colleges, BOCES and state accredited high schools to train firefighters, to include creating pilot programs;
- (3) Feasibility and necessity of creating a unit within the Office of Fire Prevention and Control (OFPC) dedicated to volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention;
- (4) New and existing volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention benefits, incentives and programs;
- (5) Recruitment and retention programs utilized by other states; and
- (6) Recruitment of volunteer firefighters from under-represented and at-risk populations.

The Task Force met five times since its first meeting in December 2021 and the five sub-committees, established to focus on specific subject areas, met on a monthly or bi-monthly basis.

Delivery methods to enhance and streamline State firefighter training to include distance learning

OFPC delivers high quality, state of the art, and comprehensive training for career and volunteer fire departments to assure new and existing firefighters can perform their job efficiently, effectively, and safely. OFPC's State Fire Training program is the primary source of formal training for many volunteer firefighters.

OFPC primarily provides in-person training and education using in classroom and training ground settings. While certain training is offered at the Academy of Fire Science in Montour Falls and at the State Preparedness Training Center in Oriskany, the majority of OFPC's training courses are delivered statewide at the local and county level and are offered at no cost.

Career firefighters, appointed pursuant to the Civil Service Law, are required to meet minimum training requirements (minimum 229 hours) developed and administered by OFPC. Conversely, training requirements for volunteer firefighters are established through regulations administered by the Department of Labor, Public Employee Safety and Health Bureau (PESH). Volunteer firefighters must also meet training requirements established by the local fire department.

Surveys and anecdotal information identified existing training requirements as an impediment to recruitment and retention.

OFPC has sought to mitigate the challenges imposed by training requirements by evaluating its training to ensure it is appropriate, available, and meets the needs of the department and their trainees. Increasingly, this has included the evaluation and adoption of virtual and blended learning delivery methods. Not all training content can be appropriately delivered in a virtual format or as a combination of in-person and online learning. Firefighter training, by its nature and objectives, requires significant hands-on practical skill components which can only be addressed through in-person direct delivery.

To complement traditional in-person direct delivery methods OFPC continues to offer a blended learning version of Firefighter I, utilizing an online application within the commercial curriculum package used for that content. Since 2018, this blended program has been delivered 187 times with 1,923 student completions.

OFPC is working on expanding delivery of other training content in virtual and online formats where appropriate, such as the Fire Investigation for the Line Officer (FILO) course and the Vehicle Arson Awareness program. Online, virtual offerings have also been utilized to increase the reach of and access to workshops within the Fire and Emergency Services Training

Conference and fire inspection and code enforcement in-service and professional development training. These efforts have proven effective and efficient by reducing or removing the need for students to travel to the Academy of Fire Science to attend the training and allowing for increased participation above and beyond any limitations imposed by classroom capacity.

In addition to making more online/hybrid training available when appropriate, OFPC has modified training content and delivery methods to reduce redundancy, align training with roles and responsibilities commonly utilized New York State's fire service, and maximize the ability of students to access and complete this training.

Where feasible OFPC has re-structured single courses into separate modules, with Firefighter I, Fire Officer I, and Hazardous Materials Technician level training content providing the main examples. This provides better alignment of training with the common roles and responsibilities of firefighters as well as provide increased flexibility for student attendance and completion.

OFPC continues to increase the availability of certain training courses at the local and regional levels which were previously limited to residential offerings at the Academy of Fire Science. These include Fire Officer I and II and Fire and Emergency Services Instructor I and II courses.

The Best Practices for Firefighter Training, developed by OFPC in conjunction with input from the various statewide fire service association stakeholders, details training paths aligned with common functional roles in the volunteer fire service including exterior firefighter, interior firefighter, apparatus operator, incident commander and instructor, to assist fire departments with focusing the investment of time available for training on the content and objectives appropriate for their members assigned responsibilities.

To improve firefighter's awareness of training opportunities and access to training, the latest version of OFPC's Learning Management System allows individual firefighters to log in to view and register for upcoming training courses online, as well as view and print their individual training transcript and certificates of completion.

Recommendation: OFPC to continue to ensure courses within the State Fire Training Programs remain current, available, meaningful and are efficiently provided to facilitate the ability of volunteer firefighters to achieve core training objectives.

Recommendation: OFPC to continue to work with fire service partners to provide flexibility in training offerings and scheduling and support local basic training skills and resources.

Recommendation: OFPC to continue to evaluate whether additional courses can be made available in hybrid or virtual format.

Utilization of community colleges, BOCES and state accredited high schools to train firefighters, to include creating pilot programs

The Task Force recognized the potential benefits of engaging high school students, as the next generation of firefighters, by providing fire service training in the high school or BOCES, and where possible, provide both educational and fire service training credit.

Promoting and incentivizing fire training at the high school level provides an effective way to maximize individuals' time by fulfilling educational requirements and accomplishing firefighter training in the same hours.

The Task Force also recognized the recruitment and retention value of engagement through college equivalency programs. OFPC currently offers credit for firefighter training completed outside the State Fire Training program through equivalency, whereby training is recognized upon a content review or through the National Certification process. Promoting awareness of training equivalency as well as creating college programs which meet or exceed state requirements would eliminate duplication of mandatory training requirements and may result in cost saving for students in fire-related college programs. While several local community colleges currently offer fire science courses, development of a practical interior firefighter training program would allow the student to get college credit while completing training required to be a firefighter.

Recommendation: OFPC and the NYS Education Department (NYSED) work together to promote delivery of firefighter training, through the State Fire Training Program or High School or BOCES programs with equivalency.

Recommendation: Promote and support High School level Fire Science courses to increase awareness of the volunteer service and career opportunities in the fire service.

Recommendation: Provide and maintain a mechanism for students to receive college credit for completion of certain State Fire Training Program courses and, conversely, a means for college students to receive college and State Fire Training credit. This may require engagement with National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS), American Council on Education (ACE), or other credit recommendation organizations.

Recommendation: OFPC and the State University of New York (SUNY) to collaborate on establishing State Fire Training equivalency programs.

Feasibility and necessity of creating a unit within OFPC dedicated to volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention

As the State's lead fire agency, OFPC is uniquely positioned to promote and support effective recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters through training and education. Providing training, education, and support to the fire service of New York State are core functions of OFPC.

OFPC is currently working with the fire service to highlight and share state and local best practices and lessons learned as well as partnering with stakeholders to ensure coordinated and mutually supportive initiatives.

Efforts such as these can be addressed through OFPC's existing structure and is consistent with its core mission. While OFPC and the fire service associations can support and supplement recruitment and retention efforts statewide, local fire departments are best positioned to have the greatest impact upon the success of recruitment and retention of its membership.

Recommendation: OFPC to identify a point of contact to serve as liaison and coordinator for the fire service in the promotion and support of recruitment and retention effort.

Recommendation: OFPC to work with fire service partners to develop best practices for recruitment and retention to include effective administrative practices, such as onboarding practices of new members and mentoring programs, to assist fire departments with integrating and retaining new members within their existing membership and supporting successful local recruitment and retention incentive programs.

New and existing volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention benefits, incentives, and programs

In addition to identifying and analyzing the efficacy of existing firefighter incentives, to include continuation and/or expansion of existing incentives, there was a greater focus on identifying new ways to incentivize and assist with the recruitment of new members as well as the retention of existing members.

Currently available incentives include: real estate property tax exemption, personal income tax credit, tuition assistance, access to the state health insurance program, and length of service benefits. Local fire departments may also offer incentive and service benefit programs to their members.

The personal income tax credit is currently limited to \$200 (\$400 for married filing joint taxpayers where both spouses are eligible). For Tax Year 2020, approximately 70,000 volunteer firefighters filed claims, totaling approximately \$15.2 million. More information on volunteer firefighter income tax credit can be found at: <https://www.tax.ny.gov/pit/credits/volunteerfirefighters.htm>.

The Real Property Tax Law was recently amended to expand local government authorization to provide a real property tax exemption of up to ten percent of assessed value for volunteer firefighters that serve at least two years. (Chapter 670 of the Laws of 2022)

The Task Force identified new incentive program for consideration at the State and local level through professional knowledge and experience, awareness of successful local programs, and

research into programs offered in other states. These incentives include: allowing compensation of volunteers, paid or unpaid leave for training, similar to paid family leave or military training; mortgage assistance, stipends for training, state and local retirement credit and health insurance subsidies.

Recommendation: Authorize paid on call or allowing compensation for volunteer firefighters; authorize stipends; requires consideration to ensure continuity of volunteer benefits. This was identified by the Task Force as the priority recommendation.

Recommendation: Increase the amount of personal income tax credit and allow volunteer firefighters to take advantage of the income tax and real property tax exemption.

Recommendation: Expand tuition assistance programs; consider loan forgiveness program at state or local level.

Recommendation: Subsidize health care or insurance related benefits including dental and vision coverage.

Recommendation: Provide one year of State and local retirement credit for every 5 years of service as an active volunteer firefighter, up to a maximum of 3 years credit for 15 years of active service.

Recruitment and retention programs utilized by other states

The Task Force looked into successful recruitment and retention programs in other states, including to help inform recruitment and retention efforts in New York. Research showed that there were common approaches, but incentives were reflective and focused on the emergency response expectations, goals and needs of the local community.

Connecticut and Pennsylvania have successful High School, Technical School, BOCES or Community College level programs, and Florida has a public service academy, which serve as a gateway from school to fire service through offering cross credit in educational and fire training record applications.

Numerous states offer financial incentives, similar to those being recommended by this Task Force to include tax incentives, fuel cards/stipends, free/reduced cost health care, mortgage assistance, training stipends, and tuition reimbursement.

Connecticut produced an effective Public Service Announcement (PSA) communicating the diversity of skills needed within a fire department. Similarly, Pennsylvania has a high-impact website, with a recruitment video, providing information about the need for volunteer firefighters, savings to governments and taxpayers, how to become a volunteer firefighter, benefits of volunteering, and motivational incentives to join the volunteer fire service.

Recommendation: New York State should develop and maintain a high-quality, readily accessible recruitment website to provide an immediate result of searches to volunteer fire departments. The website should link to the National Volunteer Fire Council’s recruitment and retention resources, such as “Make Me A Firefighter” program, social media use in recruitment, recruitment PSA’s).

Recommendation: OFPC to work with the fire service partners to include other state practices in evaluating and recommending best practices.

Recruitment of volunteer firefighters from under-represented and at-risk populations.

Populations under-represented in the fire service when compared to the percentage of a community’s population they protect provide an underutilized source for firefighter recruitment, particularly minorities and women. Fire departments need to know and understand the community they serve to allow for meaningful engagement to improve community participation and representation within the fire service.

The U. S. Census Bureau reported in 2020 that women make up 50.5% of the population. Sources indicated women volunteer at a rate of 64% while men only 36%. Notwithstanding, in 2020 the National Volunteer Fire Council reported that only 11% of volunteer firefighters are women.

Many volunteer fire departments rules, regulations, and by-laws were written decades ago when most families were single income households, many women did not work outside the home, and children were not involved in as many activities. Fire department membership, outside of a “Ladies Auxiliary”, was exclusively male. Times have significantly changed. Households now commonly include double and triple income earners and children are involved with many activities after-school and on weekends. These trends have further limited the time available for individuals to volunteer. If fire department membership requirements and by-laws do not evolve and keep pace with these trends, they may serve to disincentivize or create barriers to serving as a volunteer. Additionally, the fire service itself has changed, with increases in the volume, type, and complexity of emergency responses.

Fire departments should review and revise their by-laws, rules, and regulations, which may be outdated and potentially exclusionary, to ensure they accurately reflect the needs of the department and eliminate attendance or other membership requirements determined to pose unnecessary barriers to service. Fire departments should ensure that all the required meetings, drills, events, and fundraising activities that members are mandated to attend to maintain active membership are truly necessary for a member’s role and responsibility within the department. Fire departments should allow as much flexibility as possible for their members to complete the minimum required activities. Effective and efficient use of the time a volunteer has to serve is

an important factor in successfully recruiting and retaining members. Membership requirements must therefore be carefully considered and purposeful.

Consideration of providing membership options for non-operational roles to allow individuals interested in serving and capable of performing administrative and support duties can benefit a department and free others to focus their time and effort on training and emergency responses. Efforts such as these will also allow departments to assure membership requirements are inclusive, appropriate, and appealing to under-represented populations.

Military veterans represent another population potentially under-represented in the fire service. Veterans are often inherently driven to serve their communities and their Country. Through their military service, these individuals may have basic firefighting experience, leadership skills, a respect for procedures, loyalty to a common mission, and a strong sense of responsibility and accountability. The military has a very similar community structure with chains of command and many units working together to ensure the overall mission is successfully supported. It is a natural transfer of skills to recruit and connect veterans with their local volunteer fire departments.

More broadly, engaging with community organizations to increase understanding and familiarity with the fire service can serve as an important foundation for recruitment efforts.

Recommendation: Utilize the 2020 Census data to assist with identifying a community's current population and predicting future trends.

Recommendation: Fire departments should attend local diverse community events, heritage days, LGTBQ organizational meetings, and other non-traditional places and events. Fire departments should partner with already established groups and organizations composed of or serving these under-represented populations. Most volunteer fire departments have space within their buildings to hold meetings and events. Fire departments should reach out to the established minority organizations and other volunteer organizations within their communities to offer their space for meetings or events in return for some time to educate the organization about their volunteer fire service.

Recommendation: Fire departments need to review and revise by-laws to ensure they are current and provide flexibility to better suit the environment of today's volunteer. Departments should consider waiving or reducing requirements of new members to attend meetings or drills until their initial, basic training (Firefighter I program) is complete. This allows new members time to concentrate on training and studies while balancing fire department requirements and family/home life.

Recommendation: Fire departments should partner with realtors and assessors to engage new homeowners and renters regarding the way fire protection is provided in the community and the needs and opportunities of volunteering in the fire service.

Recommendation: Fire department should engage veteran organizations.

Recommendation: Fire departments should provide childcare at the firehouse during training, structured duty shifts, and appropriate response events. This would provide needed childcare for parents to be available for training and responses.

Other Issues for Consideration

In addition to the various recommendations associated with the areas outlined above, the Task Force has highlighted other issues to advance volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention efforts.

Shared Services/Consolidation

Increasingly, volunteer fire departments are finding it harder to provide the same level of service with fewer volunteers. Fire departments must balance the increased cost and need to maintain an appropriate level service with the public's expectation of service and cost.

Many fire departments are facing a crossroad and should take a systematic approach to determining what is best for the public. Exploration of consolidation and shared services may prove beneficial to identifying efficiencies while assuring the delivery of quality service. Consolidation and shared services offer opportunities to increase cost-effectiveness, by eliminating unnecessary and costly duplication of resources, maximize use of limited personnel, and improve response times while maintaining the efficient and effective delivery of services.

Recommendation: OFPC, in partnership with the Department of State, should promote opportunities for technical support and grants in support of shared services and consolidation initiatives.

Leadership

The Task Force identified the need to promote and sustain effective leadership by expanding or building upon existing Fire Officer, Instructor, and other leadership courses. Leadership was identified by the Task Force as a key factor impacting recruitment of new members and, more profoundly, the retention of existing members. The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) reported that 60% of people leaving volunteer fire departments cited poor leadership as the primary reason.

OFPC has increased the availability of leadership and instructor training courses. Traditionally, except for an entry level fire officer course, the majority of content required to meet NFPA fire officer and instructor training requirements was limited to residential offerings at the NYS

Academy of Fire Science. OFPC's Fire Officer 1 and 2 courses are now available locally or regionally statewide, as are the Fire and Emergency Services Instructor 1 and 2 courses.

Recommendation: OFPC to establish a Leadership Best Practices prescribing competencies and education needed by fire department leaders and officers to effectively perform job functions and strengthen member satisfaction, engagement, and retention.

Recommendation: Develop a leadership forum for aspiring, current line and civil officers. Organize regional leadership training opportunities with presenters from local experts, business leaders, military, fire, and police leadership, associations, and other quality sources inside and outside of the fire service. Quarterly delivery of standard, high-quality content to the fire service statewide should be the goal with the First-Line Supervisor Training Program for career fire officers serving as a potential model.

Recommendation: Expand OFPC's Fire Officer training beyond the minimum job performance requirements (JPRs) of NFPA 1021 - Standard for Fire Officer Professional Qualifications – specific to leadership content, such as human resource management, interpersonal communications, and conflict resolution.

Recommendation: Establish mentorship programs within fire departments to support the entry into the fire department and increase membership retention.

Conclusion

The Task Force believes more can and must be done to promote the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters in New York State. For many communities the volunteer model may remain the only affordable, practical means of providing fire protection. Analysis of the level of service that is needed and an evaluation of the best options available to provide that service can clarify the amount and type of staffing required and assure available personnel are being utilized efficiently and effectively.

Fire departments are relied upon for more than fire protection and suppression to include specialized services such as water rescue, hazardous materials response, inspection duties, terrorist incidents, and emergency medical services. As fire departments assumed these responsibilities, demands for training, response hours, and stresses on the volunteer fire service substantially increased. Appropriate and adequate resourcing to address those needs should be sought and supported.

Through the work of the Task Force, it became evident that there is no single, "one size fits all" solution that will work for all communities. Community demographics such as employment types and availability, population age and makeup, population density, tax base, and other local factors define what particular incentives may elicit and sustain increased numbers of volunteers from a given community.

Many of the measures recommended within this report require or would benefit from increased state and local investment and therefore will be subject to available budget appropriations. Others may be addressed by re-aligning the investment or dedication of time and resources currently available to best provide for effective and improved recruitment and retention in a given community or partnering with stakeholders to develop cooperative partnerships to do so. Regardless of the mechanism or means, in order to continue to safely and effectively protect the communities it serves, the volunteer fire service of New York State must continue to evolve to address its staffing challenges.

The Task Force members remain committed to working with State and local leaders to ensure the success and sustainability of New York State's fire service.