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A FIREMAN'S FOOTSTEPS: Shortage of volunteers complicated by required training time, expenses

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Faced with an aging volunteer population, fire companies must figure out how to recruit the younger generation and how to keep them engaged, particularly since there is a shortage of volunteer firefighters.

There is no other way of stating it. The training to volunteer is extensive.

The time involved supporting your local company by attending meetings, fundraising, let alone responding to calls takes a major commitment. For young volunteers with young families, it can be overwhelming and undoable.

At a symposium held earlier this year for firefighters and municipal officials, the group was asked how many were under the age of 50. Very few raised their hands. And for those who did, there is a good chance that they came from families where volunteering for the local fire company was a given.

These figures also are reflected in a survey conducted by the Lycoming County Department of Public Safety. Of the 25 county fire departments that respond to calls, about half of their members are between 41 and 60-plus years of age.

Major hurdles

When John Yingling, director of public safety for the county, first signed on as a firefighter, he admitted that the amount of training required was not as extensive. Because members of a volunteer fire department can wear different hats, so to speak, training can be rigorous and expensive, he said.

The basic firefighter 1 certification, which according to Yingling is not required, takes about 192 hours and can cost up to \$600.

In the emergency medical service, the crew on ambulances includes the Emergency Medical Responder (EMR), which requires 50 hours of training, and the Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), which requires 160 hours of training. Costs for the EMT program, including background checks and testing, is about \$970.

On an ambulance call, the EMT is the senior person and the EMR is the driver. The driver must have a current driver's license and have completed a 15-hour emergency vehicle operator's course.

In addition, 24 hours of continuing education is required every three years.

According to Yingling, training programs are an eligible reimbursement expense through the Firemen's Relief Association. Training expenses can also be offset by grants or through funding from the municipalities or by the fire companies' general funds.

He stressed that these standards are across the board, whether the fire departments are volunteer or paid.

In its survey, the Public Safety Department identified a major complaint from local fire companies about the amount of training necessary to do the job.

Respondents to the survey cited the number of training hours needed as their greatest challenge for recruiting and retaining members.

"People do not have the time with family, job (some work multiple jobs) and then ask them to put in training hours on top of the fundraising to keep us in business," he said. Add to that, "keeping them coming to training nights and getting them to take classes to advance their skills" as being among the highest rated responses.

Although many of the classes may be completed online, Yingling said that is a problem for many of the outlying municipalities who do not have high-speed internet available.

For someone living 40 miles from Williamsport, that would mean an 80-mile roundtrip just for one night's class.

Gearing up

The cost of outfitting firefighters was a revelation for the municipal officials at the symposium.

"That was one of the big takeaways for the elected officials there," he said.

Because firefighters require two separate sets of gear, each designed for different tasks, the cost runs into thousands of dollars.

Wildland gear is designed for fires that occur in the wilderness where there is no immediate danger of exposure to direct flames. Structural gear is used where there is direct exposure to flames, particularly when it is necessary to enter burning structures. This type of gear should only be used for no more than 10 years, officials said.

Add to that the expense of the equipment and municipal officials are left wondering where the money goes.

Follow the money

For many municipalities, fall is a dreaded time of year - budget time.

Proposed spending for the next year is calculated and for many fire departments, it is the time when they make their requests for some type of funding from their home governments. Some communities levy a fire tax, while others have a contract with the fire department for a set amount in the budget. Still others donate to the fire company to help with expenses.

Since funds are usually earmarked for operating expenses, the cost of replacing equipment is usually funded through grants or fundraisers. Bingo night at the fire hall has been a staple through the years, but the numbers have dwindled and very few fire companies have carnivals as in the past.

Many hold dinners, sandwich sales and other fundraisers to supplement the money from the municipalities, which often leaves members of the fire company stretched to the limit.

The problem with relying on a fire tax for funding the fire department is that it can rise and fall, according to the amount of delinquent taxes in a municipality. It's a percentage of the property taxes.

"The fire tax might generate \$21,000 a year, but if the property owners don't pay their taxes or they pay them on the different scales, your taxes go up and down. So, you'll get either \$18,000 or you'll get \$19,000 and it will go a couple of years and they must pay their taxes. Then you'll get

\$20,000 to \$21,000, but you'll never get what the full amount is supposed to be because it fluctuates," said DuBoistown Fire Chief Paul McKinley.

And, if the county reassesses properties, the amounts change again.

"So, you really don't have an accurate number to do your budget," he added.

When it comes to purchasing equipment, a new ambulance can run as high as \$250,000.

A new tanker or engine can cost from \$500,000 to \$800,000, with ladder trucks even more. It is recommended that trucks be replaced about every 10 years, according to officials.

McKinley said the state offers a loan program, but it's only up to \$200,000.

"Anything over that you have to come up with from a local bank or from savings, so when municipalities come to the fire service and ask you, 'We want to see your books,' and see how much you have, when we have \$300,000 or

\$400,000 laying in the bank that's accumulated to buy your fire truck,' "he said.

With smaller municipalities, like DuBoistown, the annual budget is less than the cost of a fire truck.

Other boroughs, like Muncy, have gone a different route in financing the fire service.

They are presently locked into a five-year contract with the area volunteer fire company which guarantees a set amount each year based on population in the service area, which includes Muncy Borough, Muncy Creek Township and parts of Moreland Township.

Benefit of mergers

Several years ago, in response to the shortage of volunteers, the Muncy fire department merged with Clarkstown to form the Muncy Area Volunteer Fire Co.

"It was also duplication of services," said Muncy Borough Manager William Ramsey. "Why do we need multiple ladder trucks? So, manpower and money."

As far as services provided by the merged group, Ramsey said the borough is satisfied.

"But, I'm sure the fire department will tell you they still need more volunteers," he said.

"The fire service has to start thinking like another branch, because they are another branch of the municipality," McKinley said. "You work for that municipality and if you don't want to, they can get rid of you at any time and go hire another service."

He said each community is responsible for fire and EMS and they must support it, but it is also the responsibility, by law, of the fire department to show where the funding goes.

In the past, a group would get together and start a fire company in a community.

Boroughs and municipalities did not fund them, but now they fall under the laws of the state and they must justify where they are spending the taxpayers' money.

On the other hand, according to McKinley, municipalities have got to realize that just because they give \$10,000 to support the fire department, they can't think they own the whole thing.

"Your \$10,000 just paid to keep the lights on for the year," he said.

"I'm still showing up here 10 nights a month to do the bingo to buy the firetruck. I will be glad to hand you my \$600,000 bill for that fire truck,"

he said. "The community has got to figure that out. If you're only given

\$30,000 or \$40,000 a year, remember building operating expenses are \$100,000 a year."

Sincerely,
Don Konkle
PFESI