

# The dire shortage of volunteer firefighters in the US

25 January 2024

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Volunteers are needed to service communities both within cities as well as rural and suburban areas, but their numbers are thinning (Credit: Getty Images)

**Much of the US relies heavily on non-career firefighters, but their ranks are dwindling. If the problem doesn't abate, there's a lot at stake.**

During Covid-19, I – like many others – found myself wondering what I could do to help. After passing by a local fire station many times, I checked out the department's website and found that they needed volunteers.

Having lived in rural areas growing up, I knew volunteer fire departments existed. But I didn't think my town, an 8,500-person suburb of New York City – Hastings-on-Hudson, 20 miles (32km) from Midtown Manhattan – had one. I was also surprised to learn that even in the largest metropolitan area in the US, a large percentage of the population doesn't have full-time fire departments.

Instead, volunteer firefighters do the work that paid, professional – "career" – firefighters do. They are essential to their US communities. Yet many of these volunteer departments, especially across rural and suburban areas, are struggling.

Crucially, they often have a shortage of people willing to do the job. Even when new recruits join, many simply can't commit to being on-call or at a firehouse as they juggle careers and family dynamics. And those who do stay are often older men who are close to ageing out; I am 38 years old, and one of the younger members at my firehouse. Brian Schnibbe, chief of [the Hastings-on-Hudson Fire Department and Ambulance Corps](#), where I volunteer, is also in his late-30s. "I've been there for 20 years, and I'm still one of the young guys," he says.

As such, the emergency services that millions of Americans take for granted are in an increasingly dangerous situation.

Communities with understaffed volunteer fire departments may experience delayed response times for issues ranging from a potential gas leak, or a full-blown structure fire. Ultimately, that could lead to more injuries, more deaths and, possibly, the necessary implementation of paid departments, costing US taxpayers tens of billions of dollars. Entire essential fire departments or firehouses could shutter, too, leaving even more people vulnerable.

## **A leaky hose: Recruitment and retainment**

Of the more than one-million firefighters in the US, 65% of them are volunteers, according to data from the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC). Of the more than 29,000 fire departments across the country, almost 19,000 of them are run completely by volunteers.

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Volunteer firefighters are essential to responding to both structure fires as well as issues like gas leaks (Credit: Getty Images)

Internationally, that's not entirely unusual. In many European countries, the fire service is composed mostly of volunteers – a list that includes Austria, Germany and Portugal. Australia also relies heavily on volunteer firefighters, as do parts of the UK. But the US's reliance is particularly significant, due to the country's larger geographic footprint and population.

Lori Moore-Merrell, who oversees the US Fire Administration (USFA) as part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (Fema), says about 85% of the US population is covered by career departments, which means most households live in areas serviced by full-time fire departments. Yet that still leaves 15% of the country in the hands of volunteers.

Steve Hirsch, chair and Kansas State Director of the National Volunteer Fire Council, says a town or community would probably need around 15,000 residents to warrant a career department, but there are a huge number of small towns and cities that don't meet that threshold. US Census data from 2020 shows that 76%

of the 19,500 incorporated towns or cities in the US have fewer than 5,000 residents, and 42% have fewer than 500.

In Kansas, for example, Hirsch says volunteers "probably protect 85% of the state", which is similar to other largely rural states. In Iowa, the figure is 92%. In Minnesota, paid-on-call or volunteer firefighters comprise 97.5% of the state's firefighting force.

Yet these are precisely the areas most likely to struggle to find volunteers, as there's a smaller population to draw from; and some volunteers, especially younger ones, may move away. "We're a pretty well-staffed, small-town department," says Schnibbe of the Hastings-on-Hudson firehouse, "but if you go out into rural America, you could have six guys covering 20-square-miles."

Moore-Merrell says, "We're leaking out one side, and not filling the bucket on the other side. We not only have a recruitment issue, we have a retention problem." It's a broader issue even career departments are contending with. "We have major departments who are not able to fill a recruit class."

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The number of volunteer firefighters in the US numbered nearly 898,000 in 1984, but only around 677,000 in 2020, according to the NVFC data. During that time, the number of calls to those departments has more than tripled, from less than 12 million nationwide in 1986, to more than 36.6 million in 2021.

## **Duty and danger**

The severity of the issue varies from city to city and state to state. In New York, it is glaring. Since the late 1990s, "we've seen a 32% decrease in the amount of volunteering", says New York Assemblyman Bill Conrad, chair of the Assembly Subcommittee on Volunteer Emergency Services. "It's a state-wide problem, and what's also shocking is that the amount of calls has gone up 29%."

Conrad says he's led several roundtables and meetings with departments around the state to get to the bottom of the precipitous drop in new recruits. Several factors are in the mix.

The state of the economy plays a big part. "People are and have been busier, we have economic factors at play – you need to have one or two jobs and childcare to be able to volunteer," he says.

In years past, many volunteers – often men – were able to come home from their jobs, put in the hours and go on calls on evenings and weekends while depending on their spouses for care. (Even today, only 11% of volunteer firefighters and 5% of career firefighters in the US are women.) Now, however, more families are now reliant on dual incomes and working longer hours, plus struggling with additional child- and eldercare issues. Potential volunteers simply don't have as much bandwidth.



To recruit and retain, prospective first responders and community members must learn about emergency services and their value to the community (Credit: Getty Images)

"I think the demands for time upon people are too great," says Hirsch, whose own department serves 2,500 people in a rural area of Kansas measuring roughly 900 sq miles (2,331 sq km). "I'm second-generation. My dad started in 1963, [when] moms stayed at home and dads could go out and do the calls. Today, that's not the case, and it adds a whole different element."

Schibbe also says the economic element is currently the most significant hang-up in recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters at the current time. "There's a

need for two or three incomes now, and the requirements needed to do the job [firefighting] is so much more. There's better training, and it's more elaborate, but you're doing it for free," he says. "And there's only so much time in a day that you can dedicate."

By definition, firefighting is also dangerous – a problem that's always looming. There are health effects to consider – both mental and physical. It can be emotionally draining, too, especially for volunteers who end up on particularly grisly calls and have trouble processing what they've seen. Firefighters exposed to various hazardous substances also increase their risks of developing cancer or other diseases, which is a concern for potential recruits.

Although Hirsch says that the ranks for his brigade aren't quite as thin as many other areas across the US, his department is always in recruitment mode, anyway. "You've got to hammer away and make sure people know that they don't want to wait an hour for a fire truck or 45 minutes for an ambulance," he says. "When people realise that, you get people who start thinking, 'if not me, then who?'"

## **Finding a fix**

Moore-Merrell says that the USFA has been identifying ways to help volunteer departments fill their classes and keep those recruits. In 2022 and 2023, the USFA held summits, bringing together numerous leaders in the fire service to try and "get a sense of the scope and the scale". She says, "What we're doing now is strategising."

Potential solutions, some of which are included in the USFA's recently published recruitment and retention manual, include apprenticeship programs for the fire service, which could help young people see it as a viable career path. Mentorship programmes are another retention strategy, as is family support.

*We've always thought that everybody wanted to be a firefighter. We took it for granted – Lori Moore-Merrell*

The US federal government also offers financial incentives in the form of grants to many departments. Many are available through Fema, including Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (Safer) grants. With the goal of ensuring a given community has enough trained and prepared firefighters at any given time, these awards help volunteer departments with resources to increase recruiting and retention efforts as well as ensure volunteers are trained and outfitted for service. These grants can help with those costs, particularly if a department is short on funding. Departments are generally funded through state and local taxes, grants and donations, but the amounts can vary substantially from department to department.

The catch: Fema has handed out around \$16bn (£12.65bn) in grants throughout the past 22 years through Safer and other programmes – and there still isn't enough to go around. "The challenge is that you have 30,000 fire departments in the country, and we have anywhere from 8,000 to 10,000 applicants, and issue about 2,000 grants per year," says Catherine Patterson, division director for Fire, Regional, Emergency Management Grant Programs at Fema.

One way to fix the staffing situation would be to replace volunteer departments with career departments. However, the financial burden would likely fall on community members with tax increases.

Paying for a full-time fire department, complete with salaries for a team of full-time firefighters, can cost millions of dollars. Volunteer firefighters save taxpayers in the state of New York roughly \$3.8bn (£2.99bn) in salaries and benefits; a switch to all-career departments would lead to an average increase in property taxes of more than 28% state-wide, and cost \$4.7bn (£3.7bn) annually.

"Somebody's going to have to go on these calls," says Schnibbe. "The alternative is that you're going to have a paid department, and you're going to be paying millions of dollars per year."

## **A generational shift?**

Despite the uphill battle, Moore-Merrell remains optimistic, and thinks many Americans will recognise the overall health and vitality of their communities

ultimately rests on their shoulders, as the potential consequences of the loss of volunteer fire departments become increasingly clear.

That may be the fact that more people could suffer injuries or die due to longer response times, or that their taxes are going to go up significantly. Both could motivate more people to volunteer or find ways to help their hometown departments.

"We all should care about our neighbours. We all should care about our family and friends to the point that we're willing to intervene," says Moore-Merrell.

"We've always thought that everybody wanted to be a firefighter. We took it for granted."

There are reasons to think that things are beginning to shift. As I went through my initial county-level firefighting training in late 2020 and early 2021 – a class called Firefighter I in New York state – I noticed the difference between my classmates and the firefighters in my department. In class, I was one of the older students, and many of my fellow volunteers from across the county were still in high school.

It may have been that the pandemic inspired more young people to serve their communities. Or perhaps they just wanted to get out of the house. But the signs are encouraging – there's even been a handful of younger volunteers that have joined the Hastings-on-Hudson Fire Department, too, throughout the past year.

This year, my department will celebrate its 148th birthday. It persevered through the Great Depression, two world wars and the aftermath of 9/11, which occurred only miles away. I think it's reasonable to believe my department, and many others, will also be able to make it through recruitment and retainment challenges.

I too am optimistic, as are others in the volunteer fire service. There will always be emergencies, and a certain set of Americans will always respond to the call to serve their communities.

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