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USA TODAY.com

Number of volunteer firefighters is declining ; People are too busy to serve, especially if unpaid; [FINAL Edition]

Rick Hampson. **USA TODAY**. McLean, Va.: Nov 7, 2005. pg. A.1

Abstract (Document Summary)

There is no greater, longer-running expression of volunteerism in U.S. history than the volunteer fire service, which still saves taxpayers billions of dollars each year. Almost three-fourths of the nation's 1.1 million firefighters are volunteers, and two-thirds of all fire departments are volunteer.

Even though emergency calls are up, the number of volunteer firefighters has dropped nationally more than 10% over the past two decades. The decline is particularly steep in the Northeast. Pennsylvania, which had about 300,000 volunteers three decades ago, is down to 72,000. New York state, which had 140,000 15 years ago, now has 96,000.

*In the 1980s, the volunteer company in Adamsburg, Pa., had a waiting list for members. Last year, the department failed to answer one call; no volunteer responded to the alarm. (Although some departments still use a siren, most now raise their volunteers primarily by cell phone or beeper). It was a false alarm, but Fire Chief Don Thoma, who works nights, says he's afraid to take a new job because there'd be no one to cover weekdays. "

Full Text (1451 words)

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PENN TOWNSHIP, Pa. -- It took 26 fire companies from three counties last year to fight the fire at Dino's Grille, a two-story wood structure that ignited on a hot Tuesday morning in this town outside Harrisburg. The local volunteer chief still fumes just thinking about it.

When Monte Supko arrived at the scene, he signaled other volunteer departments in the area for help. He needed firefighters. But what he got, mostly, was firetrucks -- many with only one or two people aboard.

By the time sufficient help was assembled and the fire extinguished, Dino's was a smoking wreck. "A parade of half-million-dollar firetrucks didn't help much," he says. "I got mad, because we've waited so long to address the problem."

The problem is this: The volunteer fire company, an institution that dates to Ben Franklin, is slowly going the way of the horse-drawn pumper.

Blame it on the changes in society: longer commutes, two-income households, year-round youth sports, chain stores that won't release workers at midday to jump on a firetruck. Blame it on new folks in town who don't even know the department is volunteer. Blame it on stricter training requirements and fewer big fires and the lure of paying fire jobs in the cities.

There is no greater, longer-running expression of volunteerism in U.S. history than the volunteer fire service, which still saves taxpayers billions of dollars each year. Almost three-fourths of the nation's 1.1 million firefighters are volunteers, and two-thirds of all fire departments are volunteer.

In many communities, the volunteer fire company is a social and civic anchor. Members organize the Fourth of July parade and hang the holiday decorations on Main Street. The volunteer firehouse is the scene of scout meetings, wedding receptions, service club luncheons and knitting bees. It's a place to vote, drink, or hang out.

But even though emergency calls are up, the number of volunteer firefighters has dropped nationally more than 10% over the past two decades. The decline is particularly steep in the Northeast. Pennsylvania, which had about 300,000 volunteers three decades ago, is down to 72,000. New York state, which had 140,000 15 years ago, now has 96,000.

The kinds of volunteers who used to be able to cover weekday calls -- farmers, shop owners, factory shift workers -- are becoming as rare as a firehouse Dalmatian.

Supko remembers when his fire company got a new member a month; there wasn't enough room on its firetrucks for everyone. Now, he says, "nobody wants to join."

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The department, which counted 30 active firefighters in the 1970s, is down to fewer than 20. A program to groom high school students has five members, a third of what it used to. It's an issue of time: potential volunteers have less, and firefighting requires more.

Consider training. Once, a novice received basic instruction from his colleagues and learned the rest on the job. Today, most departments require more than 100 hours of initial instruction, plus weekly drills and annual refresher courses for everything from first aid to anti-terrorism.

Then there's fundraising. Because the number of departments has not fallen along with the number of volunteers -- tradition-proud companies are usually reluctant to merge -- there's duplication of costly equipment and firehouses.

Fundraising, not firefighting

Supko's company must raise \$10,000 of its \$12,000 annual budget. "We do more fundraising than firefighting," he complains.

The company runs bingo games two nights a week and a series of Saturday chicken barbecues. Supko says all the fundraising drives some people away and makes those who do volunteer less willing to attend drills and training sessions.

At the same time, firefighting isn't what it used to be. As buildings have gotten safer, fire calls increasingly consist of what firefighters disdainfully call "smells and bells."

Smells (someone sniffs something and calls 911 without checking to see if there's a fire) and bells (false house alarms) "are basically a waste of time," says Vincent McNally, director of the public safety program at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia and a veteran volunteer fire officer.

"There was more good work when I started," he says. "Now we're like an army that rarely gets to fight a battle. It's hard to get people to spend a lot of time training and waiting for a few real calls."

The "Firefighters Needed" signs outside thousands of firehouses have not solved the recruiting crisis. The only thing that seems to work is one that makes a department volunteer in name only: pay.

A growing number of "volunteer" departments rely on government funds to pay for a few fulltime firefighters; to pay volunteers per call or per hour; or to pay for volunteers' health insurance or pensions.

"People have to realize that volunteerism isn't free any more," says Al Musicant, New Jersey director of the National Volunteer Fire Council. "You're going to have to give volunteers a stipend."

That will be expensive; the National Volunteer Fire Council says volunteers provide about \$37 billion a year in free fire services.

Even limited compensation bodes ill for the future of volunteerism. Once a department starts paying, it's on a slippery slope.

The "combination" department -- an increasingly popular hybrid with volunteers and full timers -- is often just a stage on the route to a force of full time, career firefighters.

The demographics promise to get worse. In many places volunteer fire fighting is a tradition passed down through families and friends. Fewer volunteers today means even fewer tomorrow.

"To be honest with you," says Robbie Honeycutt, chief of the Robinson Volunteer Fire Department outside Charlotte, "the volunteer fire service is a dyin' breed."

Response times holding

So far, declining volunteerism appears to have had little effect on fire protection. The National Fire Protection Association and the Insurance Service Organization, which rates local fire risks, say there's no sign that call response times are up.

That's probably explained by several factors: neighboring volunteer companies increasingly cover for each other, especially weekdays; fires have become less common and less severe, thanks to sprinklers and smoke detectors; and departments are doing the job with fewer people.

But a report issued in June by a Pennsylvania legislative commission said that 40% of fire chiefs surveyed said they had been unable to respond to at least some calls because of a lack of volunteer turnout.

Three cases where the shortage of manpower was apparent:

*In Alexis, N.C., the volunteer company missed its first call in memory when a medical emergency failed to rouse a single volunteer in March. Another department eventually handled the call, but the county subsequently agreed to pay for two part-time firefighters. As a result, the fire tax on a \$100,000 house rose from \$45 to \$65 a year.

*When a house caught fire in Mecklenburg County outside Charlotte this year, a truck from Chief Honeycutt's local volunteer company arrived at the scene at the same time as an assisting truck from the Charlotte Fire Department. The homeowner complained to a local television station about the delay, noting that the firehouse was only a couple of miles away.

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departments still use a siren, most now raise their volunteers primarily by cell phone or beeper). It was a false alarm, but Fire Chief Don Thoma, who works nights, says he's afraid to take a new job because there'd be no one to cover weekdays. "

A year after the fire at Dino's, the building is unoccupied. The blaze might have done as much damage if more firefighters arrived sooner, but Chief Supko estimates that it took 20 minutes to deploy the number of men and lines he needed when it should have taken two.

It could have been worse. Supko says he had to send firefighters in to search for occupants before he had others to come to their rescue if something went wrong.

"We have to let people know how dangerous this situation is," he says. "We're asking for some help." By that he means money, possibly credits or pensions for volunteers.

But it may be too late for the volunteer fire company as a social institution. "It was the blue-collar country club," says McNally. "You could shoot a little pool and have a beer. It's a relic of a simpler time. But society has changed. The world has changed."

[Illustration]

GRAPHIC, B/W, Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY, Sources: National Fire Protection Association and National Volunteer Fire Council (Line graph, bar graph); PHOTO, Color, Eileen Blass, USA TODAY; PHOTOS, B/ W, Eileen Blass, USA TODAY (2)

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