

LEGISLATIVE STUDY COMMITTEE

My name is Barry Kuenkel. I am a 35 year member of the Cumberland Fire District in northwestern Wisconsin. I have been the chief of the department for over 14 years. I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

The Cumberland Fire District is made up of the City of Cumberland along with 4 surrounding townships and operates under a joint powers agreement. The district also contracts fire protection to portions of 3 other townships which makes our total coverage area 204 square miles. The district, through representatives from each of the owner municipalities provides the general management and establishes general policies, while the fire chief and his officers provide the specific management of day to day operation and maintenance of the department.

At this time my department is not experiencing any recruitment or retention problems. In fact we maintain a waiting list of potential members. The average tenure on our department currently is 15.7 years, that is despite having 11 members with 5 years or less.

Most of my neighbors, however, are not so fortunate. As a member of the board of directors for the Wisconsin State Firefighters Association, I have the unique opportunity and duty to visit fire departments and area fire associations for various events. A common theme of discussion is the difficulty of recruiting members and having them stay. This is not just a problem in Wisconsin, and it is not new.

In the mid 1980's the nation's volunteer firefighting force was 897,000 strong, by 2004 (the year the International Association of Fire Chiefs published The Blue Ribbon Report titled, "A call for action to preserve and improve the volunteer fire service") the number was down to less than 800,000. In 2014 the number was 786,000. You can see the trend. Of the total 30,052 fire departments in the country, 19,807 or 66% are all volunteer, 5,797 are mostly volunteer, and 2,477 are all career. The time donated by volunteer firefighters saves localities across the country an estimated \$139.8 billion per year. In addition, while the volunteer

force is declining, the average age is increasing. The percentage of firefighters over 50 years old has gone from 15.9% in 1987, to 30.5% in 2013. Fewer of our younger folks are staying in the small towns. Most leave for the big cities.

The reasons for these trends as I am sure you have heard include time demands, more rigorous training requirements, the proliferation of 2 income families whose members do not have time to volunteer and the fact that many people no longer work in the same town they live in. I was at a recruiting event recently and here are some of the comments I have heard from folks in attendance when I asked them why it is so difficult to get people to volunteer.

Brule- Pay is not an issue, but many of the required "checklists" are too much, but if we don't do them we could get dinged by DSPS. Some of the training is simply not applicable to small departments. LOSAP is a positive.

Wascott- Most of our members are seniors who go south in the winter, those residents that remain have a hard time just making ends meet, and don't have the time to spare. Medical 1st. responders are very important to us as the nearest hospital is an hour away.

Highland- More appeal to older folks (that's all we have) Make training pertain to the area they are in. Many times we respond with a 2 man crew. What should we be doing in the 20 minutes it takes to get mutual aid there?

Maple- regulations are killing medical 1st. responder programs, go back to basics and have steps they can take if they wish to go further. They are being trained beyond the level in which they can operate. We are being regulated out of help.

Solon Springs- Testing should rely more on what people can do and not so much on the written. Not everyone is good at taking exams, but can do the skills with ease.

Mason- There is no sense of community or belonging by the younger generation. We need to find away to get them involved.

Also heard were comments about The aging of our population in our area, National registry, segmenting firefighter I, and dropping of classes by tech colleges.

We also have to consider that many fire departments have tiny budgets with which to work. They have to heat and light their stations, maintain their apparatus, pay insurance, have their equipment tested, equip their members with PPE on as little as \$15,000 per year. Which is why many members foot the costs for training out of their own pocket. Many Medical 1st. responder units are not funded at all and have to rely on individual generosity to survive. If volunteers are found, many organizations have trouble finding the money to equip and train them.

I have heard about efforts to consolidate, regionalize, or form county departments, and that could work in some instances, but not everywhere, many believe this could put resources further away than they already are. The public expects its local fire department to be readily available. Mutual aid has its benefits, but where I live the next town is 10 miles away and is smaller than ours. Back when I started, fires would double in size every 10 minutes, now they double in size every minute because of today's building and furnishing materials. It burns faster, hotter and is more dangerous. So when help is 15-30 minutes away, time is definitely our enemy. We need to have an initial response adequate enough to mount an immediate attack.

So what is the solution to the shortage of volunteers? I am not sure there is an answer that will be a fix all for every area of the state, as each community has its own unique characteristics and needs. The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) has released a report entitled "Retention and Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services Challenges and Solutions which addresses the primary challenges departments face regarding retention and recruitment and then outlines proven solutions to overcome these obstacles. The NVFC has also helped launch Fire Corps, which is a national initiative to recruit community members into local fire and EMS departments to perform non-emergency roles, which allows department members to focus on training and emergency response. Also,

the NVFC administers the 1-800-FIRE-LINE which community members can call toll free to learn about firefighter, EMS and Fire Corps opportunities where they live. The Wisconsin State Firefighters Association which has about 11,500 mostly volunteer members, offers life and disability policies and the Wisconsin Fire Journal magazine as part of their \$25 annual membership package. Many department use it as an incentive for their members. The Length of Service Award Program (LOSAP) is certainly a huge incentive if departments choose to and are able to use it. Act 140, which protects a responder from being reprimanded or fired for being late for work because of an emergency response has certainly had a positive impact. There is also new technology in fire apparatus that allows a 2 man crew to mount an effective attack from the exterior, but that comes at a high cost.

So, there are tools out there that can and do help, but I believe many chiefs are not using them. The reason for that could be that they are unaware of them or they don't believe they would work for them. I believe there are many chiefs out there who are really over whelmed by how complex the job can be, and how much time is involved in performing the duties required of today's fire chief, and some have had the job thrust upon them when they are totally unprepared to handle all the intricacies involved with it, even for a small single township department, but are too proud (or stubborn) to ask for help.

One of the primary functions of government is the protection and well being of its citizens. Volunteer medical 1st. responders and fire departments are on the front lines in fulfilling that function, but we need help. Funding for medical 1st. responder groups would help. School programs promoting volunteerism for more than just the National Honor Society students would help. Property or income tax incentives for volunteers would help.

I realize that everyone has pet projects that they want the government to fund, but this is the safety of our citizens, and the people who provide it at a reasonable cost we are talking about. The state needs to try to help small communities to maintain their volunteer services. Surely there must be some positive actions that can be taken to improve circumstances for our volunteers. Thank you.

