

WTA Fire/EMS Roundtable Session

On May 18th, 2016 the Wisconsin Towns Association hosted a gathering of 20 fire, EMS, and Town officials from throughout Wisconsin to brainstorm answers to a series of questions (see attached). The iterative discussion did not allow for the group to address all of the questions; however, a robust discussion on issues and potential solutions produced the following thoughts and ideas. These results are a product of the roundtable discussion and might not be indicative of any individual participant's or WTA's opinions. That is, they are the responses from the participants.

Issues driving volunteer firefighter and EMT shortages

A. Conflict with Career

- Daytime coverage is particularly difficult because employers are less willing than in the past to allow people to leave work, in part, because they are staffed so thin due to recession externalities
- Lack of being able to leave work
- The 8 – 12 hour work day decreases time to volunteer
- People don't have time for the amount of training given their full time career
- Retaining them through the onset of the home mortgage and child bearing phase of life is difficult; we can recruit them when they're young, but can't hold onto them when they become too busy with a second job or other life responsibilities

B. Societal Mobility

- Many volunteers do so because their parent/s did; when kids leave town due to lack of jobs in the community, the cycle breaks down
- Transient nature of people, especially young people, create lack of ownership in community
- The 40 year volunteer is a thing of the past due to people moving from job to job and community to community

C. Demographics

- Declining rural population densities combined with graying of society
- Aging citizens are increasing EMS demand
- Amish densities in some areas cause a high level of service requirement relative to other areas and they don't volunteer

D. Economic Roadblocks

- In urban areas, affordable housing problems cause people to work multiple jobs, which decreases time for volunteering
- In forestry, agrarian, mining, etc. regions, volunteering can cause loss of seasonal unemployment benefits
- The small amount of money from paid calls, paid on call, etc. can cause loss of Badger Care and /or unemployment; especially difficult in rural areas with seasonal employment that includes unemployment payment as part of business strategy

E. Training

- Tech school times and locations are not at all convenient; lack of willingness to come to the potential volunteer, want you to come there
- People don't have time for the amount of training given their full time career
- There are good and bad tech school teachers; the bad teachers cause potential volunteers to leave or fail
- Fire teachers are often just people who successfully took the class; they aren't "teachers" and don't know how to teach
- National Registry Exam is developed by career interests that make money from the training system they have created; tech schools do what they can with the system they have to fit into, but the real problem is the National Registry Exam
- The courses for EMTs has increased to 212 hours and the AEMT course has increased to 164 hours causing a decrease of interested people for the course. The lifestyles of people today has changed from years past, people need to work longer hours to make ends meet.
- The potential number of volunteers is high in some areas, but they become disinterested due to time commitment mostly due to training and continuing education
- Tech school levies keep going up and the training gets more inconvenient
- We once had 19 potential trainees but tech school canceled the class and wouldn't come to town because we didn't have 20 (the trainer's threshold) so we lost 19 potential volunteers
- Once the State EMS Office decided to accept National Registry as the state curricula, things started to go south fast.

- Leadership and management techniques required to keep volunteers happy is different from the past and the necessary leadership training is not being provided; young people are being scared off by old management techniques
- Potential EMR/EMT has to pay for their own training
- National Registry is developed by a consortium that is dominated by full time/career (not volunteer) representatives. It is a competency based metric, which does not mandate the amount of training. Most states, including WI adopt the registry. The amount of training hours is determined by Wisconsin actors. The number of hours could be decreased and still achieve competency.
- The actual National Registry test is computer based and you can't go back once you've completed a question. It is a very poor system for anyone that is not the best with computers, has a disability, or wants to proof their test or go back on a question.

F. Generational Differences / Societal Attitude Shift

- Millennials are not as willing to volunteer; they would rather pay higher taxes and have the service provided to them so they can pursue other interests
- We live in a "give me" society
- Everything today requires incentives for people to get involved, including intangible; more incentives are needed

G. Equipment

- In urban areas, the departments with the best equipment steal volunteers from others with lesser equipment
- The cost of equipment prevents us from providing decent paid on-call amounts and recognition
- Equipment certification requirements causes us to retire equipment that is almost not even used
- Sub-par equipment discourages volunteers; if we can't invest in them then why should they invest in the community

H. Miscellaneous

- Volunteer departments are training grounds for career departments, and the volunteer departments cover the training responsibility and turnover costs

- Pure volunteerism does not largely exist and will not exist in the future; some type of incentive is necessary
- If you are paramedic level and established before 2000, you need two on staff; after 2000 only 1; this artificially causes staffing shortages
- We have businesses that are paying additional on their own accord to maintain fire services so their insurance rating doesn't go down; this is a negative for economic development in the region if we ask employers to do that
- EMS provider has monopoly and jacks up rates beyond what we can pay
- The potential impacts on public health and safety are an increased response time due to shortages of EMTs. There is potential for one ambulance service to have staffing issues for a certain time period thus having to call in a neighboring department for mutual aid. That mutual aid department will be responding from a farther distance to get to the patient. This could cause some economic issues in the resort / vacation areas. If a person feels that there is no emergency medical protection, or the time to receive those services is too long, that individual may not vacation or visit those areas.

Potential Strategies to address volunteer firefighter and EMT shortages

A. Incentives

- Property or income tax break for volunteering
- Business tax incentive for employers for matching payment of local government for each call
- Business tax incentive for allowing employees to leave during work hours, especially the daytime
- Increased state match of LOSAP payments
- Make volunteers WRS eligible
- College loan forgiveness for volunteering for fire/EMS like other professions have (e.g., attorneys in non-profits); also makes college more affordable, which is a goal for the state

B. Training

- Statewide clearinghouse of information on recruitment and retention strategies

- Leadership training for fire/EMS leadership to help lead/manage people, especially millennials
- Training on best practices for recruitment/retention, training, etc.
- Consistent tech school charge throughout the state
- Lower the training hours required
- The state should fully fund the training for EMS and not expect the volunteers to pay
- Fire/EMS training hours should count as credits toward a college degree
- Create a program that allows for training from one certification to count toward hours for the next level up so the number of hours can go down (e.g., EMR hours take off of the number of hours required for EMT)

C. Equipment

- Eliminate levy limit for capital purchase if purchased from a Wisconsin based manufacturer/company; will help grow state's jobs and economy; tax dollars stay here with our businesses
- Get state bids for equipment that apply to all fire/EMS departments

D. Increased Flexibility

- More local control for EMS staffing decisions so that the level of service can adjust to staffing availability; currently if you are at a certain level of EMS, you can't adjust to a different level to prevent staff shortages, prevent increased costs, or actually increase service levels

E. Generational Differences / Societal Attitude Shift

- Develop a High School class for science credit that provides training for EMR, EMT, Firefighter I

F. Finances

- Increase shared revenue specific for fire/EMS
- More communication and education from the state on grant opportunities
- State grant writing assistance
- Remove levy caps for fire/EMS

- Remove levy limit for at least on call pay
- What about treating the 911 fee for EMS like the 2% dues is for Fire?
- Limit ability of private contractors to increase costs consistent with levy limits

G. Miscellaneous

- Some surgical fixes could occur in DHS110
- DHS is advised by EMS advisory board that is SE Wisconsin focused; DHS needs to listen to the rural and volunteer dominated portions of the state, especially the north

1. What is the magnitude of volunteer firefighter shortages and where in Wisconsin are shortages most prevalent? What is the magnitude of EMT shortages and where in Wisconsin are shortages most prevalent?
2. When shortages exist, what tangible potential impacts to public health and safety, as well as economic development could occur?
3. In the presence of shortages, what steps could be taken to mitigate the negative impacts on public health and safety, as well as economic development concerning volunteer firefighters? EMTs?
4. When and where shortages exist, what factors are creating the shortages of volunteer firefighters? EMTs?
5. What strategies can be implemented to prevent shortages? That is, what strategies can be implemented to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters? EMTs?
6. Between 2011-2015, median Wisconsin Town fire costs went up 6% and median Town EMS costs went up 26%. These are not sustainable given levy limits. What is driving cost increases for fire? EMS?
7. What strategies can be implemented to address rising costs for fire? EMS?
8. Are current training and continuing education requirements contributing to shortages for volunteer firefighters? EMTs? If so, how?
9. If yes in number 8, what are some strategies to address this? If no, then skip.
10. What is the relationship between full time and volunteer emergency response departments, and how does a volunteer shortage impact non-volunteer departments in neighboring communities?