

Volunteer Firefighter and EMT Recruitment and Retention: Challenges and Solutions
Testimony Delivered by David Finger, Chief of Legislative and Regulatory Affairs
National Volunteer Fire Council
Before the Study Committee on Volunteer Firefighter and Emergency Medical
Technician Shortages

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Intro

My name is David Finger and I am the Chief of Legislative and Regulatory Affairs for the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC). I want to thank Chair Nass, Vice-Chair Kremer and the members of this study committee for inviting me here today to speak to you about volunteer firefighter and EMT recruitment and retention.

The NVFC represents the nation's volunteer fire, EMS and rescue services. Our primary form of membership is state associations, with the Wisconsin State Firefighters Association being our member here in this state.

I'm going to break my presentation into three parts. First I'm going to go through some charts and data to build a picture of volunteer staffing trends nationally and how they compare with staffing trends here in Wisconsin. Next I'll talk about the results of the market research that the NVFC did in 2014 to help us develop our national volunteer firefighter recruitment campaign. Finally, I'll talk about the challenges that I see related to volunteer recruitment and retention nationally and comment on some of the policy options that the committee is considering.

I've brought handouts that include the text of my testimony as well as charts and graphs referenced in the testimony. The Power Point follows the testimony so I'd encourage you all to follow along on paper as I move through the presentation.

National Data and Trends

There are roughly 800,000 volunteer firefighters in the United States. That is based on data from the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). The NVFC estimates that there are approximately 200,000 volunteer EMTs in the United States. There is better national data on the volunteer fire service than there is on volunteer EMS, so for this portion of my presentation I'm going to focus more on fire.

There are close to 20,000 all-volunteer fire departments and 5,580 mostly-volunteer fire departments in the United States. So about 26,000 of our nation's fire departments are all and mostly volunteer, out of approximately 30,000 fire departments total. All- and mostly-volunteer departments make up 85 percent of our nation's fire departments and protect roughly 36 percent of the population. Volunteers are clustered mostly in smaller jurisdictions.

National – Fire Department Type by Community Size (percentage)

Population Protected	All Career	Mostly Career	Mostly Volunteer	All Volunteer
1 million or more	69.2	30.8	0.0	0.0
500,000-999,999	71.4	23.8	4.8	0.0
250,000-499,999	78.6	14.3	3.6	3.6
100,000-249,999	81.3	15.9	2.8	0.0
50,000-99,999	64.0	22.7	13.4	0.9
25,000-49,999	46.0	27.2	21.0	5.9
10,000-24,999	21.7	24.2	38.0	16.2
5,000-9,999	5.5	9.4	38.4	46.7
2,500-4,999	1.7	1.7	25.6	71.0
Under 2,500	0.6	0.9	5.3	93.3
Total	8.1	6.8	18.6	66.4

National – Fire Department Type by Community Size (percentage)

Population Protected	All Career	Mostly Career	Mostly Volunteer	All Volunteer
25,000 or more	56.1	24.4	16.1	3.8
10,000-24,999	21.7	24.2	38.0	16.2
Under 10,000	1.7	2.6	16.0	79.6
Total	8.1	6.8	18.6	66.4

Wisconsin – Fire Department Type by Community Size (percentage)

Population Protected	All Career	Mostly Career	Mostly Volunteer	All Volunteer
25,000 or more	66.7	8.3	16.7	8.3
10,000-24,999	6.3	12.5	62.5	18.8
Under 10,000	0.7	0.7	6.8	91.9
Total	4.0	2.2	13.1	80.7

Sources: Third Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service, NFPA, 2011; Third Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service: Wisconsin, NFPA, 2011.

In Wisconsin the percentages track fairly closely with the national data, as you can see from the handout. There are three notable differences in how fire departments in Wisconsin are staffed compared to how fire departments nationally are staffed: fire departments in communities with populations of 10,000 or fewer residents are more likely to be volunteer in WI, departments in communities with populations of 10,000-25,000 are more likely to be mostly-volunteer and departments in communities with population of 25,000 or more are more likely to be all-career.

According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) the cost of replacing all volunteer firefighters with career personnel would be nearly \$140 billion. By contrast in 2013, according to the U.S. Census there was \$44.2 billion spent on local fire protection services throughout the country. So volunteers account for 76 percent of the value of fire protection services rendered but only protect about 36 percent of the population. How does that work? Essentially, volunteers serve in communities that cannot take advantage of economies of scale, and consequently the per-resident cost of providing emergency services is astronomical.

The graph on this slide shows the number of residents per pumper truck by community size. I'm not here to talk about the cost of fire trucks but you could substitute "pumper" with any fire department resource and the graph would look pretty similar. This is really just a way of showing how much farther fire department resources can be stretched in larger, more densely populated communities. You can see that in communities with one million or more residents there are more than 30,000 people for each pumper. In communities with 2,500 or fewer residents there are about 800 people per pumper.

As communities get larger, and especially as populations are more densely clustered, the number of people who can be protected by a single pumper truck goes up. The more people you have living closely together, the easier and cheaper it is to provide those people with emergency services because you have more pockets to dip into to pay for everything, and more people can be protected with the same amount of equipment.

This is the challenge that smaller communities face. With a small tax base to draw from they have difficulty paying for new equipment and apparatus, they typically don't have money to pay for training that isn't either delivered in-house or available for free, and they can't afford to pay career staff. To cope with this smaller communities tend to make due with older or used equipment and they use volunteers. The silver lining is that because small communities typically have a much lower call volume than large communities this model generally works fine as long as you have enough volunteers.

In a nutshell that is why volunteer recruitment and retention is so important, especially in smaller communities. If you lose your volunteers you lose your ability to provide emergency services protection without significantly increasing taxes in communities that don't have a large tax base to begin with.

The number of volunteer firefighters in the United States has gone down by about 100,000 since 1983. As you can see from the chart, a lot of that decrease happened between 2008 and 2011, but we've bounced back a bit in the years since. Overall there is a slight downward trend since the early 80s in the number of volunteer firefighters but the topline number is only part of the story.



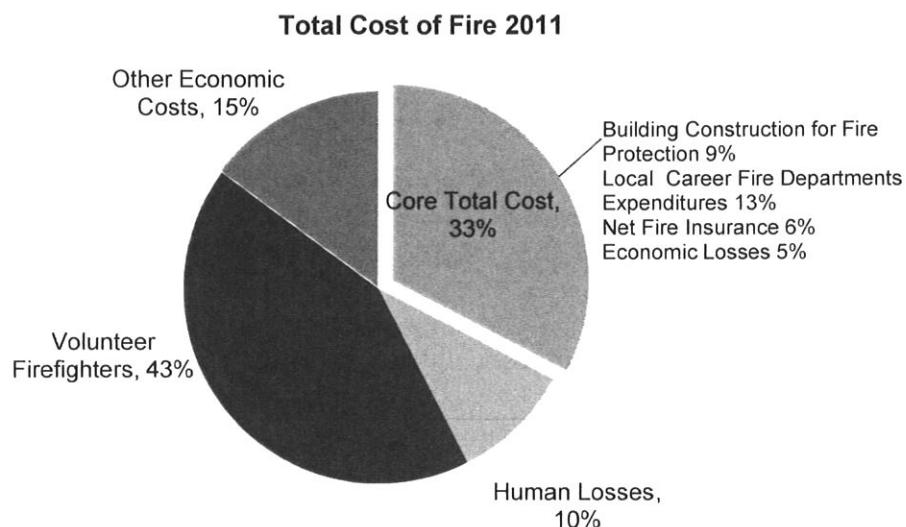
National Fire Protection Association



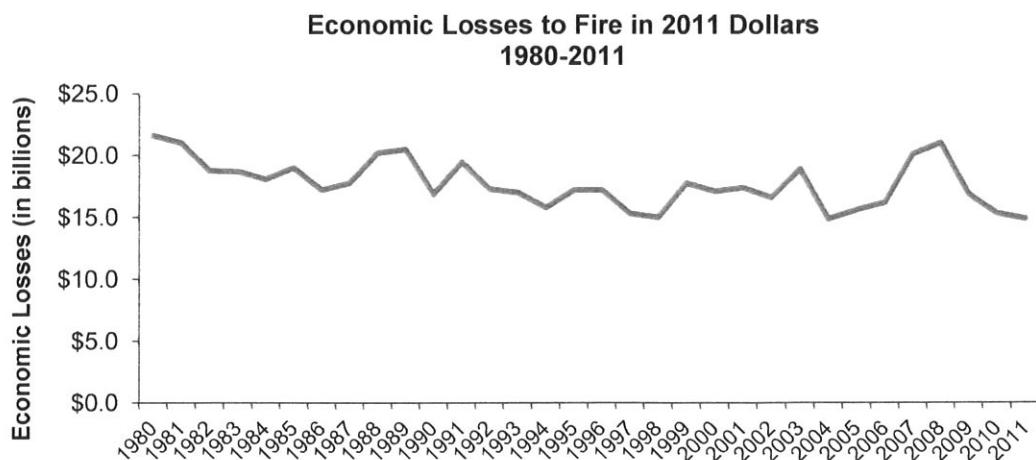
Fire Analysis & Research

The Total Cost of Fire in the U.S. 2011

In 2011, the total cost of fire was an estimated \$329 billion, or 2.1 percent of U.S. gross domestic product (GDP). The total cost of fire includes the losses that fire causes, such as human losses (e.g., lives lost, medical treatment of injuries, pain and suffering) and economic losses (e.g., property damage, business interruption); and the cost of provisions to prevent or mitigate the cost of fire, such as fire departments, insurance, and fire protection equipment and construction.



In 2011, economic losses to fire (direct and indirect, reported and unreported) totaled an estimated **\$14.9 billion**.



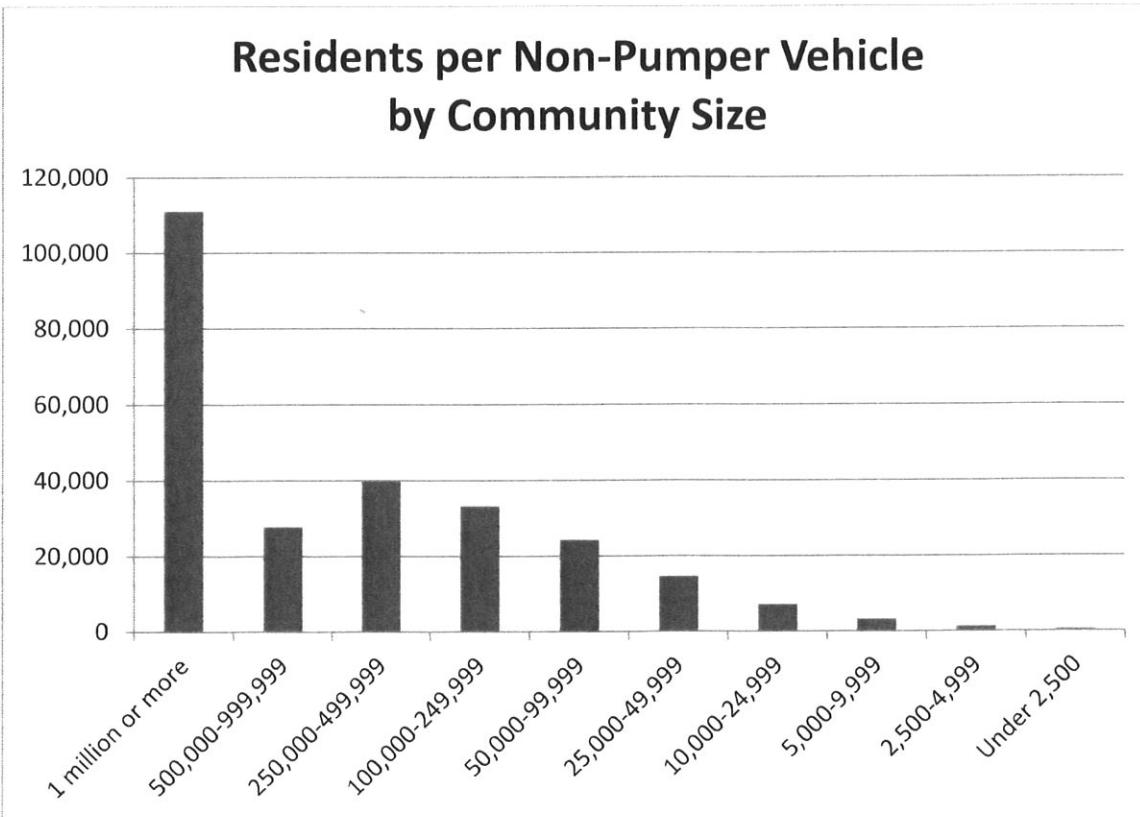
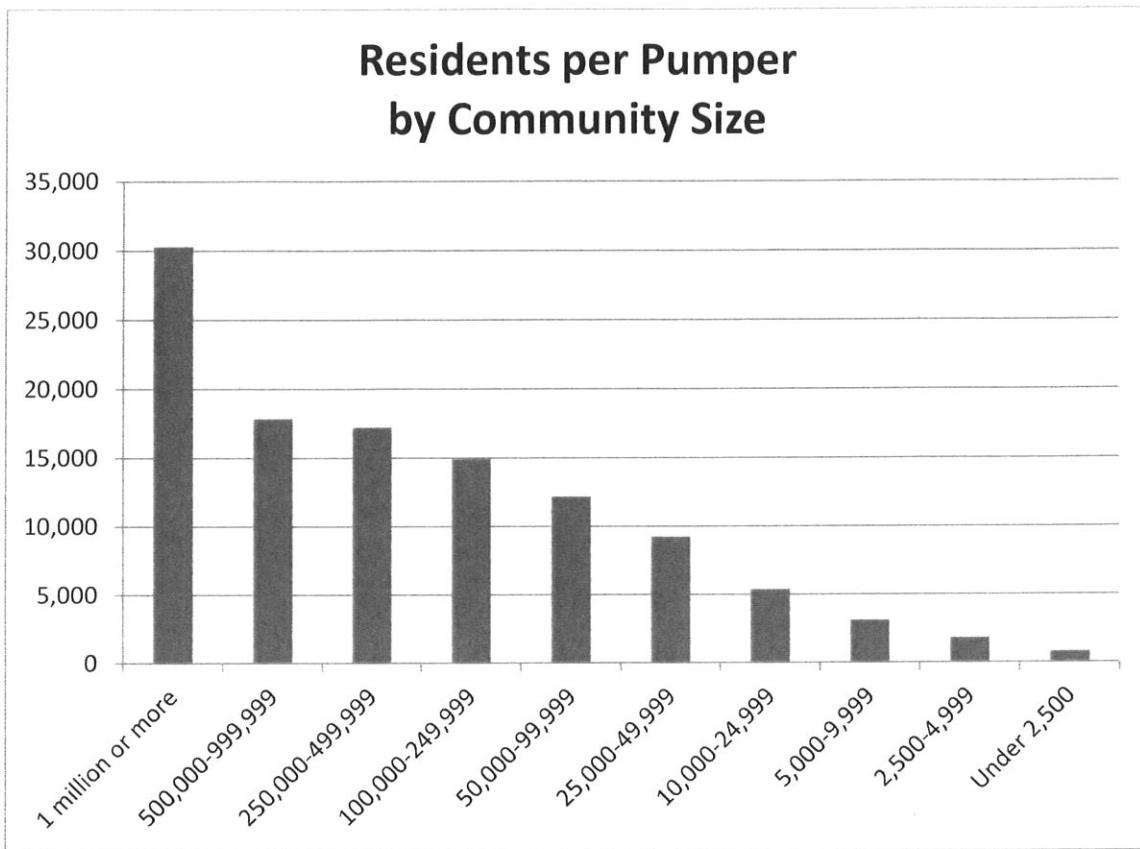
The year 2001 excludes the events of September 11.

Source: *The Total Cost of Fire in the U.S.* John R. Hall, Jr., March 2014

NFPA, 1 Batterymarch Park, Quincy, MA 02169, www.nfpa.org
Fire Analysis & Research Division, osds@nfpa.org

FACT: Fires in 2011 caused \$13.3 billion in reported or unreported direct property damage which was 89% of economic loss that year. The other 11% was indirect loss, such as business interruption.

Source: NFPA Survey of Fire Departments for U.S. Fire Experience (2014)



The real problem with volunteer shortages is not just that there are fewer firefighters but that the firefighters are much older, on average, than they used to be. This is especially true in communities with populations of 2,500 or fewer residents, which generally speaking do not have the resources to pay career staff or the call volume to necessitate career staffing.

You can see from the chart that between 1987 and 2014 the number of firefighters under the age of 40 serving the smallest communities is down by more than 100,000, while the number of firefighters over the age of 50 is up by almost 50,000. Obviously this is not sustainable, especially when you look at the trend since 2000 among firefighters in the age 30-39 and 40-49 cohort. There simply are not enough people coming through the ranks to replace all of those nearing retirement age.

Another issue is that as firefighters age many are only able to perform limited duties on the fire ground. NFPA did a national fire department needs assessment survey last year and while the report has yet to be published I can tell you they found that there are more than 100,000 firefighters being used in a limited duty capacity. These folks are doing everything from rehab to driving apparatus to the scene to assisting with communications and incident command on the fire ground. If we have 800,000 volunteer firefighters in the United States but 15 percent of them aren't able to perform interior attack on a fire or perform various other duties in the hot zone on the fire ground, our staffing capacity is substantially less than the topline number suggests.

So, staffing capacity is reduced and based on the demographic trends it looks like the situation is about to get worse. Why are so many departments struggling to attract new members?

Volunteer Recruitment

There are a number of headwinds facing volunteer fire departments, but most of it comes down to a lack of three important resources – a lack of time, a lack of people and a lack of money. Young people are increasingly leaving rural areas for work. Sometimes they move away, which means that they aren't around to volunteer. Even if they still live in a rural community, if they are commuting to work they aren't around for daytime, weekday responses and they have less availability in the evenings for training. We also have a lot more households in which all adults present are working, which makes arranging for childcare more difficult.

So there are fewer people with less time available in the communities that rely on volunteers the most. Colliding with this is the fact that training and certification requirements have gone up substantially in recent decades. Fire departments respond to a much wider range of incidents today than they did in the past, all of which requires additional training.

Another consequence of people and jobs leaving rural areas is that the tax base is shrinking, even as the cost of running a fire department has increased. Fire trucks and protective gear cost more because of upgrades. Departments need to have specialized equipment to respond to different types of incidents. Small departments have a variety of coping methods, including using older equipment longer, obtaining used equipment – especially vehicles – and doing more private fundraising.

Number of Volunteer Firefighters in the U.S.	
1983*	884,600
2008	827,150
2009	812,150
2010	768,150
2011	756,400
2012	783,300
2013	786,150
2014	788,250

Source: NFPA Survey of Fire Departments for U.S. Fire Experience (1983, 1987 and 2000-2014)

*Earliest year for which data is available

Age Range of Firefighters Protecting Communities with Populations of 2,500 or Less

These are significant challenges, but they do not have to be overwhelming. In order to keep up, a volunteer fire department needs to have community support and great leadership. The good news is that there are thousands of fire departments across the country that have the right kind of leadership and support in place to succeed. Many departments are doing innovative things to recruit and retain staff and provide outstanding service at a fraction of the cost of a career agency.

The issue is that there are some 26,000 all and mostly volunteer fire departments in the United States. Many serve communities that, as I discussed earlier, are losing young people and tax base to urban and suburban areas. How many of these communities are going to have political leadership willing to provide adequate financial support to the fire department? How many communities will have a fantastic leader with enough free time to run the department on a volunteer basis living in the response area? What you have in many of these departments are dedicated, talented folks who are doing the best that they can with not enough time, people or money. Their heart is in the right place and generally speaking they do a pretty darn good job with the limited resources available to them, but the challenges are growing and a lot of these departments simply need help.

To assist these agencies, in 2014 the NVFC received a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to develop the Make Me a Firefighter campaign: the first national volunteer firefighter recruitment campaign. What we wanted to do was develop resources that would be simple for local fire departments to use to boost their own recruitment efforts. The campaign launched last December, but before we started developing it we did market research to learn more about how departments recruit staff now and what prospective recruits are looking for so that we could calibrate our materials accordingly.

One thing that we learned is that recruitment is a process. Our research revealed that there are 5 phases of recruitment: interest, invite, sampling, commitment and training. When we surveyed potential recruits (aka the general public) we found that about 30 percent of men and 27 percent of women were either definitely or possibly interested in becoming a volunteer firefighter. Since women only represent about ten percent of volunteer firefighters in the United States, the fact that they are only slightly less interested in serving than men suggests that there is significant potential for growth by targeting recruitment messages at women.

Interest levels were highest among young adults, and were also slightly higher among racial minorities than among white respondents. One challenge that fire departments face in attracting all of these demographic groups – women, young people and racial minorities – is that you often need to go outside of existing social networks to reach them. Existing social networks – family and friends – are historically how most volunteer fire departments have recruited new personnel.

Another thing that we learned is that most people join the volunteer fire service for the same reasons. They want to have a sense of accomplishment and belonging, they want to find a way to help other people, and they want a personal invitation. This last piece is extremely important. The feedback we got from people was loud and clear that sometimes all that is standing in between an interested individual and their joining up is a personal invitation – a feeling of being personally called to serve.

Something else that we discovered was that there is a real disconnect between departments needing volunteers and people being aware that they are needed. In some cases people didn't even know that their fire department was staffed by volunteers. In other cases people didn't realize that the department needed volunteers. In other cases people didn't see themselves as a fit for the department, or weren't sure what volunteer firefighters even do. The NVFC's Make Me a Firefighter campaign includes tools that make it easy for departments to build awareness about needs and opportunities, and make it easy for interested individuals to connect with those opportunities.

One thing that we emphasize in the campaign and encourage our members to emphasize in their own recruitment efforts is diversity. Diversity is a buzzword that a lot of people like to throw around, and depending on the setting it can mean a lot of different things. For the volunteer fire service it means maximizing the human resources that are available to you.

A volunteer fire department is by definition community-based. The human resources at your disposal are the people living in or near your response area. This can be a real problem, particularly as rural populations age and shrink. We created tools to help departments with outreach to younger, female and minority populations in the Make Me a Firefighter campaign because what we discovered was that these groups were underrepresented in the membership ranks of volunteer fire departments nationally.

The point here isn't simply that you need more racial minorities, women or young people in your fire department. The point is that if there are demographic groups in your community who are not represented in your department, your department is missing out. Maybe you have a good mix of men and women in the department but most of them are older: then you need to target young people. Maybe you have a good mix of older volunteers and millennials but they are all men: then you need to target women. The point is not just that diversity for the sake of diversity is important, but rather that departments need to maximize the human resources potential based on who lives in the community.

Most people don't just walk into a fire department and say "Sign me up!" Another aspect of the Make Me a Firefighter campaign is giving departments strategies for how to draw people in. The more personal the invitation, the better, but a good start is an invitation to an event — whether a family and friends event at the firehouse, a casual meet and greet with other volunteers, or a sampling event. The idea is to tap into the prospective recruit's desire for a sense of personal accomplishment and pride, the prospect of belonging among a team of people who would have their back. Making them feel called to serve is key.

Once you've identified folks who are interested and invited them in, how do you motivate them to actually complete an application? What we found was that sometimes all it takes is giving them an opportunity to see how they fit in with the department. Our research revealed that some of the key barriers to moving people from being interested to actually applying are fears that they don't have what it takes -- the skills, the physique, uncertainties about what all is involved with being a volunteer firefighter, what would be expected of them, or how the application process works.

Our campaign encourages departments to take the guesswork out for prospective recruits by giving them a taste of what the department does and how the team dynamic works. Sharing personal stories

about concerns that department members had when they were in the recruit phase, and how they overcame them.

We heard loud and clear that prospective recruits need follow-up to retain their interest, they need to be assured that you're still interested in them. Individuals we interviewed mentioned infrequent recruitment as a barrier to joining -- that they got the impression that they could either "join or don't join" and that it didn't matter that much to the department.

Folks want to feel like they are making a difference. Joining the department, going through the training, and becoming a firefighter is a really big deal to them, and they aren't always completely sure what they are getting into. The department needs to really make them feel valued so that they push through in those moments where maybe they start to have doubts or where it feels overwhelming.

So staying in touch with and following up with prospective recruits, especially when there are long lapses in time between recruitment activities, is essential. This can be challenging to manage and track, and the Make Me a Firefighter Campaign makes that easier by using SalesForce software so that the department can log all interactions with prospective recruits to make sure that they don't go too long between contacts.

Training can be a serious barrier to keeping new recruits. Its important to set expectations so volunteers understand what is required of them. Its also important to make training events fun and to be innovative in order to combat boredom. Here's what we learned in our research:

- What we heard in interviews is that it helps with retention if departments make training fun, interesting and flexible. While this isn't easy, and departments may feel that shouldn't be part of the focus when the business of being a firefighter is so serious, the reality in the volunteer service is that there are many things competing for people's time and interest.
- Breaking up training in a way that allows people who are juggling other responsibilities to make it work with their schedule is one successful approach. Also, offering fun breaks in the midst of less interesting (but essential) training modules.
- Treating new recruits well from the minute they enter the door and throughout training, is a factor in retaining them. This is not boot camp or pledging a social club. New recruits should not have to earn their stripes before they are treated with respect. The ultimate goal is keeping volunteers committed to the department, especially if trying to attract a more diverse set of volunteers.

Volunteer Retention

That is a lot of information on recruitment, which again, is the focus of the NVFC's Make Me a Firefighter campaign. I also want to talk a little bit about retention. With both retention and recruitment, a lot of the issues are the same. Showing appreciation for people, making them feel part of a group, being responsive to their concerns, etc.

Retention is probably even more important than recruitment. If you are going to put the time and energy into recruiting people, training them and equipping them you want them to stay with the department as long as possible. On average a volunteer firefighter donates services worth approximately \$18,000 annually to the department that he or she serves, and it costs approximately \$8,000 to train and equip a new recruit. Departments that have too much turnover among their volunteer staff will waste a lot of good time and money trying to replace personnel.

The number one PREVENTABLE reason that people give for leaving a department essentially boils down to leadership. People don't feel valued. They feel like the demands are too high. They don't get along with the other firefighters. They don't feel like they are being listened to. They aren't getting what they want out of the experience. Obviously sometimes things just don't work out and people have to go their separate ways, but in departments with great leadership these sorts of issues crop up far less.

One of the tools that many departments use to bolster retention efforts is providing benefits. These come in many forms, from non-monetary – awards banquets, donated goods and services from the community, fire department clothing – to stipends, per-call payments and retirement plans. The most important thing to keep in mind with benefits is that they are primarily a way of demonstrating that the services donated by the volunteer are appreciated.

The other thing I'd say about benefits is that volunteers generally do not view them as compensation, but rather as a form of reimbursement. Being a volunteer firefighter or EMT costs money. Most volunteers respond to calls in their personal vehicles and do not get reimbursed for gas or wear and tear. They have to pay for the boots they wear to training and the clothing they wear under their turnouts. If they miss work for a department activity they may have to take vacation time or lose pay. There are all sorts of things that add up over time and, combined with all of the training and response activity that is required, can lead people to quit volunteering. Benefits are a way to make volunteers whole so that they don't feel like they are being taken advantage of or that they can't afford to continue volunteering.

In closing I'd like to take a few minutes to provide my thoughts on some of the options that this committee is considering to help communities recruit and retain volunteer firefighters:

LOSAP

- Increase the annual matching amount paid by the state for each service award.

This would certainly help those departments that are already participating, and might encourage more departments to participate. One thing to keep in mind is that the smaller the agency the less money they are going to have at their disposal to be able to participate. Smaller agencies, particularly in super-rural areas typically have the most difficulty with recruitment and retention because of population loss and aging. Reducing or waiving the local matching requirement for super-rural agencies would be a way to benefit more departments.

- Reduce the age or years of service required for vesting in the service award program. For example, permit vesting at a younger age, such as 50 or 55, for a volunteer who has served for a minimum number of years, such as 15 or more years.

I'm not sure that this would help with R&R directly but it would probably make sense. 20 years is a long time to serve as a volunteer firefighter. People move, get hurt, change jobs, etc. Lowering it to 15 years might be more realistic and fair.

Employment Flexibility

- Expand the protected absences from work to include responding to a declared state of emergency.

You probably should consider making sure that the person has been formally dispatched or requested. Otherwise this makes sense. This probably has more of an impact on availability for responses to declared state emergencies than R&R.

- Require employers to allow an employee to have a planned unpaid absence to obtain training or continuing education as a volunteer firefighter or EMS personnel. A maximum number of hours could be specified, such as 80 hours per calendar year.

I'm sure that there are people who would take advantage of this. Getting employers to cooperate could be a challenge, particularly if volunteers don't know that the protection exists or how to take advantage of it. Outreach and education to employers, departments and volunteers would be important.

- Create a tax credit for employers who permit volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel to leave work to respond to an emergency call.

This would be helpful for folks who work in or near their fire department's response area. Increasingly, however, folks are commuting longer distances to and from work. When someone works in the community where they are a volunteer firefighter employers are typically more willing to let them leave to respond, since the volunteer service benefits the employer, even if indirectly.

Training Costs

I will defer to others regarding the specific merits of each of these proposals, but generally speaking I will say that volunteer emergency responders should not have to pay for their own training and they should be able to access training and certification services without having to travel a long distance. I would also point out while most firefighters are volunteers, most EMTs are career – at least nationwide. Consequently, whereas the laws and services specific to the fire service will typically account for the needs of the volunteers, when it comes to EMTs that is not necessarily the case. My observation is that the EMS industry often assumes that someone is a career EMT and does not accommodate for folks who are practicing EMS on a strictly volunteer basis. I'm not commenting specifically on Wisconsin but making a general observation. The changes being proposed here do seem like they would very likely help volunteer EMS.

I would also point out that the volunteer fire service and volunteer EMS would benefit from having access to more nonoperational training. Courses on how to manage an emergency services agency, how to be a great leader, how to balance budgets and deal with procurement, how to manage people, how to recruit and retain personnel, etc. There are all important aspects of being the chief of a fire or EMS department that are sometimes overlooked.

Wisconsin Retirement System (WRS) Participation

- The committee has been presented with the option of authorizing participating local employers to make contributions to the WRS on behalf of volunteer firefighters and EMTs.

From an R&R perspective I think that the program Wisconsin has for matching local LOSAP contributions is excellent. LOSAP is a phenomenal tool for long-term retention – getting people who are in the department for a few years to stay for a few decades. Enrolling folks in the employee retirement system would probably have the same sort of impact, with the incentive value depending largely on how large the benefit amount is and how it is structured. If some jurisdictions are more likely to provide a retirement benefit if they have this option then I think it is a good idea.

Other Options for Increasing Volunteer Recruitment and Retention

- Present a “years of service” citation award from the State to volunteer, or all, firefighters and EMTs who have served a certain number of years.

This sort of recognition is generally very well received in the volunteer fire service. This would be a fantastic and relatively inexpensive way to recognize long-serving volunteers.

- Create a charitable tax credit for hours served by volunteer firefighters or EMS personnel and for course hours in training or continuing education. The credit could be specified as a fixed dollar amount, such as \$1,000, or be based upon the number of hours volunteered up to a certain number of hours per year at an imputed hourly rate, such as 300 hours of qualified service at \$20 per hour.

Providing nominal compensation to volunteers is a great way to not only demonstrate appreciation for their service but also to help offset the various nickel and dime costs that they incur by serving. The NVFC supports legislation that would create the exact same tax credits but in the federal tax code. One of the benefits of doing something like this is that it benefits all volunteers, not just those in departments that can afford to provide benefits themselves.

- Create a charitable tax credit for costs associated with volunteer duties. The credit could be limited to a certain dollar amount, such as \$400. Costs could include:
 - o Out-of-pocket unreimbursed gear and equipment purchases;
 - o Out-of-pocket unreimbursed mileage to obtain training and continuing education; or
 - o Unreimbursed books and supplies purchased for training or continuing education.

This is a fantastic idea. Delaware does something similar.

- Allow active volunteer firefighters or EMS personnel to exempt one vehicle from the annual vehicle registration fee.

Great idea. Many states do something like this. I've heard of states reducing fees for hunting licenses for volunteers as well.

- Create an annual EMS commemoration day (compare, for example, Fire Prevention Week, s. 995.225, Stats.) or other recognition event for volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel.

These sorts of ceremonial days are nice if people know about them. If there are some activities planned to go along with the day then I think it is a lot more impactful.

- Direct the Department of Safety and Professional Services (DSPS) and DHS to create initiatives to promote volunteering with fire departments and EMS providers, including programs for high school students.
- Direct DHS to create a listserv that would provide a resource group for fire chiefs and EMS directors regarding leadership, regional cooperation, and other management issues for EMS providers.

This would be extremely helpful. The biggest challenge that many volunteer fire and EMS agencies have with recruitment is that people don't know that their local department is looking for volunteers.

- Specify that a fire department or EMS provider may not prohibit its employees from volunteering as a firefighter or EMT with a volunteer fire department or EMS provider, and specify that this topic is a prohibited subject of bargaining in a collective bargaining agreement.

The State of Michigan passed this law in 2014, I believe. Prohibiting people from volunteering during off-duty hours can be a significant drag on retention. Most two-hatters, as we refer to them, get their start as volunteers before joining the career service. So what you're really talking about from the perspective of the volunteer fire department is recruiting, training and equipping someone and then losing them after they get a job. Career firefighters obviously are very well trained and have excellent experience, but more to the point, two-hatters tend to be very dedicated firefighters who love the job – exactly the sort of people volunteer fire departments need.

- Specify that volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel are eligible for BadgerCare Plus without having to meet the Medical Assistance program's financial eligibility requirements.

This would be tremendous. It would help with recruitment and retention but it would also be a huge boost for health and safety. A lot of volunteer firefighters don't have insurance or even a personal doctor. The NVFC recommends that all firefighters have an annual physical exam, but we know that many don't and very few volunteer fire departments have the resources to pay for them. Giving volunteers access to health insurance would be a terrific move on multiple public policy fronts.

Regional Organizations and Districts

- The committee has been presented with the option to authorize the creation of fire and EMS districts as special purpose districts under state law, which serve as distinct local units of

government, as bodies corporate and politic, if adopted by resolution of any two or more municipalities.

There are a number of states that have fire districts. Oregon, Arizona and New York that I know of have statewide membership associations representing their fire districts. Regionalization is a great way to try to take advantage of economies of scale, which as I mentioned earlier is a challenge in sparsely populated areas. One of the problems in very rural areas related to regionalization is that the fire departments are community-based. The members of the fire department live in the community and the community has a lot of pride and sense of ownership over the fire department. Taking the fire department out of the community can be challenging politically, since folks don't want to see their department close or have the nearest fire station be in another community 15 or 20 minutes (or more) away. Also, a lot of volunteers won't want to volunteer if the department that they served closes. None of this is to say that regionalization is a bad thing but these are definitely factors to consider.

Primary Service Areas

Service Credentialing

EMS Staffing Requirements

I will defer to others on the merits of these proposals, but I will say that generally speaking I believe there is a lot of scope to add value in the EMS world by giving local departments more flexibility in how they deliver services. Different communities have different needs and more importantly different resource levels. On the fire side local communities have a lot of flexibility regarding how to organize service delivery compared to on the EMS side. I think that small, rural EMS agencies in particular sometimes struggle to keep up with all of the rules and regulations that they are forced to follow. That doesn't mean that the rules and regulations are bad or should be thrown out the window, but I do think that it is a good idea to think about how EMS agencies can be given more flexibility in order to improve patient care and/or reduce the cost of providing that care.