

2019's Biggest Challenge: We Need More Career And Volunteer Firefighters

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I gave a lot of thought to identifying the biggest challenge facing the American fire service in 2019. Many things came to mind: funding; fire prevention - if every building was sprinklered and all had working smoke alarms, it would solve a lot of other problems; political influences; initial, regular and ongoing training, and a bunch more.

But the one constant that kept popping up is the people issue. Staffing. This obviously isn't the first time you've heard that. Normally, when we talk about staffing, we talk about the number

of firefighters on the apparatus. That is not exactly what I'm talking about. What I mean is, in 2019, we better figure out where our next group of recruits is coming from.

Measurable Drop In Applicants

“ If one fire department is paying more than another, members jump ship

On the career side, numerous areas are reporting a measurable drop in applicants—in other words, they need people who *want* to be firefighters and medics. In some areas, it's a bidding war. If one fire department is paying more than another, members jump ship. And who can blame them? They have families to take care of.

But when the dust clears, there are still far fewer people interested in this job than we need.

Some theories are that the new generation:

- ┌ Doesn't like helping people
- ┌ Are self-focused
- ┌ Aren't into doing physical things
- ┌ Are lazy
- ┌ Can make the same money without shift work

┌ Can make the same money without risk

None of these theories gets us far in addressing the problem.

Big Picture Focus

On the volunteer side, all you have to do is listen to a fire radio nearly anywhere in the U.S. (and Canada) and you will hear volunteer fire departments toning out... toning out... and toning out—with little response when members are responding from home or work. It, too, is a measurable problem.

There are volunteer departments with little funding and others with plenty of funding. Regardless, there seems to be little “big picture” focus on solving the problem based upon what’s best for the people having the fire. Some say to simply hire career firefighters. Is it that simple? What are the pros? And are there any cons? There certainly are.

Trained Interior Firefighters

“ Some departments solve the problem by having their volunteers on duty, in quarters, ready to roll

The old model of volunteers responding from home or work doesn’t work very well when you consider the proven fire spread in 2019 vs. fire spread even just 20 years ago. Some

departments solve the problem by having their volunteers on duty, in quarters, ready to roll.

That may be the least expensive option depending upon the local model. Some hire part-time firefighters. Some unfairly and regularly rely on mutual aid. Some have a fair and balanced mutual aid system. Some have their heads in the sand.

The goal of any fire department is to deliver staffed, trained interior firefighters just a few minutes after someone dials 9-1-1. If we don't have people knocking on the fire station doors to become career firefighters or to volunteer, that goal is in jeopardy.

I simply can't see a bigger, more immediate challenge for 2019 than the "people" issue.

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