

Recruiting And Retaining Volunteers Is A Top Priority In Fire Service

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Maintaining adequate staffing is a key challenge facing many volunteer fire departments. While not a new issue, increasing population and call volumes along with the expanded services many volunteer departments now provide have made recruiting and retaining volunteers a top priority in the fire service.

The federal government supports volunteer recruitment and retention through the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program, administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). SAFER has provided more than \$300 million in grants

to help fire departments recruit and retain volunteers from FY 2010-2017 and will distribute approximately \$42 million in the FY 2018 grant cycle, expected to open in the near future.

Annual Contribution Cap

“ Give volunteer emergency responders increased access to mortgage and other housing assistance programs through the U.S. Department of Agriculture

The National Volunteer Fire Council's (NVFC) legislative agenda for 2019 is heavily focused on recruitment and retention. In addition to advocating for funding for SAFER, we will be asking Congress to:

- pass legislation exempting nominal benefits that volunteers receive as a reward for their service from federal income and withholding taxes
- clarify the tax status of length of service award program (LOSAP) to make plans easier to administer (the NVFC was successful last year in doubling the annual contribution cap on LOSAP from \$3,000 to \$6,000)
- make volunteer emergency responders eligible for the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program through the U.S. Department of Education, which forgives

the student loan debt of public servants who have served for at least 10 years

give volunteer emergency responders increased access to mortgage and other housing assistance programs through the U.S. Department of Agriculture

Free Department Portal

In addition, the NVFC recently received a SAFER grant to continue its work with the Make Me A Firefighter campaign. Launched in 2014, this is the first national volunteer recruitment campaign of its kind. Fire and emergency service agencies can use the free department portal to find resources and tools to help them with recruitment as well as post their volunteer opportunities in a national database.

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The campaign also works to raise public awareness of the need for volunteers and connects potential recruits with their local fire department through the web site. With the new grant, additional focus will be given to retention of volunteers. Department composition should reflect the community’s demographics, and yet many groups, such as millennials, women, and minorities, are drastically underrepresented in the fire service.

Diversify Their Ranks

These target groups present significant areas of opportunity for fire department recruiters. As part of the Make Me A Firefighter campaign, the NVFC is working to help departments diversify their ranks and reach these key audiences.

Volunteers make up 70% of the U.S. fire service, and most small, rural communities depend entirely on volunteers to respond to emergencies of all kinds. Recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters, EMS providers, and support members is critical to ensure adequate protection of our residents. The NVFC will continue to provide advocacy and resources to help local departments in their efforts.

Author Profile



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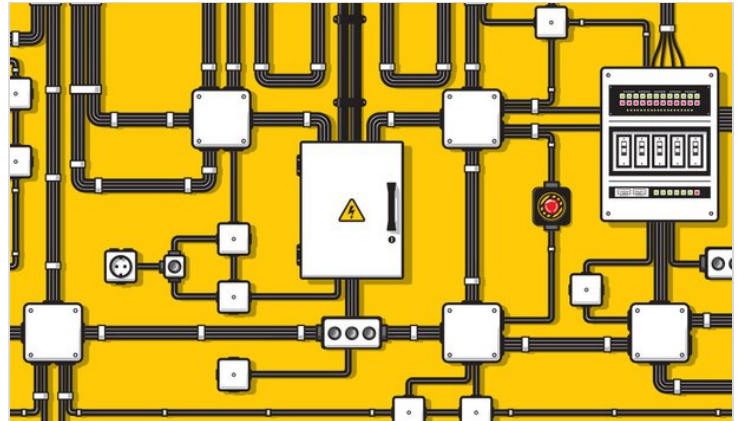
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