



White Paper: Reduction of Call Firefighters in Massachusetts Fire District 7



**Chief Stephen M. Coleman Jr., MPA, CFO
Auburn Fire Rescue Department
47 Auburn St.
Auburn, MA 01501
Phone: 508-832-7800
E-mail: scoleman@town.auburn.ma.us
Website: auburnmassfire.org**

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Introduction

It has been well documented that over the past 30 years the fire service has seen a reduction in the amount of people willing to serve as call and volunteer firefighters. This is not a localized problem just seen here in Massachusetts Fire District 7, but the state and even the country as a whole. This is a problem that is facing the nation's fire service. Many reasons have been stated as to why there is such a reduction in the willingness of people to serve in these positions. This white paper will relay the opinions on this topic of twenty-four fire chiefs that lead combination fire departments in Massachusetts Fire District 7 located in Southern Worcester County.

Problem

In a June 29, 2017 article written by Madeline Bodine for Gov.tech.com titled "Volunteer Fire Departments Are Struggling to Retain Firefighters, While 911 Calls Are Surging" she looked at the West Barnstable Massachusetts Fire Department and their struggle to maintain qualified call firefighters. She writes *"Every year an average of 10 volunteer firefighters quit the West Barnstable, Mass., Fire Department, about 27 percent of the department's total. Fire Chief Joseph Maruca never finds out why half of those department members leave, but does know that about one-third of his crew leaves for career firefighting positions at larger, nearby fire departments, typically after serving in West Barnstable fewer than four years."* (Bodine 2017)

As Ms. Bodine points out in the article the nationwide tally of the calls departments respond to each year has tripled in the last 30 years, according to NFPA. With a rise in call volume it has become harder and harder for call firefighters to put in the time commitment needed to be an active member of the department, especially in busier systems. Thirty years ago most of our call firefighters worked in town for local businesses that allowed them to leave for emergencies, those days have long gone. Most of our call firefighter's work out of town and in some cases commute long distances to get to work. Even those that may still work in town the business model has changed and time is money. Larger corporations or businesses do not allow members to leave work to answer calls during the day. In addition many of our members are working second jobs and are part of a two income family where both spouses work, and throw in activities for children leaves little time for extracurricular activities.

Background

Massachusetts Fire District 7 serves 25 cities and towns in southern Worcester County. Of those cities and towns all but one, the City of Worcester utilizes call firefighters in their departments. A survey was conducted with those 24 communities by asking them a series of questions about the status of the call firefighters in their departments. Those questions were;

How many call firefighters did you employ 20 years ago?

How many call firefighters did you employ 10 years ago?

How many call firefighters do you employ today?

Have you seen a decrease in the amount of qualified call firefighter applicants in the past 10 years?

Have you seen a decrease in the call back of on call members when they are toned out?

In your opinion, why is there a decrease in the amount of qualified call firefighter candidates?

What is the main reason the call firefighters from your department are leaving?

What do you think is the solution to increase recruitment and ultimately retention?

Results

Between 1997 and 2007 departments surveyed employed a wide number of call firefighters. Those numbers ranged between 18 and 80 call firefighters. During that time 3 departments within the district saw a 50% reduction in the number of on call firefighters, 8 departments saw between a 25 – 33% reduction while 13 departments saw no significant changes in their call firefighter staffing.

A more significant reduction was seen between 2007 and current day with 11 departments seeing a 50% or greater decrease in their call firefighter staffing. 4 departments saw a reduction between 25 – 33% and 9 departments saw no significant changes in their call firefighter staffing.

One thing that needs to be considered when looking at the data of call firefighter staffing is that even though the total number of call firefighters in some departments may have remained steady over a twenty year period, how many members have come and gone from the department in that time period? Take the Town of Spencer for example. Although they reported employing 47 call firefighters in 1997 and employing 42 today, they have seen 72 call firefighters come and go in that 20 year period. The majority of call firefighters that quit the department left with less than 5 years' experience. That is a tremendous amount of money, time and energy spent in training new members for a net loss of five members in 20 years.

The large majority of departments (20) reported a decrease in the amount of qualified call firefighter applicants in the past 10 years. While 3 report no change and 1 Chief abstained due to a lack of data within the department.

Many Chiefs reported a decrease in the call back of on call members when they are toned out. 19 departments confirmed the decrease while 4 reported no decrease and 1 Chief abstained due to a lack of data within the department.

The Chiefs in the district were asked to give their opinions on why there is a decrease in the amount of qualified call firefighter candidates applying to departments. There were a wide range of answers. The most popular answers are noted. (They are ranked in order)

- Increased training requirements
- Busy home life

- Overall reduction in general volunteerism
- Changing community dynamic
- Out of town employment
- Low pay
- Loss of wages from full time job
- Unable to pass background check
- Lack of commitment
- Increased health risks concerning firefighting

The Chiefs were also asked to report the main reason their call firefighters are leaving their departments? Again there were a wide range of answers. The most popular are noted. (They are ranked in order)

- Time commitment
- Increased training requirements
- Reduced availability
- Full time job commitments
- Moved out of town
- Retirement
- Obtained fulltime firefighting job
- Age / physical ability
- Working out of town (travel)
- Transition to combination department

One chief from a smaller community reported that many members have left the department because of low call volume. The chief reported that many people they have lost expressed the feeling that they were wasting their time at trainings, meetings, fund raising, etc. for very few calls to keep them interested. They reported that they felt like they were training for calls that never happen. This is clearly a challenge for departments that have low call volume annually but it also may speak to how we are promoting the fire department during our recruitment efforts. Are we trying to appeal to potential candidates by showing action shots of things that have never occurred in the community or may occur once in a career? Departments may want to consider the promotional material they are using during their recruitment campaigns so more realistic expectations of the job are set so we do not see as much disappointment when the department is not living up to the action packed opportunities that were advertised.

The last question asked of the chiefs in the survey was what they thought was the solution to increase recruitment and ultimately retention of call firefighters. The complete list is noted. (They are ranked in order)

- Better pay
- I don't know
- Regional departments
- Employee benefits
- Flexibility with job requirements

- Social media advertising
- Tax breaks
- More community support for equipment
- Drop certification requirements
- Drop requirements for Physical Ability Testing (PAT) and medical physicals
- More participation in town events
- More responsibility for call firefighters
- Better support at home
- Leadership

It should be noted that the two Chief's that suggested dropping the certification requirements and the requirements for Physical Ability Testing (PAT) and medical physicals stated that they didn't believe that was the right thing to do, simply that it could be a solution to increase recruitment and ultimately retention of call firefighters.

Solution

As Madeline Bodine points out in her article, "across the country, small, rural fire departments like West Barnstable's are struggling to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters. But even where the number of volunteer firefighters is holding steady, the number of calls is exploding. The nationwide tally of the calls departments respond to each year has tripled in the last 30 years, according to NFPA. These numbers influence a community's ability to deal with emergencies, both large and small." (Bodine 2017)

That is also the case here in District 7. Departments across the district report an increase in their annual call volume making the time commitment for call firefighters greater than recent years. It is also worth noting that the recruitment issues for firefighters in Massachusetts may not be strictly a call firefighter issue. The state has seen a decrease in the amount of candidates applying for full time firefighting jobs through the Civil Service system. From 2006 to 2016 the state saw a reduction in candidates by 2,420, a 28% drop off. In 2006 there were 8,667 candidates that applied to take the firefighting exam with just 6,247 signing up in 2016. The numbers represent those that applied and paid the examination fee, not those that passed and ended up on the list meaning there were less than the 6,247 candidates to choose from state wide. This may continue to be a trend as more millennials enter the workforce. In a 2015 article written by Susan Adams for Forbes.com she outlined the 25 most promising jobs for millennials. Not only was firefighting not on the list, no jobs in public government even existed on the list. As more millennials seek jobs in computer science, biotech and the medical field it may be another sign that those willing to work in public government is declining.

Conclusion

Of the 24 departments participating in the survey the large majority have seen a decrease in the number of call firefighters serving their department in the past 20 years. Even those whose numbers have held fairly steady report large turnover in those years that required recruitment and training of new members to maintain their call firefighter staffing. Several factors were identified in the study which included a changing community dynamic as volunteerism continues to decline

and the need for families to have dual incomes. In addition the demands of the fire service continue to rise with increased training requirements, call volume and expectations for more diverse services such as Haz Mat response, Emergency Medical Services and Technical Rescue which will continue to put a strain on our current members and those wanting to serve the community as call firefighters. Furthermore, increased family responsibilities and commitments of a member's full time job will continue to put a strain on their abilities to serve. Another component that cannot be overlooked is the increased health risks to firefighters. According to the Center for Disease Control and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health firefighters face higher risks of certain types of cancers than the general U.S. population. In addition "the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance estimates about 30 percent of the nation's 1.3 million career and volunteer firefighters suffer from PTSD, with 132 suicides by active and former U.S. firefighters and paramedics reported last year." (Spencer, 2016) As this information becomes more common knowledge through media and other studies this may be another contributing factor in the decline of call firefighters as there may be safer volunteer opportunities in a community that will not affect their overall health and safety.

Updated Data, July 2022

In October 2017 a White Paper Report was published collecting data from 24 communities within Massachusetts Fire District 7 that employ call firefighters. It has been five years since that report was published. We wanted to go back and take a look at how those departments were doing today by reviewing a few of the data points that were collected in 2017.

As mentioned in the introduction of the white paper the reduction of call firefighters has been well documented. This is not a localized problem just seen here in Massachusetts Fire District 7, but the state and even the country as a whole. Over the past five years it has become more obvious the problem is not exclusive of call firefighters. In MA, we have seen a significant reduction in the number of career firefighter candidates seeking full time employment through the Massachusetts Civil Service system. The system saw an all-time high in 1996 with approximately 13,000 people taking the entrance examination. To an all time low in 2021 with just approximately 2,000 people testing. There are many reasons people are citing for the severe reduction of candidates seeking to become full time firefighters through the civil service system. Although we are not going to discuss those in detail in this update, some of those reasons are generational differences, lack of support for public employees, higher pay and benefits in the private sector, just to name a few. Departments who are not part of the civil service system also report a significant lack of qualified candidates applying for full time firefighter positions. Many Chiefs state the people they wind up hiring are full time members of other departments. Which is a sign we are recycling people who are currently in the profession and not attracting new candidates. What does not seem to fare well for the future of call firefighters is if we have seen such a major reduction of people seeking the job full time as a career, who will we attract to do it on a part time or on call basis?

We revisited some of the questions asked in the original report. They were;

How many call firefighters do you employ today?

Have you seen a decrease in the amount of qualified call firefighter applicants in the past 5 years?

Have you seen a decrease in the call back of on call members when they are toned out in the past 5 years?

Has your opinion changed on why there has been a decrease in the amount of qualified call firefighter candidates?

What is the main reason the call firefighters from your department have left in the past 5 years?

What do you think is the solution to increase recruitment and ultimately retention of call firefighters?

Results

How many call firefighters do you employ today? In order to get a more global look at the district we looked at a ten-year period from 2012 to 2022 to evaluate the number of call firefighters in District 7. In 2012 the district had 729 call firefighters employed between the twenty-four departments compared to 500 in 2022. A reduction of 229 call firefighters.

Only two departments reported an increase in the number of call firefighters they have today versus 2012. Of those two departments one grew by one member and the other grew by four members. The remaining twenty-two departments saw reductions in the total number of call firefighters. Five departments saw at least a 50% reduction and two departments reported complete elimination of their call departments.

Have you seen a decrease in the amount of qualified call firefighter applicants in the past 5 years? Twenty-three departments reported a decrease in the number of qualified applicants. One department reported no decrease.

Have you seen a decrease in the call back of on call members when they are toned out in the past 5 years? Twenty-one departments reported a decrease in call back. Three departments reported no decrease.

Has your opinion changed on why there has been a decrease in the amount of qualified call firefighter candidates? Twenty-four Chiefs reported their opinion has not changed as to the reason for a decrease in the amount of qualified call firefighter candidates.

What is the main reason the call firefighters from your department have left in the past 5 years? The Chiefs cited these reasons for call firefighters leaving the department in the past five years.

- Time constraints in their personal lives
- Unable to commit
- Busy family life
- Moved out of town
- No full-time opportunities within the department
- Retirement
- Lack of use of call members due to increasing full time staff
- Other job commitments for full and part time employment
- Increased training requirements
- Lost interest

What do you think is the solution to increase recruitment and ultimately retention of call firefighters? The Chiefs cited these ideas as possible solutions to recruiting and retaining call firefighters.

- Better pay
- Low impact training
- Flexible training schedules
- Regionalization
- High school, college and church recruitment programs
- Pensions
- Tuition assistance/reimbursement
- Tax incentives
- Junior firefighter programs
- Allow them to be more involved in day-to-day activities such as IT support, SOP review, fire prevention programs, etc.
- Waiving requirements for physicals, PAT, training and certification until they have demonstrated interest and a commitment to long term employment
- Better working conditions

Conclusion

Of the 24 departments that participated in the survey update the large majority have continued to see a decrease in the number of call firefighters serving their department in the past five years. With two departments reporting complete elimination of call firefighters, now bringing the number of departments in the district who are completely career from one to three.

The factors for the reduction of call firefighters identified in the original study from 2017 remain consistent. Those factors continue to contribute to a decrease in the amount of call firefighters a department is able to retain, and it is affecting the callback for emergency calls in the vast majority of departments.

Of the five departments that reported a 50% or greater reduction in the amount of call firefighters over the past five years, if those departments were to see the same 50% reduction in the next five years, they would be left with anywhere from two, to ten call firefighters on the department.

References

Call Firefighter Survey for District 7 Departments. 2017

Updated Call Firefighter Survey for District 7 Departments. 2022

Related Links

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