

*An assessment of retention incentives
for volunteer firefighters in Virginia*

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ABSTRACT

Volunteer firefighters provide fire protection for the majority of communities in the United States and often receive little compensation in return. In addition to the inherent hazards of firefighting, volunteers are challenged by increasing call volumes, training requirements, and demands from family and careers. As a result, fire department leaders often attempt to retain members through incentives.

The opinions of 108 volunteer firefighters in Virginia about which incentives will enhance recruitment and retention efforts were investigated according to personal factors such as sex, age, and rank. The analysis looked at 12 incentives and five personal characteristics and revealed only six of the 60 possible two-variable relationships as being statistically significant. In particular, younger volunteers were more likely to name training competitions, tuition reimbursement, and the opportunity to fundraise as being important factors in their volunteerism. The most significant finding of the research, however, is that a decentralized management style—manifested in the delegation of authority and participation in decision making—is important to the vast majority of volunteers, regardless of their personal attributes. Although such emphasis on decentralization will likely require a cultural shift in many volunteer fire departments, it is cost-effective and, most importantly, will encourage the recruitment of volunteers and enhance their retention.

Key words: volunteer firefighters, incentives, recruitment, retention

INTRODUCTION

According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) report entitled *US Fire Department Profile Through 2003*, there are 30,542 fire departments in the United States, with 88 percent of these considered to be volunteer or mostly volunteer organizations¹ that provide fire protection to 39 percent of the US population.² Nationally, over 73 percent of all firefighters are volunteers and 93 percent of these are members of departments that protect fewer than 25,000 people.³

In Virginia, 25 percent of fire departments employ career firefighters, and of the state's 21,000 firefighters, 66 percent are volunteers.⁴ Similar to national trends, the percentage of volunteer firefighters serving Virginia communities varies by population, so that although only 28 percent of firefighters are volunteers in communities with populations of more than 250,000, communities with fewer than 100,000 citizens rely almost exclusively on volunteers.⁵ Many of the volunteers in the larger communities are members of 'combination' fire departments, where volunteers are used in conjunction with career personnel.⁶

From 1983 to 2002, the call volume for all fire departments in the United States experienced an increase of over 94 percent.⁷ Yet, from 1983 through 2003, the number of volunteer firefighters declined from 884,600 to 800,050, representing an almost 10 percent decrease.⁸ In addition, the NFPA has found that "since 1983, a generally upward trend in career firefighters has been more than offset by a generally

downward trend in volunteer firefighters.”⁹ This trend is mirrored in Virginia, with a report entitled the *Virginia Fire Service Needs Assessment* published in January 2004 suggesting the presence of a “trend in fire departments of most sizes towards the employment of additional career personnel to meet community expectations and emergency response objectives.”¹⁰

The most recent finding by the NFPA of a 10 percent decrease in the number of volunteer firefighters is consistent with the findings from a study conducted earlier by the National Volunteer Fire Summit in June 1998, which determined that “many fire departments across the nation are experiencing more difficulty with recruiting and retaining members than ever before.”¹¹ During the summit, Reade Bush, of TriData Corporation claimed, “The declining level of fire service volunteerism is attributed to many factors.” These include:¹²

- time demands;
- training requirements;
- higher emergency call volume;
- increased demands within departments;
- changes in sociological conditions;
- leadership problems;
- increasing use of combination department;
- higher cost of housing in affluent communities; and
- aging communities.

Although the decline in the number of volunteers may itself be cause for concern, the impact of this decline is far greater. A document prepared for the National Volunteer Fire Council and the United States Fire Administration entitled *Recruitment and Retention in the Volunteer Fire Service—Final Report*

states that “Some of the departments represented in the regional workshops indicated that their towns could not afford to hire paid firefighters, and that the services of firefighters would not exist if their departments folded.”¹³

James Fisher and Kathleen Cole, authors of *Leadership and Management of Volunteer Programs*, remind fire chiefs that “development and implementation of a comprehensive plan to address the motivational needs of all volunteers are integral components of the volunteer administrator’s role.”¹⁴ Kathleen Brown offers a suggestion to supervisors for selecting incentives, stating, “Supervisors should realize that a volunteer job is seldom one’s first priority.”¹⁵ Fisher and Cole cite McCurly and Lynch, who claim, “The needs common to most people are belonging and autonomy, but that the needs for recognition, achievement, control, variety, growth, affiliation, power, fun, and uniqueness also influence decisions to engage in volunteer activities.”¹⁶ The two basic research questions of the current study, then, are: 1) are there any incentives that are particularly important to maintaining positive attitudes about being a volunteer firefighter? and, 2) if there are important incentives, to what extent are they idiosyncratic to volunteers with certain attributes?

METHODOLOGY

Development of the study

Development of a questionnaire for use during the study involved satisfying the requirements of the Christopher Newport University Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (RBPBS), including fair selection of subjects and anonymity. Informed consent and anonymity required that respondents knew they had been selected at random, and that they would not be required to provide their name nor would any effort be made to identify them or the fire department to which they belonged.

Anonymity was enhanced by labeling the ‘return addresses’ on the return envelopes for each questionnaire as the researchers’ address, eliminating the possibility that subjects would include identifying information. Efforts to assure freedom from coercion

were based upon the fact that the researchers did not have a professional or personal relationship with any subjects, and questionnaires were distributed to respondents by a third party (usually an instructor) who was not privy to whether the questionnaire was returned.

The questionnaire included the five independent variables related to a respondent's sex, age, years of service as a volunteer firefighter, current rank, and years of service in that rank. The selection of independent variables for age and years of service was based in part on research conducted by Herzburg, who, according to Fisher and Cole, "helps to place in proper perspective the various components of a volunteer's motivation by distinguishing between aspects of a position itself, which provides intrinsic satisfaction, and aspects of the context in which the job is performed."¹⁷ Fisher and Cole expand on this point by stating that "a person's needs and expectations may change during and as the product of a volunteer experience" and that "although it may not be feasible to assess and respond to the needs of all volunteers on an individual basis, it is usually possible to distinguish between new and experienced volunteers in an organization."¹⁸

The selection of the 12 dependent variables included in the study was based in part on results contained in *The Final Report* but also supported by the work of researchers and those with experience in the field of volunteerism, including Fisher, Cole, Lee, Herzberg, McGregor, McCurly, and Lynch. Respondents were requested to evaluate the degree to which these variables could influence their decision to remain as a member of their volunteer fire department.

The dependent variables were categorized as "Department Incentives," "Financial Incentives," and "Activity Incentives," and the degree of influence for each of the incentives were ranked as none, low, moderate, high, and very high. A complete list of incentives is included with the questionnaire in Appendix 1. The questionnaire also allowed respondents an opportunity to answer two open-ended questions to identify if there were additional incentives other than those included in the survey, as well as their reason for joining a volunteer fire department. Selected

responses to these questions are included in Appendix 2.

Selection of subjects

The selection of subjects for this study was accomplished in cooperation with the Virginia Department of Fire Programs (VDFP) and involved the distribution of relatively short questionnaires to students enrolled in various training classes conducted for Virginia's volunteer fire departments. The sampling frame consisted of classes scheduled for delivery statewide from September through December 2004.

Selection of classes was accomplished using systematic random sampling from a list of 64 classes pre-arranged in random presentation. Once this list was arranged in random presentation, systematic random sampling was accomplished by selecting every third class following an impartial random start.

For each class selected, the assigned instructor was requested to distribute a package to each student present in their class (up to 20 students) and encourage them to complete the questionnaire at their earliest convenience, but outside of class in order to ensure anonymity and to minimize peer influences. In addition, each instructor was asked to remind students that there would be no effort to identify respondents or their departments.

RESULTS

A total of 108 questionnaires were returned by the deadline of December 31, 2004, which represented approximately 27 percent of the questionnaires distributed. However, the actual response rate was greater and was calculated based upon 'adjusted' enrollment figures provided by VDFP for each of the classes selected to participate in the study. While figures from VDFP indicated actual total enrollment of 364 students, the 'adjustment' was made to account for classes with enrollment in excess of 20 students. This adjustment was necessary to exclude as non-respondents those students who did not receive a questionnaire in classes where enrollment exceeded the maximum number of questionnaires available for distribution. As a result, the adjusted enrollment figure

Table 1. Frequency distributions for independent and dependent variables (percent)

Independent variables			
Gender		Current rank	
Male	84.3	Firefighter	75.2
Female	15.7	Officer or other	24.8
Age		Years in current rank	
16 – 25	43.5	1 – 2 years	54.8
Over 25	56.5	Over 2 years	45.2
Years of service			
1 – 2 years	42.1		
Over 2 years	57.9		
Dependent variables			
Social events		Pension plans	
Low	28.8	Low	40.8
Moderate	32.7	Moderate	12.6
High	38.5	High	46.6
Delegation of authority		Gift certificates	
Low	7.8	Low	51.0
Moderate	31.1	Moderate	15.7
High	61.2	High	33.3
Involvement in decision making		Training competitions	
Low	6.8	Low	24.0
Moderate	16.5	Moderate	20.2
High	76.7	High	55.8
Pay per call		Child care	
Low	56.7	Low	54.5
Moderate	11.5	Moderate	9.9
High	31.7	High	35.6
Tax exemptions		Health club memberships	
Low	32.0	Low	44.1
Moderate	10.7	Moderate	17.6
High	57.3	High	38.2
Tuition reimbursement		Fundraising activities	
Low	35.0	Low	25.0
Moderate	11.7	Moderate	32.7
High	53.4	High	42.3

was 318 students, and with 108 questionnaires returned, the actual response rate was determined to be 34 percent. There is no reason to believe that the respondents' characteristics or responses would differ significantly from those of the entire sample, but the non-responses nevertheless introduce a potential bias into the analysis.

A data set was created using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Due to the low response rate, the original data were recoded to create fewer values for certain variables that would be more likely to ensure sufficient distribution of responses across cells required by various statistical measures. In particular for dependent variables, responses of none and low were combined and recoded as low, responses of moderate were unchanged, and responses of high and very high were recoded as high.

Gamma was selected as a means to determine the strength of association between the dependent variables and all independent variables with the exception of gender. Strength of association between the ordinal dependent variables and the nominal variable of gender was determined using Pearson's *r*. Data analyses included tests for statistical significance.

Frequency distributions for independent and dependent variables are presented in Table 1. Respondents were predominantly male (84 percent), and a little more than half (56 percent) were older than 25. Almost three in five (58 percent) possessed more than two years of service, about one sixth (13 percent) of whom reported more than fifteen years of service.

Of all respondents, three-quarters reported their rank as firefighter, with the ranks of chief officer and company officer reported at 9 percent and 8 percent, respectively. When comparing an individual's rank with their years of service at that rank, a fifth of respondents with no more than two years of service were officers, while a quarter of respondents with more than two years of service were officers.

Regarding the dependent variable frequency distributions, incentives ranked most often (more than 50 percent) as high—relative to their degree of influence—were involvement in decision making (77 percent), delegation of authority (61 percent), tax

exemptions (57 percent), training competitions (56 percent), and tuition reimbursement (53 percent).

The pay per call incentive was the least popular, ranked not only as being a high influence by the fewest number of respondents (32 percent) for any incentive in the study but also ranked as having a low influence by the largest number of respondents (57 percent).

Child care and gift certificates were ranked by a majority of respondents (54 and 51 percent, respectively) as having a low influence, while responses were mixed regarding the value of health club memberships, with 44 percent of respondents indicating a low influence and 38 percent ranking its influence as high.

Using gamma and Pearson's product moment correlations¹⁹ of the 60 possible two-variable relationships (five independent and 12 dependent), only six were statistically significant at the .05 level (Table 2). The strongest relationship of these was the age of a respondent as it relates to the positive influence of participation in training competitions ($\gamma = -.432$; $p = .006$)—a desire to participate in training competitions is most associated with being a younger volunteer. Younger volunteers also believed that participation in fundraising activities was more important than did their older cohorts ($\gamma = -.361$; $p = .019$). The variable of years in current rank was inversely related to perceptions about the importance of tuition reimbursement ($\gamma = -.385$; $p = .024$), health club memberships ($\gamma = -.372$; $p = .026$), and training competitions ($\gamma = -.416$; $p = .010$), indicating that these three incentives are more important for younger volunteers.²⁰ It was determined that pay per call was slightly more favored by males. ($r = .194$; $p = .049$)

DISCUSSION

Based upon the absence of statistical significance for 54 of the 60 two-variable relationships, we infer that knowing a firefighter's personal characteristics will generally not predict the degree to which incentives will influence their decision to remain as a member of their volunteer fire department. The value of this finding for fire service leaders is that popular incentives appear capable of maintaining their

Table 2. Strength of association and statistical significance

Dependent variables	Age of respondent		Years of service		Current rank		Years in current rank		Gender	
	γ	Sig.	γ	Sig.	γ	Sig.	γ	Sig.	Pearson's R	Sig.
Social events	-.106	.513	-.139	.396	-.035	.851	-.305	.053	-.139	.158
Delegation	.100	.588	-.059	.752	-.040	.862	-.346	.063	-.161	.103
Decision making	-.123	.582	-.208	.349	.051	.839	-.306	.154	-.094	.345
Pay per call	.018	.922	.077	.673	.058	.769	-.176	.326	.194	.049*
Tax exemptions	.132	.465	.058	.744	.200	.345	-.113	.541	-.049	.623
Tuition reimbursement	-.097	.581	-.305	.074	-.066	.755	-.385	.024*	-.138	.164
Pension plans	.095	.585	.084	.628	.067	.740	.011	.951	.028	.781
Gift certificates	-.180	.294	-.073	.668	.031	.869	-.234	.182	.035	.725
Training competitions	-.432	.006**	-.112	.521	-.150	.470	-.416	.010**	-.050	.614
Child care	-.008	.963	.071	.695	.139	.494	-.152	.418	.051	.611
Health club membership	-.138	.408	-.267	.097	.158	.448	-.372	.026*	-.116	.245
Fundraising activities	-.361	.019*	-.091	.575	-.099	.605	-.263	.108	-.067	.501

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$.

popularity regardless of who the individual is and should, therefore, be easier to implement and manage for the benefit of all members of their organizations. Administrators are best advised to promote delegation of authority and involvements in decision making. If there is one prescription implied by the results that is specific to volunteers' individual characteristics, it is that younger volunteers appreciate training competitions, tuition reimbursement, and the opportunity to participate in fundraising activities.

With regards to financial incentives, as noted, tax exemptions and tuition reimbursement were popular with a majority of respondents. Gift certificates, while not ranked as low as pay per call, were still ranked as a low influence by 51 percent of respondents. In open-ended responses, some did suggest financial incentives beyond those specifically posed to them, such as providing volunteer firefighters with free vehicle registrations and driver licenses, as well as health insurance and

discounts at local businesses. Other respondents, however, countered these suggestions with statements such as "firefighting should be in your heart—pay is the appreciation from your community."

In terms of other financial incentives, although the vast majority of respondents were 26 to 45 years of age, responses to the incentive offering child care were mixed, as were those for the incentive to provide members with pension plans. However, since the survey did not attempt to determine whether respondents were responsible for the care of children, and if so, if there were perhaps others available to provide for this care in the absence of the respondent, it was difficult to fully assess responses to the child care incentive. Likewise, since no attempt was made to determine if respondents were already covered by one or more pension plans elsewhere, the full extent to which they valued the pension plan incentive as a volunteer firefighter could not be determined.

The results clearly support the popularity of training activities. Not only was the incentive of training competitions ranked as either a high or very high influence by a majority of respondents, comments provided by respondents regarding their reason for joining and remaining as a member of their volunteer fire department include statements such as “gain experience and knowledge for a career,” and simply, “more training.” It is important to note that efforts to make training more enjoyable were cited in *The Final Report* as one of several “fun factors” of being a volunteer firefighter. The *Report* indicated that training which is “fun and challenging helps retention.”²¹ Training competitions found to be popular in the current study certainly fall into that category.

It should also be noted that despite the apparent popularity of some forms of training, it can not be overlooked that training demands were also cited as a reason for declining levels of volunteerism in *The Final Report*. Therefore, the influence of training on volunteer retention, which was not thoroughly investigated by this study, may be affected by other factors. These may include whether training is mandated by an outside entity or is at the discretion of the fire department. Whether training is conducted in the spirit of competition and as part of a positive culture in the department, or whether there are negative consequences for failure that may affect one’s future role as a firefighter, may also be important in this regard.

Many respondents believed that helping their community was still a major factor in their decision to join a volunteer fire department, with some claiming that being a volunteer firefighter was a “family tradition” that offered a “sense of belonging to an elite organization,” and that when more than one family member belonged, fire department activities actually provided more time for their family to be together. Incentives that encourage and support family memberships in volunteer fire departments appear to offer a solution to retention.

CONCLUSION

Despite receiving only a 34 percent response rate to this study, there is no reason to believe that the results are not representative of volunteer firefighters

across Virginia, and perhaps even elsewhere. The two most popular incentives promoting decentralized management styles—delegation of authority and involvement in decision making—are ones that should not inflict a financial burden on fire departments, thereby providing opportunities for cost-effective and long-term solutions to retention. Yet, the degree to which incentives such as these are sustainable will likely be dependent upon a cultural shift in volunteer fire departments to ensure a supportive management style that is consistent across changes in department leadership, which for many volunteer organizations occurs on an annual basis. As stated by Fisher and Cole, “Volunteer retention is a consequence of doing things right.”²² The real challenge for most volunteer fire departments is selecting the right thing to do.

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 19. Babbie E, Halley F, Zaino J: *Adventures in Social Research*. Thousands Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2000. According to the text, "Gamma is a measure of association based on the logic of proportionate reduction of error (PRE) and is appropriate for two ordinal variables." The authors state that the logic of PRE "means that two variables are related to one another to the extent that knowing a person's attribute on one will help you guess his or her attribute on the other, or in other words, the extent to which one variable is 'associated' with, affects, or has an impact on another variable." Regarding Pearson's *r*, the authors state that this is a measure of association that "allows for the fact that the relationship between variables may not be completely consistent, but nevertheless it allows discovery of any prevailing tendency in that regard," and as

is the case with this study, "when you calculate correlations among several pairs of variables the resulting *r*'s will tell which pairs are more highly associated with one another than is true of other pairs." Both gamma and Pearson's *r* indicate the strength of association with a numerical value, where "the closer to -1.00 or 1.00, the stronger the relationship between the two variables, [and] the closer to 0.00, the weaker the association between the variables." Gamma and Pearson's *r* both also indicate the direction of association, where "a negative sign indicates a negative association (the items change in opposite directions) [and] conversely, a positive sign indicates that both items change in the same direction (they both either increase or decrease)."

20. Findings associated with the dependent variable of *years in current rank*, and the independent variables of *Health Club Memberships*, *Training Competitions*, and *Tuition Reimbursement* indicate a negative association, meaning that as *years in current rank* increase, the influence of these incentives appear to decrease. While the findings of this study are generally inconclusive as to the influence of *age* or *years of service* related to these three incentives, findings do indicate a positive association between the independent variables for *rank*, *age* and *years of service*. With this positive association, it may be possible to conclude that *rank*, *age* and *years of service* are directly related to *years in current rank*, and if so, the negative association between *years in current rank* and the above-mentioned incentives may also mean that as *rank*, *age*, and *years of service* decrease, the influence of these incentives increases.

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APPENDIX 1

**CHRISTOPHER NEWPORT UNIVERSITY - GRADUATE STUDIES
A SURVEY OF INCENTIVES OFFERED TO VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS**

You have been selected for participation in a survey to determine your opinion of how various incentives offered to volunteer firefighters could influence your decision to remain a member of your department. **Respondents in the survey are not required to provide their name and there is no effort to track respondents or their departments.** The survey form should take only a few minutes to complete. **Once you have finished, please return the completed survey form in the envelope provided.** Thank you in advance for your participation.

PART 1 FIREFIGHTER PERSONAL PROFILE

Male _____ Female _____

Your age: 16 to 17 _____ 18 to 25 _____ 26 to 45 _____ Over 45 _____

Years of service as a volunteer firefighter: 1 to 2 _____ 3 to 5 _____ 6 to 10 _____ 11 to 15 _____ 16 or more _____

Current position _____

Years of service in current position: 1 to 2 _____ 3 to 5 _____ 6 to 10 _____ 11 to 15 _____ 16 or more _____

PART 2 HOW MUCH OF AN INFLUENCE COULD THE FOLLOWING INCENTIVES HAVE ON YOUR DECISION TO REMAIN A MEMBER OF YOUR VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT?

Very High High Moderate Low None

DEPARTMENT INCENTIVES

Social events (dinners and parties)	5	4	3	2	1
Delegation of authority from leaders	5	4	3	2	1
Involvement in decision making	5	4	3	2	1

FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

Pay per call	5	4	3	2	1
Tax exemptions	5	4	3	2	1
Tuition reimbursement	5	4	3	2	1
Pension plans/IRA's	5	4	3	2	1
Gift certificates	5	4	3	2	1

ACTIVITY INCENTIVES

Training competitions	5	4	3	2	1
Child care	5	4	3	2	1
Health club membership	5	4	3	2	1
Fundraising	5	4	3	2	1

PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ON THE REVERSE SIDE

1. What was your reason for joining a volunteer fire department?
2. Are there incentives other than those listed above that would influence your decision to remain a member?

APPENDIX 2

RESPONSES TO OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

1. What was your reason for joining a volunteer fire department?

To help the community/give back to the community/help others in time of need

Best way to start a career/gain experience/gain knowledge for a career

Enjoy firefighting/fire apparatus/taking care of the trucks

Family tradition [born into firefighting]/Allows family members to be together

Volunteer fire departments keep taxes low

Gain experience and knowledge for a career

More training

Sense of belonging to an elite organization/gain respect/attention

Excitement/to explore new interests

Prove that women can do the job

2. Are there incentives other than those listed that would influence your decision to remain as a member?

No incentives—firefighting should be in your heart—pay is appreciation from your community

Availability of state-of-the-art equipment

No smoking during meetings

Free vehicle registration and drivers license

Way to get teenagers off the streets [by seeing tragedies faced by others]

Have the state stop mandating things

Respect from career firefighters [in combination departments]

More state assistance on grants and equipment

Discounts at local retail businesses