

The Future of Fire Services: Addressing the Volunteer and Staffing Crisis

A Data-Driven Guide to Ensuring Sustainable Fire Protection for Communities





Introduction: The Growing Fire Services Challenge

Across the country, many fire departments are facing an unprecedented crisis. The traditional model of volunteer-based fire services is under strain, and many communities are grappling with declining recruitment, increased response times, and financial constraints.

For decades, volunteer fire departments have provided an essential public service, particularly in rural and suburban areas. However, volunteerism is at an all-time low, and many fire departments are struggling to maintain adequate staffing levels. At the same time, the rising costs of apparatus and equipment, expanded training requirements, and the need for ongoing maintenance are forcing municipalities to rethink how they fund and operate fire protection services. This guide, drawing on independent research and real-world case studies, highlights the key challenges fire departments face, the warning signs of service instability, and practical solutions for sustaining fire and EMS services.

The Declining Volunteer Firefighter Workforce

Volunteerism Trends and the Reality on the Ground

- Over the past 30 years, the number of active volunteer firefighters has decreased by over 30% nationally and the remaining firefighters are older on average than in prior years
- In many communities, daytime response times have doubled due to a lack of available volunteers and it is difficult to get enough staff during serious events without mutual aid.
- Training requirements have increased significantly, making it harder for departments to recruit and retain members.

What Departments Often Overlook

While most fire service leaders recognize volunteerism is declining, many struggle to quantify the impact.

Some key questions departments should be asking:

- How many new recruits actually stay beyond their first year?
- What percentage of the department is over the age of 50?
- Why are volunteers leaving this organization?
- How do response times and staffing change based on time of day?

The Financial Cost of Losing Volunteers

- When a volunteer department cannot maintain staffing, municipalities and districts must consider transitioning to paid or hybrid models.
- The cost of staffing even a skeleton crew of full-time paid fire department can be millions of dollars annually, making proactive volunteer recruitment strategies essential.

The Budget and Sustainability Challenge

The Rising Cost of Fire Protection

Fire services are facing rapid cost increases due to:

- The price of fire apparatus has doubled in the last 15 years, with new fire engines often costing over **\$1 million** and taking 18 to 36 months to construct and have delivered.
- Protective gear regulations now require gear replacement **every 10 years**, costing departments thousands of dollars per firefighter.
- Training and certification requirements have grown, increasing time commitments for volunteers.

Budget Killers Fire Departments Must Address

Many fire departments and districts struggle with financial inefficiencies. Some common budget drains include:

- **Inefficient Equipment Purchasing:** Buying equipment as an individual organization instead of regional purchasing agreements.
- **Unnecessary Customization of Apparatus:** Fire apparatus manufacturers can build vehicles more quickly and less expensively if they follow standard blueprints.
- **Facility Maintenance Backlogs:** Underfunded stations that require repairs from deferred maintenance.
- **Operational Redundancies:** Separate fire districts in close proximity duplicating tasks and operating in silos.

Signs Your Fire Department Needs a Sustainability Plan



Declining volunteer recruitment numbers for **3** consecutive years.



Increased response times and declining numbers of respondents for emergencies.



Difficulty funding apparatus or equipment replacement.



Increased reliance on mutual aid from neighboring departments for routine calls.



Aging workforce with more than 50% of firefighters over age 50.

Strategies for Building Sustainable Fire Services

1. Strengthen Volunteer Recruitment & Retention Programs

- Simplify Entry Requirements: Many departments unintentionally deter new members with overly complex application processes.
- Offer Financial Incentives: Length of Service Award Programs (LOSAP), tuition assistance, and tax breaks can improve retention.
- Improve Workplace Flexibility: Partnering with local businesses to allow volunteers to leave work for emergency calls.
- Engage Younger Community Members: High schoolers and young adults may need to learn about the opportunities for service and training in the fire service.

2. Explore Shared Services & Regional Cooperation

- Automatic & Mutual Aid Agreements: Reducing response gaps by formalizing shared service protocols.
- Joint Training Programs: Cost-effective way to standardize procedures and build interoperability between departments.
- Cooperative Equipment Purchasing: Reduce procurement costs by leveraging economies of scale.

3. Consider Alternative Staffing Models

- Combination Fire Departments: Use of both career and volunteer firefighters ensures adequate response levels.
- Regional Staffing Models: Centralized firefighter staffing for multiple agencies.
- Administrative Support: Staff to assist with paperwork, finances and planning can reduce the burden on volunteer officers freeing up time for firematic activities.

4. Improve Long-Term Capital Planning

- Develop Apparatus, Equipment & Facility Replacement Plans: Reduce budget shocks from unexpected apparatus, equipment, and station costs.
- Leverage Grant Funding: Many municipalities underutilize available state and federal fire service grants.
- Conduct Strategic Plans: Independent assessments help departments plan 5-10 years ahead.

Case Study: Restructuring for Sustainability

A Path Forward for Volunteer Fire Departments

The Challenge

A mid-sized rural town in the Northeast was facing severe firefighter shortages as volunteer numbers steadily declined over the past decade. With growing response times, rising equipment costs, and an aging volunteer base, the town's leadership was under pressure to find a solution. Local officials and fire department leaders were hesitant about merging departments or restructuring services, fearing political pushback and loss of local identity.

CGR's Approach

CGR conducted an independent evaluation of the town's fire services, focusing on operational efficiency, staffing models, and financial sustainability. Through data analysis, stakeholder engagement, and benchmarking against similar communities, CGR identified key areas for improvement:

- Optimizing resource allocation to reduce response times and improve coverage.
- Developing a hybrid staffing model, supplementing volunteers with part-time paid firefighters.
- Recommending cost-sharing opportunities with neighboring departments to improve training, equipment purchases, and staffing.
- Implementing new recruitment strategies, targeting younger volunteers while reducing barriers to entry.

The Outcome

Rather than continuing to struggle with a shrinking volunteer force, the town restructured its fire services, forming a regional partnership with neighboring departments.

This resulted in:



Improved response times due to optimized coverage zones.



More sustainable staffing by hiring part-time paid firefighters where gaps existed.



A more efficient training pipeline that increased retention of new volunteers.



Financial stability, as shared service agreements helped reduce operational costs.

While the number of volunteers did not significantly increase, the efficiency of the department improved, ensuring that available personnel were deployed strategically. This restructuring model has since been used in several other communities facing similar challenges.

Why CGR?

Independent, Data-Driven Fire Service Solutions



Independent & Objective

We provide unbiased data-driven recommendations.



Customized to Your Needs

Every fire district is different - we develop solutions that fit your community.



Proven & Practical

We focus on implementing realistic, sustainable improvements.



Experienced Practitioners

Through decades of practice, our team has an extensive understanding of fire protection and EMS



Is Your Fire Department Ready for the Next Decade?

Fire and EMS services are at a turning point. Departments that take proactive steps today will be better prepared to protect their communities for years to come.

This guide provides a data-driven roadmap for fire districts and municipalities looking to secure sustainable, high-quality emergency services.



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Meet with Paul Bishop

[Schedule a meeting](#)

Contact Us to Discuss Your Customized Fire Service Sustainability Plan