

## GREENE'S FIRST-RESPONDER CRISIS

# Greene is not spared from nationwide volunteer decline

BY TERRY BEIGIE

Record Editor

*Editor's note: This is the first of four articles delving into the volunteerism decline for Greene County's fire and rescue departments.*

In your worst times you dial 9-1-1 and expect you will get the help you need—whether it's a fire, rescue or law enforcement emergency. However, volunteer numbers for these first-responders are dwindling rapidly, not only here but across the country.

It wasn't that long ago, really, that Greene County had no fire or rescue services. Ruckersville Volunteer Fire Company was founded in 1948. Stanardsville Volunteer Fire Department's resurgence came in 1959. In 1968, the Greene County Volunteer Rescue Squad began. In the mid-1980s the Dyke Volunteer Fire Department was created.

The Greene County Rescue Squad now has two paid shifts while the fire departments continue to operate 100% with volunteers, but that's becoming increasingly harder to do.

Earlier this year, the National Fire Protection Association noted in its 2017 U.S. Fire Department Profile report that there were roughly 682,600 volunteer firefighters in the United States, which is down from 814,850 in 2015 and the 729,000 in 2016.

"The volunteer firefighter numbers for 2016 and 2017 are the lowest recorded levels since the NFPA began the survey in 1983," stated a news release from the association.



FILE PHOTO

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service roughly 2.2 million Virginians contributed 231.7 million hours of volunteer service in 2017 and roughly 34% of Virginians volunteer ranking the commonwealth 22nd among

the states. However, only 7.5% volunteer by providing counseling, medical care, fire and EMS or protective services. The largest segment of Virginia's volunteers—38%—collect, prepare,

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# Crisis

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distribute or serve food.

All four departments in Greene are suffering from this lack of volunteerism.

"I know that one of our greatest challenges is to keep a certain number of people here to keep the operation functioning," said Ruckersville Volunteer Fire Company President Frank Crocker. "Without the people we can't function."

The Greene County Rescue Squad was granted a second paid shift, this time at night Monday-Thursday, for the fiscal year 2020 budget that began July 1 because they were unable to have enough volunteers for all nights. The squad already had one paid shift during the day.

When Rescue Squad Capt. Jack McKeen started volunteering in the late 1990s it was a different situation.

"We had a large calendar on the wall and you'd add your name to a shift to volunteer," he recalls of his first years volunteering in Madison County. "Some of the biggest fights we'd have would be when someone removed your name from a shift because there were so many volunteers who wanted to help."

McKeen is paid rescue personnel in Madison County and noted Madison has struggled to staff enough volunteers, too.

"We're really banging our heads on the wall trying to figure out how we're going to get people in here," he said.

In her final report on April 23, Brenda Garton, interim county administrator classified the situation as a "volunteerism crisis" to the Greene County Board of Supervisors.

"Often citizens who move from a city or large jurisdiction to a rural area are not even aware that the firefighter who saves your home or the rescue squad personnel who transport your very sick relative are not paid, but volunteers," Garton wrote. "Although the Greene County Rescue Squad and our fire departments make considerable effort to recruit, train and retain volunteers, the volunteers available to these organizations over time have steadily declined."

Why the decline? That's a difficult question to answer.

"Why has volunteerism become a challenge nationally?" Mark Taylor, new county administrator, asked. "Because people are working and the two-income family is normative. The concept of commuting has become normal or typical and a longer commute is more tolerable to people now than it appears to have been."

Taylor said there's been a change in the dynamics of community that's impacting the lowered volunteerism rates.

The officers at Dyke Volunteer Fire Department agree.

"Look at Dyke Store, if we had a fire the owners would almost shut the doors to help us run the call," said

Mark Shifflett, assistant fire chief.

Dustin Clay, Stanardsville

Volunteer Fire Department chief, said he thinks pride and ownership play a part in the decline.

"I don't think people nowadays have the pride in what they do in the same way," Clay said.

"We were born in this county, took pride on our county," Shifflett said.

"Every Friday night, come hell or high water, we were at the football game. You go out there now and how many young people are there?"

Monroe Supervisor David Cox, board liaison to the Emergency Services Board, agreed with Clay and Shifflett.

"I think our two chiefs have hit the nail on the head tonight. It's an ownership and pride thing," Cox said. "The society has changed so much. We've got so many people who have moved into this county who expect not just fire services and rescue services, but they expect all these services they had where they lived at before and they don't understand that the three fire departments are totally volunteer."

Crocker said he feels ownership in the community plays a part, as does the time commitment required.

"Folks are here doing it for free and they just don't have the time like they used to dedicate that," he said.

The call load factors in, as well. According to 2018 statistics from the Greene County Sheriff's Office, the three fire departments answered 1,061 total calls and the rescue squad answered 2,337.

The county's population has grown by more than 25% in the past 19 years, with a majority of those residents falling within the Ruckersville volunteer Fire Department's first due responsibility.

McKeen said on the rescue side people used to be active members until they died, but it doesn't happen anymore.

The International Fire Chiefs Association noted in November 2018 that its research for the "State of the Volunteer Fire Service Report" backs those statements up.

"The old model of neighbors helping neighbors is all but gone in most places, as many people don't have strong ties to or even know their neighbors anymore," the report states. "As the baby boomers retire en masse on the back end, they need to be replaced with young people on the front end. In sheer number there aren't enough millennials and iGens to replace the baby boomers and worse for us those two younger generations aren't trending toward the fire service."

Dyke Volunteer Fire Department member Richard Herring said he sees this as a problem, too.

"Somehow or another we've got to get to some people and instill in them again this civic responsibility. I don't know how we do it," Herring said.

*The next article will look at the three fire departments in Greene and what they're seeing.*

## GREENE'S FIRST-RESPONDER CRISIS

# Volunteer fire departments struggle to stay staffed

BY TERRY BEIGIE

Record Editor

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Record Editor

**I**magine smoke filling your house, after getting everyone out safely what do you do next? Most people will call 911 to have fire service dispatched to their homes. However, what happens if there isn't a local fire service to dispatch?

Those who think that's far-fetched should know there is no state code that requires a locality to fund a fire service, noted Greene County Administrator Mark Taylor.

"We're not mandated to provide fire service, but we're certainly aware of the service that's been provided,

the community expectancy, which is reasonable, for such support and we would be uncaring if we didn't respond to the fire companies' needs," he said.

Greene County is served by three all-volunteer fire departments: Ruckersville Volunteer Fire Company; Stanardsville Volunteer Fire Department; and Dyke Volunteer Fire Department. In 2016 there were 801 calls for fire service and in 2018 there were 1,061, according to information from the Greene County Sheriff's Office who operates the E911 center. All three fire departments get equal monies from the county's budget, though growth is centered along U.S. Route 29 in Ruckersville, which can be frustrating to the departments.

"Our call volume is huge and we're working with a budget that's exactly the

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FILE PHOTO

Above, volunteers from Dyke Fire Company show the equipment necessary to students at Nathanael Greene Primary.

# Fire

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same as Dyke," said Ruckersville Volunteer Fire Company President Frank Crocker. "I'm a realist when it comes to funding all three companies. Dyke's needs are completely different than our needs. The call volume is here. It's been a frustration of mine for awhile. It's a sensitive subject—money always is."

To fully staff one paid fire department it would cost roughly the county \$1 million—and that's only benefits and salary, no equipment or apparatus.

During the fiscal year 2020 budget cycle it was noted that one penny added to the real estate tax rate adds about \$200,000 to the general fund. To fully staff three fire departments, Greene would need to add 15 cents onto the current 82 cents per \$100 of assessed real estate value.

"One of the things special about Greene County is that we are served by three volunteer fire companies and have no paid firefighting staff. I'm not sure what the level of community awareness of that reality," Taylor said. "We have every practical reason to support the volunteers."

Emergency Services Manager Melissa Meador said that while the rescue squad needs paid staffing to meet the needs she's not sure the firefighting side is there yet. Taylor agreed.

"Historically our community has been served and served well for many, many years by all-volunteer fire companies," Taylor said. "When the companies tell us they need or want or cannot continue without our ... whatever—whether it's money, people, help, oversight, support—we have every reason to do our best."

All three departments said that while they get some funding from the county, it's not enough to fund everything—from a \$1 million ladder truck for Ruckersville to a new tanker for Stanardsville to instruction for Dyke. It all adds up.

"The volunteers' service to our community is really a blessing to us. It is a big savings to us. Their success is our success. We are very much in this together," Taylor said.

## Ruckersville

"It's not like it used to be in the 1980s," said Crocker, who has been a volunteer with the company for 19 years. "We were probably pushing 50-60 members between active firefighters and the fundraising side—like your ladies' auxiliary, which really doesn't exist anymore."

Crocker said with the amount of fundraising the firefighters have

to do will wear them out, on top of the increased call requests.

"Before you were running a handful of calls a week and now you're running a handful of calls a day," Crocker said. "Everyone nowadays have a job or even two and both people in a relationship have one or even two jobs. To put not only that burden on the backs of the firefighters but then you add the fundraising aspect and keeping up with things around the firehouse it's a huge time commitment. The training is another whole time commitment level above that. You're putting so much on the backs of the firefighters."

Crocker, who grew up in Greene County and is a professional firefighter in another locality, said he volunteers because he likes to help people.

"To be able to make a difference in somebody's life in their worst time is important to me," he said. "This is a 24-hour business. We need bodies. We need help."

The company is at 50 Sassafras Lane, Ruckersville. The non-emergency number is (434) 985-7383. In an emergency dial 911.

## Stanardsville

The Stanardsville Volunteer Fire Department does a lot of fundraising, said Chief Dustin Clay.

"The same people running the class are doing the fundraising and it burns people out quick," he said. "Our expenses are constantly going up because we have to buy more equipment, so we have to do more fundraising."

Clay said he's taken days off from work to make sure there was someone who could run calls at his fire house because of vacations.

He said one thing he's noticed over the years is the appearance of lack of respect because "we're just volunteers."

"I'm a paid fireman somewhere else, yes, but here I stay true to my volunteering," he said. "I remember where I came from."

While the equipment gets more expensive, Clay said it's more about needing the people to fight the fires because they have the equipment.

Guys will come home from shift work, go straight to the breakfasts and a lot of us take days off from work

Clay said he'd like to see more young people joining, too.

"You're happy because 10 join but you have that 20 percent rule—only two are going to stay and be productive," he said.

There are jobs at the firehouse to do that don't involve going into a fire, that would take some of the stress from the firefighters, including cutting the grass, cleaning the firehouse and fundraising.

For those who like a bit of

adrenaline, Clay said becoming a volunteer firefighter is the way to go.

"It's not like we're a boring county," Clay said. "There's plenty to do. We send people to cool classes—like swift water rescue. We have the exciting stuff."

The department is at 275 Celt Road in Stanardsville. The non-emergency phone number is (434) 985-4638. In an emergency, call 911.

## Dyke

Dyke Volunteer Fire Department began when there was a house fire on Flattop Mountain.

"They felt maybe it could have been saved if we had a fire house closer," said Assistant Chief Mark Shifflett.

While the department doesn't do as much fundraising as the others, they do have the same issues with getting bodies in their trucks.

Several people would like to see rescue vehicles at the site, but Shifflett said he doesn't know how to make that work.

"We have people who are EMTs who are chomping at the bit for us to start, but that'll be more calls and you still don't have enough people to run," he said.

Shifflett said his department has seen a large shortage.

"We have very little interest of young people coming in at all," Shifflett said. "I think the young people would rather have a computer or game and they don't want to deal with this. But we're part of this community."

Shifflett noted that he cannot imagine trying to function as a volunteer department without the funding the county gives the departments.

"We'd be working fundraisers all the time," he said. "We hear from other counties that we take classes with that their county gives them \$10,000. With \$10,000 I could buy two air packs—maybe."

The department is at 9144 Dyke Road, Dyke. The non-emergency number is (434) 985-3711.



Clay said all departments want the community to know that the firefighters showing up at their doors are all volunteers.

"We need people. I'm all quality over quantity. I want those willing to do the work and stick around," he said. "I don't want to ever see paid, but I know it'll come at some point."

## GREENE'S FIRST-RESPONDER CRISIS

# Greene rescue squad already hybrid model with paid and volunteer staff

BY TERRY BEIGIE

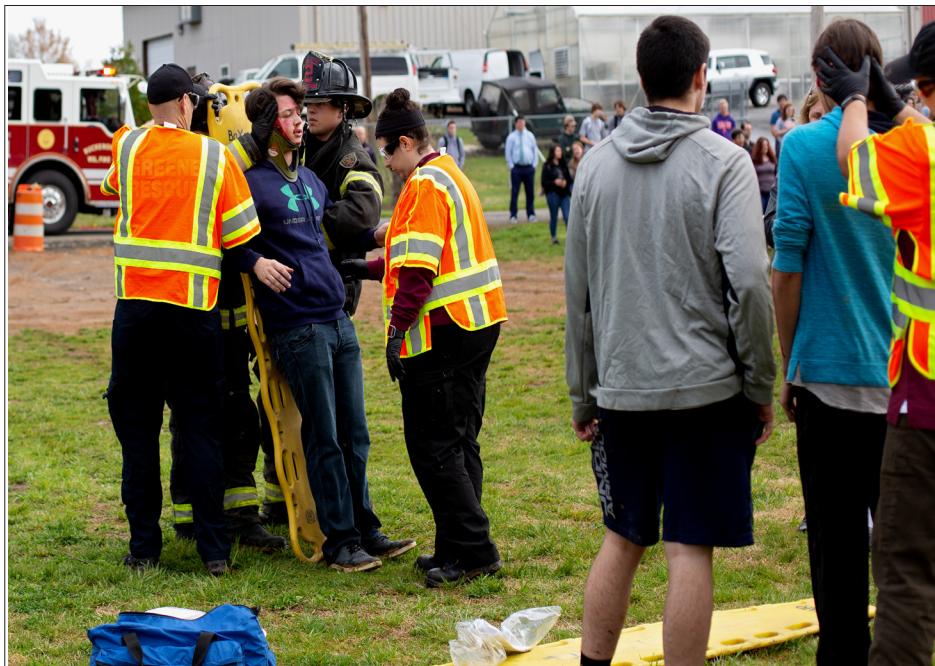
Record Editor

*Editor's note: This is the third of four articles delving into the volunteerism decline for Greene County's fire and rescue departments.*

Last December the Greene County Rescue Squad celebrated 50 years of operation as a volunteer organization, even though by that time it was already operating as a hybrid organization with career emergency workers, as well as volunteers.

Steven "Kelly" Grayson, a rescue member from Louisiana spoke during that Dec. 8 dinner honoring everyone who had served with the squad in the past half-century.

Grayson said volunteers don't work for free—they save their communities millions of dollars and Greene County is no exception. Another night career shift, provided by University of Virginia Medic 5, was added in the fiscal 2020 budget this spring, bringing the total



FILE PHOTO

**Rescue Squad volunteers at William Monroe High School's Prom Promise to show what damage drinking and driving can cause.**

budgeted for Emergency Medical Services (EMS) to nearly \$1.2 million.

"Volunteers were trying to do the See **RESCUE**, Page A10

# Rescue

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nights but we just couldn't because of a lack of bodies," said Capt. Jack McKeen, who has been a rescue volunteer in Greene County for the past eight years.

"People don't know if it's a paid person showing up or volunteers; when they call 911 they want to see somebody," he said.

The rural areas of Greene County present a challenge meeting that request whether it's paid or volunteer personnel.

"There are some areas of the county that take 45 minutes to get to, like Flattop Mountain—on a good day," he said. "I've gone up in the snow and it's taken us hours to get

there. And having trucks somewhere else that's closer doesn't really help if you don't have the people to sit in them."

McKeen started volunteering with Madison County Rescue Squad in the late 1990s and at that time they were bursting with people who wanted to help. He is currently paid rescue personnel in Madison County because they've struggled to have enough volunteers, as well.

In 2016, there were 2,140 calls for EMS in Greene and in 2018 there were 2,337, according to statistics from the Greene County Sheriff's Office which oversees the E911 center.

"That's a lot of calls and I think this year we're going to beat that number at the rate we're going now," he added.

McKeen said one reason for lesser numbers of volunteers is the experienced people are getting older and younger ones aren't interested in the same way.

"The younger generation just doesn't seem to have the community spirit they once did ... they'd rather be out than sitting up here," he said.

The cost of the EMT classes is also prohibitive, though the squad will pay for those who pledge to be a member for a certain length of time. There are also state grants to help offset the cost for those willing to take the course.

Money is a concern for the squad, though they do get funding from the county.

"It's never enough," he said. "We've asked for increases over the past

few years and they've denied it. Our medical costs three years ago were around \$30,000 in just band aids and supplies, and last year we spent \$50,000."

The cost for the new ambulances keeps rising, too. The newest one cost \$249,000, but that didn't include anything within. The squad received a grant for the loading and locking system, which runs around \$40,000. Once you get it stocked the new truck costs around \$300,000, McKeen said.

The squad sends out letters seeking donations, and they do get a response but he'd like to see that higher, too.

Other fundraisers are not really possible because of the lack of manpower.

"In a perfect world, I'd

love to have around 50 good, solid people who will show up," McKeen said.

He said there are jobs that can be done that don't require people to become EMTs, though those are desperately needed.

"We need help and we need money," he said. "Actually I need people more than I need money. We've tried advertising, but not sure it really got the word out. We just don't know how to get people in here. We've had open houses, touch-a-truck events, trunk-or-treat nights—we're out in the community. We're at a loss; I think everybody is."

McKeen invites community members to tour the squad house, see the equipment and ask questions—even do a

ride along one night.

"I don't want to say our days as a volunteer organization are over, but it's changing all over the country," he said.

The squad is at 9845 Spotswood Trail, Stanardsville. Call the non-emergency number for more information or to set up a ride along at (434) 985-7214. The rescue squad also includes information about upcoming classes and events on its Facebook page [www.facebook.com/greenecountyrescuesquad](http://www.facebook.com/greenecountyrescuesquad).

*Next week's article will be the final in the series and will be a look to the future of Greene County's first responders.*

THURSDAY, AUGUST 15, 2019

## GREENE'S FIRST-RESPONDER CRISIS

# Moving on in midst of volunteerism decline

BY TERRY BEIGIE

Record Editor

*Editor's note: This is the final article in a series of articles delving into the volunteerism decline for Greene County's fire and rescue departments.*

County officials and first responders have been in communication—both through the Emergency Services Board and directly—about next steps in the struggle to remain volunteer organizations. Even though departments across the country are facing the dilemma, there isn't a one-size-fits-all fix.

"Each volunteer company is unique, each situation is different and each one needs to be under-

stood independently and addressed on its own terms," said new County Administrator Mark Taylor.

Taylor took office on April 9.

A first step for Greene was commissioning a Virginia Fire Services Board Fire and Emergency Medical Services Study last month. Dyke Volunteer Fire Company, Ruckersville Volunteer Fire Company, Stanardsville Volunteer Fire Department and Greene County Rescue Squad will be looked into. The study looks at fire and EMS services and provides feedback on areas that are successful and those that may need improvement in a jurisdiction. The study is done at no cost to Greene County.

Melissa Meador, manager of Emergency Services in the county, said

all three volunteer fire departments operate as a cohesive unit. While each fire department has its own set of operating guidelines, Meador said the county is working to develop one standard one for all three departments.

"We're recognizing the fact that how we've done business for the last 20-30 years may not continue to move us forward," she said. "I wish there was an immediate easy answer."

The Greene County Rescue Service has been operating for awhile as a hybrid model with UVA's Medic 5 during the day and volunteers at night. However, a second paid shift was added to night Monday-Thursday with the July 1 budget because staffing enough volunteers each night wasn't possible.

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# Volunteer

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Frank Crocker, president of Ruckersville Volunteer Fire Company, said he thinks it could be time to hire someone at the county level to oversee all three companies.

"It would require each station to give up some of its autonomy," Crocker said. "I think we'd be willing to do it; for the betterment of the county I'd be for that."

Stanardsville Volunteer Fire Department Chief Dustin Clay said he'd like to see a paid daytime driver for the county.

"I will know that if I go to the firehouse, there's someone there that can drive me to a fire," he said.

Officials at Dyke Volunteer Fire Company noted three ways the county could contribute that would be helpful.

Scott Shifflett, assistant chief, said he'd like to see a combined fire and EMT course at the Greene County Technical Education Center. Charlottesville Albemarle Technical Education Center offers an EMT program.

"It might get kids interested; I think it would," said rescue Capt. Jack McKeen.

Dyke Assistant Chief Mark Shifflett agreed.

"I tell young kids all the time that firefighting is the way to go [for a career]," he said. "You can get into firefighting for 20 years, retire—especially in the city of Charlottesville—and be secured. I work for the city and need to work 30 years and be 55 before I can take retirement."

"I would like to see Greene County hire an instructor to teach here in the county," said Marcus Shifflett, Dyke Volunteer Fire Department chief. "I'd also like to see [Blue Ridge School] staff be allowed to run calls during the day with us."

Meador said she recalls people being allowed to leave their employment to run a call, but it's not that way anymore.

"Now, a lot of people are working more than one job, they're taking care of their elderly parents, they have their own children that they're taking care of—the dynamic is completely different," she said. "The time commitment is huge; the training is more stringent than when I started. I'm not saying that's a bad thing—we want our providers to be highly trained, efficient and effective."

Monroe Supervisor David Cox, a former volunteer firefighter and current liaison to the Emergency Services Board, said a county-paid daytime driver could be used in other ways to assist the departments.

"Maybe the driver could multipurpose and could put together training programs when not running calls," Cox suggested.

When it comes to recruitment, Clay noted other counties do have paid personnel to help with that.

"If it falls on us to go out all the time for that, I just can't do it," he said.

Meador said the county realizes that recruitment and retention costs money.

"We're taking a look at that now—what we can do at the county level to help

with those aspects," she said.

All four departments agreed offering a little bit of incentive for the volunteers could help with retention.

Crocker said removing the property taxes on a volunteer's primary vehicle would help.

"The volunteers are definitely not looking for handouts in any way, but if you're trying to incentivize volunteering in some way, lowering property taxes would help," he said. "Providing a per diem for crews' food could help, as right now they're paying their own meals, for the most part."

Richard Herring, a founder of the Dyke company, asked how the rest of the county residents would feel if these volunteers were given financial breaks on taxes.

"If 24/7 staffing of a fire station is a \$1 million endeavor, and investing one-third of \$1 million into volunteer recruitment promotion and retention incentives to keep the station staffed, have we spent one-third of a million or have we saved two-thirds of a million?" Taylor asked.

Ruckersville Volunteer Fire Department would like to see a change in how the three fire companies are funded by the county. The fire departments receive an equal share of funding from the Board of Supervisors, which means there is less funding per capita in the highly dense Ruckersville area than in the lower density Dyke, Crocker said.

"The last couple of years there have been discussions at the county administration level about whether there was room

for changes in the way we fund departments," Meador said. "It's probably something we need to take a hard look at."

While the fire departments and the rescue squad need volunteers on the front lines, there are numerous jobs for them that don't require that.

McKeen said one of the younger rescue squad volunteers would like to see an auxiliary started again to help with fundraising.

"Yes, we need volunteers, however if you're not interested in riding the fire truck or riding the ambulance there are plenty of other opportunities within the agencies," Meador agreed. "They can put ya to work."

Clay said Stanardsville needs volunteers for both fundraising and firefighting.

"We want people to know we're here and we are volunteers," he said. "I'm all quality over quantity though. I want those willing to do the work and stick around. I don't ever want to see paid, but I know it'll come at some point."

Crocker said the county is coming closer to needing paid firefighters.

"There's a line that you have to decide if the calls are being answered appropriately," he said. "We're getting closer to that; at least in Ruckersville."