

Charles Paullin General News Writing W12

Warren County puts out the call for volunteer firefighters

By Charles Paullin

The Northern Virginia Daily

FRONT ROYAL — Ray Warriner first became a volunteer firefighter in 1973 after he graduated high school. He thought the local fire hall might be a good place to make friends after his family moved to Ranson, West Virginia.

Almost 50 years later, Warriner is still volunteering and now serves as the president of the North Warren Volunteer Fire and Rescue Company.

"I had no intention of getting this involved," Warriner said by email. "We are supposed to have three to five operational officers but our chief (who is a charter member) is the only one. There are not enough seasoned firefighters to hold those other positions."

Warriner's company isn't the only one that doesn't have enough volunteers to fill all the officer positions outlined in the company bylaws.

The number of volunteer firefighters nationwide decreased from 884,600 in 1985 to 682,000 today, according to the National Volunteer Fire Council.

Warren County doesn't have an exact count on how many residents volunteer as firefighters and emergency medical technicians (EMTs). But one way the county tracks volunteer interest is by tallying how many people received a discount on their personal property taxes for the vehicle they use responding to incidents. In 2001, 166 operational and administrative volunteers applied for and received tax relief, according to a report from the Warren County Fire & Rescue Department compiled at The Northern Virginia Daily's request.

In 2011, 97 volunteers received the benefits.

In 2021, just 69 received the benefits.

"It's kind of wild," said Brenda Diehl, Warren County Fire and Rescue Department's recruitment and retention coordinator, after examining the numbers.

She added that the numbers come with some caveats, such as not all volunteers apply for the tax relief. Each company also has different eligibility standards for volunteers, and some volunteers may not qualify for tax relief having joined later in the year.

In 2018, the county wrote off \$21,287.05 in tax relief for 77 volunteers at all eight county stations and county residents who volunteer for Middletown or Chester Gap since those companies respond to Warren County events, Diehl said. That averages to \$276 in tax relief per volunteer that year.

Still, there's no doubt the numbers are declining, and veterans in the volunteer system point to several factors keeping people from serving.

First, there's not as much work flexibility. When farming and big families were more prevalent, it was easier to recruit volunteers.

“[Farming] freed up the family patriarch to [go] volunteer,” Diehl said.

Another obstacle is the amount of training required since volunteers must attend classes three days a week and on Saturday, Warriner said. In total, over 250 hours of training is required for both the EMT and firefighter certifications. In 1973, the firefighter course was 32 hours and the EMT course was 81 hours.

“The extra training means our first responders are better trained to handle situations but causes a decline in overall numbers because they can't give up that much time in today's fast world,” Warriner said.

History

The Warren County fire and EMS service system was run entirely by volunteers working out of eight stations until 1996, when former Chief Richard “Dickie” Mabie was hired to bring them all under the oversight of the Warren County Department of Fire & Rescue.

Today, only two stations — Fortsmouth and Shenandoah Shores — remain strictly volunteer. During the day, when volunteers are at their paid jobs, calls for service to those two stations are sent to the next nearest station to avoid any delay in a response, Diehl said.

But only two firefighters for every 24-hour shift are staffed at each station. In 2019, the Warren County Department of Fire & Rescue had 34 paid employees, 12 part-time employees, and 65 operational volunteers. A recent grant application to staff two paid firefighters at Fortsmouth and Shenandoah Shores stations was rejected, Diehl said.

The county has about 45 different emergency vehicles throughout the county, Diehl said. It would be ideal to have about 90 volunteers able to respond to incidents, so that two can ride on each vehicle if needed and provide a response more quickly.

But because of the lack of volunteers as well as paid firefighters, several companies must respond to each incident to try to get as many bodies at the site as possible, Warriner said, not necessarily because of the size of the incident.

It's a stark contrast from the past.

"I can remember ... there would be so many members at a meeting that if a call came in an officer would have to hand pick people who would respond," Warriner said. "Otherwise, they would be sitting on each others laps or laying in the hose bed. ([Can't] believe we did that)."

Time required

Volunteering takes about five to 10 hours a week to respond to incidents and about four hours to help out administratively. "I think about the about the amount of time I sit in my recliner scrolling Facebook and watching TV," Diehl said. "I could be doing something more productive for the community but after a long day's work, sometimes it's all that your brain can manage."

Chloe Via, a 17-year-old volunteer at the Front Royal station acknowledged the lack of volunteers her age.

"This time in life can be very complicated and stressful between finishing high school, applying for colleges (if that's something you're wanting to pursue), working, and spending time with your family and friends," Via wrote in an email. "Trying to volunteer on top of that can be hard, but if fire and rescue is a career path that you want to follow, volunteering is a perfect way to get ahead."

The pandemic has added to difficulties to the job, Diehl said. There's always the ever-looming concern of contracting COVID at an incident, plus the requirement to get fitted for an N-95 mask and the 45-minutes required to disinfect equipment after a response.

The pandemic also limited the number of fundraisers that departments could hold. The fundraisers help pay for a station's vehicles, buildings and more.

"Can you imagine the county having to pay for all of its stations to have adequate full-time help?" Diehl asked. "If you lost the volunteer system, the fundraising — that would go by the wayside. It makes a big difference, but it takes people to get it done."

The pandemic has provided an opportunity to get more volunteers as more people can work from home and may be able to respond to calls, Diehl said. That means less commuting time and more time for training, Diehl said.

Recruiting

To find volunteers, the department partners with local schools and attends volunteer fairs, Diehl said. To streamline the process, the department has created a standard application for all the departments, and certifications gained locally can be used in other jurisdictions. That provides a good opportunity for future healthcare or military professionals to get hands-on experience, Diehl said.

"They value that kind of medical background," Diehl said.

Volunteerism also provides an opportunity to give back to the community, something that is needed in today's world, Diehl said. In 2019, 70% of members of the county's department who responded to an anonymous survey said their number one reason for volunteering was to give back to the community, Diehl said.

"I'm just hoping we can figure out what the construct of modern society how we can continue to have good-hearted people in the community want to volunteer and give up their time in ways that fit into their lives and enrich them," Diehl said. "Because that's what it's about, taking care of the community and the people who are trying to take care of the community."

Anyone interested in becoming a volunteer for Warren County can visit warrencountyfire.com/join-us or call 540-636-3830.

Officials: Shenandoah County will always need volunteer firefighters

By Charles Paullin
The Northern Virginia Daily

Even as Shenandoah County hires more career firefighters, volunteers will always be needed, fire and rescue department officials say.

"There's no way career could answer all the calls, and there's no way that volunteers could answer all the calls," said Melissa Edmondson, recruitment and retention officer with the Shenandoah County Fire and Rescue Department. "We're all in this as a team, and that is something we push so hard as a system."

The county had 49 paid positions throughout the units as of August 2020 and added 14 positions in October 2020. Although hard statistics on the number of volunteers within the county were not immediately available, Edmondson said, they are on the decline.

"It's not just a matter of bringing folks in and getting them to volunteer. If they want to be an operational provider, they're facing six months worth of training, weekdays and weekends," said Shenandoah County Fire Chief Tim Williams. "That's both for fire as well as [Emergency Medical Services]. It's a ferocious commitment for a volunteer."

Shenandoah County is like many rural counties in the country that need more volunteers. Data from the National Volunteer Fire Council shows the number of volunteer firefighters has decreased from 884,600 in 1985 to 682,000 today.

The Shenandoah County Fire & Rescue Department has 11 different volunteer fire and EMS entities throughout the county.

There are five standalone fire companies in Woodstock, Strasburg, Edinburg, Toms Brook and Conicville; two standalone EMS companies in Strasburg and Woodstock; and four companies that offer both fire and EMS responses in Fort Valley, Mount Jackson, New Market and Orkney Springs.

In late 2021, a member of the Strasburg Volunteer Fire Department spoke to the town council with an update on operations, stating there were about 40 volunteers, but only about a dozen were actively responding to incidents. Paid firefighters from the county respond to incidents during the day while volunteers are working their full-time jobs, the member said.

“You put a paycheck to it and everybody shows up,” the member said as to why it’s difficult to get volunteer members.

Years ago employers would let volunteers leave their jobs to respond to a call, but most employers these days don’t often allow volunteers to respond to calls while they’re working, Edmondson said. Couples who needed two incomes to pay the bills also caused a drop off of volunteer firefighters actively responding to calls, Edmondson added.

“In the past the women were the homemakers,” Edmondson said. “That’s not how that is anymore. Both parents work, so they don’t have enough time to go into the firehouse like they used to.”

More people are also seeking employment out of the area, which limits their ability to volunteer, Edmondson said.

Saving money

But volunteers are vital to the safety of the community and are provide big cost savings. In addition to saving the county money on salaries and benefits, volunteers save taxpayers money in other ways.

The volunteer stations pay for their own equipment and vehicles. A new ambulance can cost an estimated \$325,000, a new fire engine \$500,000, and a ladder engine \$1.2 million, Williams said.

“When you start adding all that stuff up of what the community provides to the volunteers — everything that the volunteers own comes through donations from citizens,” Williams said, pointing to bingo games and other fundraisers. “The citizens pay for it in one way or another, but if government had to fund that it would be tremendous.”

Recruitment

Edmondson’s position was started in 2019 to help draw in members to the county’s fire and rescue services.

To find more volunteers, Edmondson visits schools to share information, but the COVID-19 pandemic has limited the number of visits she can make.

The pandemic did bring out a few more volunteers, Edmondson said, as she heard one that person stated they didn’t realize how much EMTs were needed.

The county has also implemented a peer support group to help first responders handle the trauma that can follow working different incidents. A buddy-system pairing veteran responders with new recruits gives the newcomers a chance to make friends with someone already in the system so they aren’t going it alone from the beginning.

“Truly, if you’ve got one bad egg in the system, it could potentially ruin it for everyone else, so you’ve just got to make sure that you reiterate the family aspect,” Edmondson said. “We’re all here to do the same thing.”

In addition to the camaraderie, there are other perks to volunteering. Local restaurants often offer discounts to volunteers, and there’s a \$25 reduction on personal property taxes each year for county residents who volunteer, Edmondson said. There’s also the idea of implementing a retirement program for volunteers, but it could be a while before the county takes action on that, Edmondson said.

The volunteer system is important to the community, and Williams reiterated the absolute need for more recruits. “I don’t know that there will ever be a time when Shenandoah County won’t need volunteer fire and EMS personnel,” Williams said.

Anyone looking to sign up as a volunteer in Shenandoah County can contact Edmondson at 540-459-9105.

Need for volunteer firefighters a nationwide problem

By Charles Paullin

The Northern Virginia Daily

Throughout the country, the number of volunteer firefighters is on the decline.

Data from the National Volunteer Fire Council shows the number of volunteer firefighters has decreased from 884,600 in 1985 to 682,000 today.

Some 64% of all U.S. fire departments are strictly volunteer, and 54 percent of all firefighters are volunteer, the news release states.

On the state level, 71% of the 552 fire departments in Virginia rely on volunteers. About 70% of all Virginia firefighters are volunteers, the release states.

Chris Eudaily, executive director of the Virginia Fire Chiefs Association, said the lack of volunteers has become a problem.

“I think that you’ve seen the transition happen slowly over the last five to six to 10 years,” said Eudaily, who previously served as chief of Spotsylvania County Fire, Emergency Medical Services and Emergency Management before he retired. “It’s really getting to the proportion now where it’s really becoming a real challenge for a lot of communities.”

The urban parts of the state, such as Richmond and Northern Virginia, aren’t facing the same problem because so many of their firefighters are paid. But in more rural areas, which rely on volunteer help, many people have to commute away from their communities for their jobs.

The amount of training required is another stumbling block for some people.

“Not only once they get trained...most of the departments have minimum staffing requirements in order to remain active,” Eudaily said. “It’s like anything else, if you’re a plumber and you don’t go out and use that trade every day, you’re not going to be as proficient with it as if you went out and did it every day.”

Some communities offer incentives, Eudaily said. For example, Spotsylvania County gives a \$250 a month retirement stipend for volunteers who put in 25 years of service, but that didn’t draw in as many people as anticipated.

Some localities pay a \$5 or \$10 stipend for responding to a call, Eudaily said. But the cost of gas can keep some people from volunteering, particularly teenagers.

“We haven’t found any magic bullet,” Eudaily said.

A lack of funding from the state is another problem.

The state Compensation Board pays for a portion of the salaries for sheriff’s office deputies and other law enforcement members, but the fire departments don’t get that, Eudaily said.

Fire departments do get a 1% surcharge from fire insurance funds that each locality receives based on the number of policies within their jurisdiction, Eudaily said. The Warren County Department of Fire and Rescue purchased new thermal imaging cameras earlier this year with some of that money.

Also, a portion of \$6.25 collected with every vehicle registration is returned to localities based on the number of registrations, he added.

But the funding difference between what law enforcement and fire departments get from the state is driving Eudaily to educate legislators, he said.

“There are a lot of active volunteer firefighter organizations, but they struggle from one month to the next just to keep fuel in the firetrucks and ambulances in order to be able to respond to calls,” Eudaily said.

Eudaily pointed out the cost saving benefits of volunteer firefighters since the average starting salary for a firefighter running between about \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year.

“It’s a pretty significant investment to put into someone to try to get them on board,” Eudaily said. “And if you have frequent turnover then you can imagine that’s going to end up catching up with the locality too as far as trying to replace those people...If you can keep somebody for more than about five years, you got a pretty good chance of holding on to them.”

It’s up to local leaders to decide if they want to keep a volunteer service going, Eudaily said.

“There should always be a place for somebody who wants to make the significant investment of time and dedication to that locality to serve, that they want to serve,” Eudaily said. “But...that’s going to be a decision that is left up to each locality across Virginia.”