

pressconnects.com

This is a printer friendly version of an article from pressconnects.com
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

Sunday January 13, 2008

Firefighting distress call: Broome needs more volunteers County officials plan open houses to fill range of service needs

By [Jim Wright](#)
Press & Sun-Bulletin

National advertising campaigns aimed at recruiting volunteer firefighters often ask this question: What would you do if you reported your house was on fire and nobody responded?

The Broome County Office of Emergency Services doesn't quite have that fear for its 33 departments, according to Director and Fire Coordinator Brett Chellis, but many of the smaller, rural departments in the county may not have enough volunteers at any given time to respond properly, fire officials admit.

So, to bolster an often-sagging membership, the Broome County Firefighters Association and the Broome County Fire Chiefs Association will combine efforts with county volunteer departments Saturday to try to recruit new members. Stations across the county will hold open houses between noon and 3 p.m. Fire officials say there are about 1,300 volunteers signed up across Broome County, but no one knows how many of them are really active.

The open house idea was first conceived by the Union Center Fire Company and later expanded by the 20-month-old Recruitment and Retention Committee of the Firefighters Association.

"We are looking for a county function," said Robert Shaller, a 45-year member of the Port Crane Fire Company and member of the committee. "I don't know of any department that really has an excess of members."

"The committee has been working very hard to put this together. We hope to get as many people out as possible to see what our departments are all about, and consider volunteering their time," said Broome County Fire Chiefs Association President Tom Giblin of Hillcrest. "Unfortunately, the days of the volunteer firefighter are kind of dwindling."

"Some young people are starting to join the fire service again," Chellis said, "but it just takes so much time today."

"And with the burnout we are experiencing, many of us need some new, fresh faces," Chief David Silverstein of the Maine Fire Co. said.

MONEY-SAVERS FOR COUNTIES

Approximately two-thirds of Broome County residents get their fire protection from volunteers, even though the county has the largest contingent of paid firefighters in the Southern Tier, according to the recruitment and retention committee. The county has paid departments in Binghamton, Endicott and Johnson City.



Ken Roe, senior New York state fire instructor of Broome County, observes firefighter trainees from volunteer departments across the county as they learn to attack a fire Tuesday at the Fred Singer Fire Training Site in Vestal.

Photos by REBECCA TOWNS /
Press & Sun-Bulletin



Trainees from volunteer fire departments learn to attack a fire at the Fred Singer Fire Training Site in Vestal.

VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER REQUIREMENTS

* **RESIDENCY:** A person must be a resident of the fire district where he/she is seeking to become a member. An active firefighter in New York state can belong to only one fire department. However, if a person spends a significant amount of time in a fire district other than his home district -- because of employment or school, for example -- that person can become a participating member in another department, as long as the

But having an all-volunteer department is a money-saver for counties. In "Tax Savings and Economic Impact of the Volunteer Firefighter," a report commissioned by Firemen's Association of State of New York (FASNY) and completed July 3, 2003, by the American Economic Group of Washington, D.C., the estimated cost to convert Sen. Thomas W. Libous' 52nd Senate District into a full-service department manned by paid workers would cost an estimated \$43,093,490. This would include an estimated \$34,200,419 in pay and benefits for 732 firefighters.

The same study for Donna A. Lupardo's 126th Assembly District estimated a staff of 530 firefighters would cost \$38,859,260, of which \$30,858,295 would go to salaries and benefits. The median base pay for career firefighters at the time of the study was \$55,453 and included salary, overtime and benefits.

Young and active volunteers are not all that the departments are looking for on recruitment day. Chellis noted the need for drivers, fire police, emergency medical personnel, fire prevention educators, truck and station repair and maintenance personnel.

"We can use a lot of people working in their everyday professions and not actual fire suppression," Chellis said. "Educators can do fire prevention. Business people can do the books. Technology people can teach computer skills and even handle some of the reports to give department members more time to address firefighting."

FINDING NEW MEMBERS

Even the county's two largest volunteer departments -- Vestal, with about 140 active firefighters, and Endwell, with some 60 to 70 active members, will participate in the open houses.

"Our active numbers are pretty good right now, but we still want to keep our doors open to new members," Endwell Fire Chief John Ruck said. "During 2006, we took in a lot of young people and 80 to 90 percent of them have remained as members."

Vestal, which for decades has had one of the largest active volunteer departments in the state, will have open house hours at all four of its fire stations.

"Our numbers appear to be increasing, but we could always use more. It's hard to keep young guys today because many of them are going away to school and some don't ever come back into the area," new Chief Douglas Rose said.

At the other end of the spectrum is the Ouaquaga Fire Company.

"We have been talking about the open house. We really only have 12 members. That's a real low number and we are hoping to pick up a couple," Chief Harry Cook said.

Broome County's second-smallest departments are Castle Creek and Nanticoke, each with 15 members, according to statistics in the Broome County Firefighter's Association's 2005-06 directory.

The eighth- and ninth-smallest departments are Hillcrest and Lisle, each with 23 members, but the Hillcrest fire district covers 2 square miles while the Lisle district covers 100 square miles.

department where he is an active member grants consent.

* AGE: Varies from department to department, with the youngest being 16. Many require an applicant to be at least 18 years old. Check with your local fire department for their requirements.

* PRIOR TRAINING: None

* STATE-REQUIRED TRAINING AFTER MEMBERSHIP: 15-hour Occupational Safety and Health Administration Training, initially, followed by an eight-hour refresher course annually. Additional annual hours are required for hazardous material or emergency medical service certificate.

* STATE-REQUIRED FIRE TRAINING AFTER MEMBERSHIP: None. Required fire training is mandated by individual departments. The New York State Office of Fire Prevention and Control requires the most training -- a 28-week, 80-hour Firefighter One course for active interior firefighters. Non-interior firefighters may take a 9-week, 27-hour Scene Support Operations course. The courses are taught by local state certified fire instructors, both at the New York State Academy of Fire Science at Montour Falls or at specific county or department locations. There are 142 of these courses in 12 basic categories.

INCENTIVES:

* To provide a very needed service for one's community and neighbors.

* All active fire and emergency medical service volunteers are eligible for a \$200 tax credit on their 2007 New York state income tax return.

Sources: Office of Fire Prevention and Control, Broome County Firefighters Association, Broome County Office of Emergency Services, New York State Association of Fire Chiefs, Firemen's Association of the State of New York, New York Department of State and New York State Office of Fire

The countywide effort to address recruitment and retention is believed to be somewhat unique, although Albany County tried a similar approach a number of years ago, according to Thomas Wutz, state Fire Prevention and Control Chief of the Fire Service Bureau.

"Volunteer fire service membership, based on the fact we haven't had to cancel any of the state's Firefighter I training courses, appears to be relatively steady today," Wutz said.

"We can always use some new faces. We never seem to have enough manpower," West Endicott Fire Chief Robert Miner said.

Some departments are even questioning if they have the manpower to run the open house for three hours at a station. The Windsor Fire Department will discuss that availability when it meets Monday, according to Fire Chief William English.

FASNY used "Recruitment and Retention" as its theme during 2006-07, Wutz said. "We definitely need help, a lot of help."

The fire service is awaiting a state report, conducted in 2006-07, on recruitment and retention to be released by the governor's office, Wutz said.

Volunteers provide a great service to the community, not only responding to fires, but rescues, emergency medical calls, automobile accidents, floods, storms and a variety of other issues, according to Giblin. Volunteers also assist their communities in many other ways, such as helping with traffic control at parades and other festivities.

The Broome County Recruitment and Retention Program received a recent boost from U.S News & World Report. The cover story of the magazine's Dec. 31, 2007-Jan. 7, 2008, issue was "50 Ways to Improve Your Life in 2008," and among the recommendations was "volunteering for your fire department."

The report suggested reasons to volunteer, including camaraderie and the quieter satisfaction of public service. The report said 72 percent of the nation's firefighters are volunteers and their numbers have declined 8 percent since 1984. It also notes volunteers face the same challenges and same dangers as professionals. It also draws attention to the need for non-emergency staff for support roles.

People unable to stop at their local fire station Saturday can call the Fire Coordinator's Office, 778-1208, e-mail the Broome County Firefighter's Association at broomecofire@stny.rr.com or call the national fire recruitment line, 1-800-FIRELINE.

STORYCHAT   Post a Comment  [View All Comments](#)

Like the paid firefighters don't use scare tactics!!!!
Please they wrote the book on it.

Posted by: **polski** on Mon Jan 14, 2008 1:43 pm

How's about if you're on welfare or unemployment, you MUST sign up for volunteer work. Firepeople, libraries, maintenance, city crews, street clean-up and repair, etc.

Posted by: **Mikey** on Mon Jan 14, 2008 1:42 pm


The lead paragraph of this story in my opinion

Prevention and Control.

Related material:

- [Fire stations participating in open house](#)

-  [Finding Firefighters](#)

-  [Binghamton area firefighters feel the heat](#)

makes the press fear mongers, "What would you do if you reported your house was on fire and nobody responded?". Will the editors of this paper do an editorial on scare tactics that are being used by the volunteers and the press to get their point across?

Posted by: **just the facts** on Mon Jan 14, 2008 11:28 am

Most of my life has been spent living in volunteer areas. I realize that does make a difference in time response. If volunteer stations were asked, how of them have people there during their personal time just so there is quicker response. I don't mean all the time but there are some who will spend some evenings, etc., at the station so they can get to the emergency asap, and they aren't getting paid for it. They have their jobs and family to take care of. How many people give that much of themselves. So Ken Roe made a very stupid judgement call. How much influence has he given to the area in firefighting which can and has saved lives and property. I for one have made many stupid mistakes in my lifetime, and probably would have been put down also, but nobody was there to catch it on film. Does anyone NOT have a skeleton in their closet? I know I don't. ?

Posted by: **courtin** on Mon Jan 14, 2008 6:29 am

library,
Ken Roe made 1 error in judgement but many hundreds of good calls at fires and in giving professional training to firefighters both paid and unpaid. He is an excellent teacher with both head knowledge and first hand experience fighting fires. I for one certainly try to live by the (let he who is without sin cast the first stone) No rocks in my hands.

Posted by: **ahhh** on Sun Jan 13, 2008 9:07 pm

 [Post a Comment](#)  [View All Comments](#)