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Firefighter volunteers dwindling at local companies

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 By Len Barcosky, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Bob Donaldson/Post-Gazette

Volunteer firefighters enrolled in the FireVEST program work together to extinguish a propane tank fire in a drill at the Allegheny County Fire Academy in North Park. From left are Melissa Hey, Peebles VFD; Chris Lau, Moon VFD; Mike Harris, Broughton VFD; and Orlando Burge, Quail VFD.

When a fire siren sounded in the early 1970s in many small Pennsylvania towns, business owners and bankers would be among the volunteers rushing to respond.

"You don't see that happening too much anymore," state Fire Commissioner Edward A. Mann said. "We're not getting as many white-collar people and professionals joining fire departments."

Or volunteers in general.

Commissioner Mann, who grew up in Bellefonte, Centre County, said many fire chiefs across the state are reporting across-the-board recruitment and retention problems.

The number of volunteer firefighters in Pennsylvania ranges from 45,000 to 50,000, he estimated. Those numbers are well below an estimated 75,000 volunteers in the early 1990s and 300,000 in 1975.

Responding to the problem, the state Legislature and municipal officials have taken steps to try to boost the ranks of firefighters. One current effort is a bill that would permit local governments and school districts to give tax breaks to volunteers. That measure has passed the state House and is being considered by the Senate.

Fire company officials point to a number of causes for the decline in membership.

"Volunteerism is down in general," said North Huntingdon Commissioner Richard Gray. "The increasing time commitment keeps some people away."

Volunteer firefighters are expected to take weeks of Level 1 training before they can go into the field. Members also must attend regular drills and, in many companies, help with extensive fundraising.

Mark Lauer, president of the Butler County Fire Chiefs Association, agreed that many potential volunteers no longer have the time. In many families, both parents work and their children are involved in more after-school activities, he said.

Departments also lose young volunteers when they go to college or have to take out-of-town jobs, Commissioner Mann said.

Lack of volunteers available to answer calls is especially acute during the day, when most people are working, officials said.

"We don't have the shift workers since the steel mills closed," Moon Fire Marshal Charles Belgie said. "That's our biggest problem."

He said he was grateful to local companies such as ARL Inc., a Moon-based trucking firm that allows its employees to

answer emergency calls.

Moon employees who are volunteer firefighters also are available to respond during the day. Franklin Park has a similar arrangement with its municipal workers.

Seeking to encourage volunteer recruitment and retention, the Legislature last year passed a measure offering a \$100 state income-tax credit to volunteer firefighters and emergency service providers. The program is expected to cost the state treasury about \$4.5 million in deferred revenue.

Fire officials said their members were grateful for the gesture, but officials didn't expect it to have much impact.

"One hundred dollars isn't going to provide much of an incentive," Mt. Lebanon Fire Chief Nick Sohyda said.

"But anything is better than nothing," Mt. Lebanon firefighter Tina Cook said. "The \$100 is a start."

"It's a nice gesture," Mr. Lauer said. "We'd like to see more in return for all the hours we have to donate."

In addition to being head of the Butler County fire organization, he is chief of the Unionville department in Center.

Volunteer firefighters in Allegheny County who are interested in more education can qualify for an additional benefit. The FireVEST scholarship program offers tuition and books at Community College of Allegheny County for volunteers willing to serve five years with their local fire department.

Scholarship recipients must maintain an acceptable level of volunteer service, maintain a 2.0 minimum grade point average and take two required courses at the county's Fire Academy.

The FireVEST program, which provides 200 scholarships per year, is a joint effort of the community college and the county.

"We have people studying nursing and enrolled in all kinds of different programs," said Sandy Bayer, a senior administrative assistant at the Fire Academy. "This can be a great recruitment and retention tool."

The deadline for scholarship applications for the spring 2010 semester at community college is Nov. 15. More information about the FireVEST program is available at 412-931-3158, Ext. 5, or on the Web site, www.ccac.edu. Then search for the term "PennVEST."

What else would help firefighters?

"A property tax break, a retirement plan or a reward program for long-term service," suggested Mr. Belgie, the Moon fire marshal. He also serves as chief of the township's four fire stations.

A property- and wage-tax break is the latest measure being considered by the state Legislature.

House Bill 250, which passed 191-0 on July 20, has been sent to the Senate Finance Committee. Sen. Patrick M. Browne, R-Allentown, the Finance Committee chairman, plans to hold hearings on the bill once the Legislature approves a long-delayed state budget.

The House proposal would allow local governments and school districts to provide tax breaks on earned income and property taxes.

The amount of the wage tax break would be set by local officials. The school district property tax credit could be up to 20 percent of the amount owed.

"That sounds like a good incentive," Ross Commissioner Daniel DeMarco said of the proposed legislation. "Either we are going to provide more incentives to attract volunteers, or we will soon be faced with a more serious problem."

That more serious problem would be the need to hire at least some full-time firefighters, he said. The added expense of paying salaries and benefits for firefighters would far exceed the costs of supporting volunteer departments, he predicted.

"People don't realize what a valuable service volunteers provide," said Commissioner Gray of North Huntingdon. "We give our seven fire companies about \$350,000 year. A paid fire company would cost two to three times as much."

But in return for any tax break, communities have the right to expect certain levels of service.

"The state would have to set standards that made sure volunteers are taking part in drills and responding to emergency calls,"

Mr. DeMarco said. "We can't have people sign up and then disappear for six months."

Pennsylvania and many local governments do a good job supporting volunteer fire companies, Commissioner Mann said. He estimated that the state provides about \$150 million in aid for firefighting companies.

"But we need to adopt some additional programs that benefit not the organization, but the individual firefighter," he said.

Fire officials agree, however, that it takes more than financial incentives to draw volunteers.

"First, you have to have an interest in public service and in the job," said Ben Avon Fire Chief Gary Buckman, a 37-year veteran of that department.

Commissioner Mann grew up watching his father dash out of the house to answer fire calls. As soon as he was old enough, he joined Bellefonte's Logan Fire Co. After he retired from a career as a Air Force firefighter, he continued to serve as financial secretary for the East Derry Fire Co. in Mifflin County.

"Either you have that volunteer spirit or you don't," said Mr. Gray, a life member of North Huntingdon's Hartford Heights Volunteer Fire Department.

Len Barcoucky can be reached at lbarcoucky@post-gazette.com or 724-772-0184.

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