

# FireRescue1 News

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## Rural volunteer departments struggle for members

**Editor's note:** What do you think can be done to solve the membership struggles many volunteer departments are facing? Share your thoughts and experiences in the Member Comments section at the end of this article.

The Associated Press

BIG SPRINGS, Neb. — Simple numbers were working against the fire and rescue department in this town of 400 along Interstate 80. Unbeknownst to six people in a Suburban that had just wrecked on the busy interstate, the math didn't favor them either.

"We only had enough people to run one ambulance," said Adam Hayward, an emergency medical technician with Big Springs Fire & Rescue. "We have two, but a lot of times we don't have enough people to run them."

The fire chief called for help from a volunteer department in nearby Julesburg, Colo., and there were no life-threatening injuries. But the 13-mile drive that normally adds 20 to 30 minutes to the response time and highlighted a growing problem that may be compromising public safety, especially in rural areas: Volunteer fire and rescue departments nationwide are struggling with declining membership, increased costs and changing attitudes toward a vocation with roots dating to the early 1700s.



**AP Photo/Scott Kingsley**

Instructor Todd Brim, left, and volunteer firefighters advance toward a propane 'christmas tree' to practice pushing flames away from a valve during the 71st Annual Nebraska State Fire School in Grand Island, Neb.

State and federal lawmakers are taking action to help reverse the trend because volunteers are often the first responders to events ranging from floods to fires, and some say the shortage presents a looming crisis.

"In some communities out there, it's the volunteer fire department or nothing," said U.S. Fire Administrator Gregory Cade. "There's not the economic base to support a career department. So if they can't keep the volunteer fire department viable, then the potential exists that they're not going to have any protection at all."

Volunteer fire and rescue personnel represent 72 percent of the nation's 1.1 million firefighters. More than 50 percent of volunteers are associated with departments that cover areas with populations of less than 2,500, according to the U.S. Fire Administration.

Between 1984 and 2006, the number of volunteers nationwide fell by 8 percent, or nearly 74,000, according to information from the National Fire Protection Association.

During the same period, the number of emergency calls to paid and volunteer departments doubled. The statistics don't break

down the increase based on department, but volunteer chiefs say they're busier than ever.

Fire officials blame the staffing decline on several factors, including increased family demands, employers who are less sympathetic toward community concerns, and regulations that require volunteers to take up to 200 hours worth of training before they can start fighting fires.

"Your mom and your dad was in the fire service and their parents were in the fire service, and it just goes on from generation to generation," said David Finger with the National Volunteer Fire Council. Now, as people move from one community to another, "people kind of lose that connection."

"It makes you wonder where we'll be 20 years from now."

Also, with so many other activities available, the local fire hall is becoming less of a social hub for small communities.

"There's more recreation, there's Internet, there's cable TV," said Sam Love, a former volunteer fire chief who now lobbies for the West Virginia Firemen's Association.

Those distractions also may be contributing to reports of volunteers not responding to their pagers. Others may be reluctant to be rustled out of bed at night, their employers won't let them leave work or they are more selective on which calls to respond to.

"Every time I hear the pager go off, you know, you wonder who's gonna be there and who's not," said Duane Halsema, chief of the McCutchanville Fire Department in Indiana.

Fire Chief Tim McDonald used to be able to count on a dozen or more volunteers from his Mt. Clare, W.Va., department to respond to fire and medical calls.

But now, "sometimes you just don't have anybody to go, especially during the day," he said. Recently he couldn't send a crew to back up an ambulance crew on a medical call.

Fire chiefs are reluctant to talk about delays in response times, but many say they are increasingly turning to their neighbors for help. And even that safety net is sometimes stretched thin.

"I hate to admit it, but there's been more times this year where other departments have had to help us out," said Bill Fortune, the fire chief in Ogallala, Neb., about 20 miles from Big Springs. Of the 75 volunteer positions on the Ogallala department, only 31 are filled.

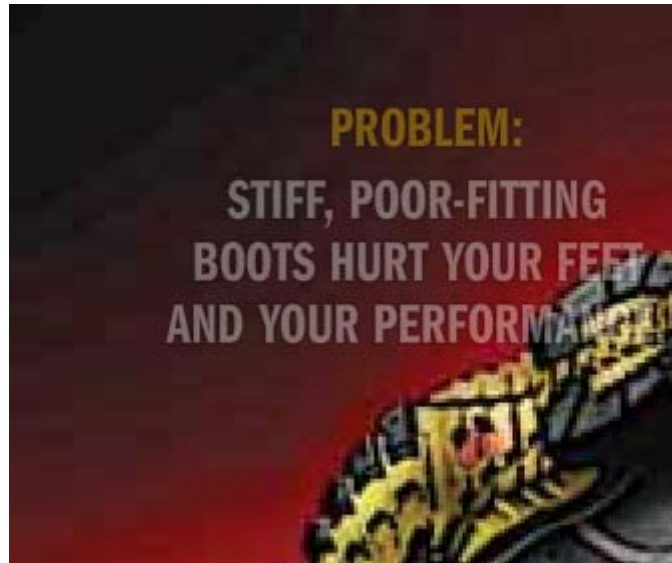
During another recent wreck on I-80 near Big Springs, no volunteers at all showed up and the Julesburg department again took the call. The reason: Big Springs and Ogallala firefighters were helping put out a fire about 10 miles away.

Cade, the U.S. fire administrator, was unaware of any communities being sued over slow response times, but "it's not to say it's not going on."

#### **New laws**

This year, Colorado lawmakers passed a law barring employers from firing or disciplining employees who leave work to respond to emergencies. Nebraska lawmakers passed a law this year that bars employers from punishing employees who arrive at work late because they have responded to emergencies.

Other states have offered financial carrots to attract volunteers, and separate bills pending in Congress



“ I think the government, whether it be state or Federal, should offer some sort of tax rebate or tax credit for volunteers. ”

— 'Ellyngerb'  
FireRescue1 Member

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would give volunteers greater tax exemptions for mileage and help departments with fuel costs.

Small town chiefs have also dreamed up their own promotions, from paying volunteers a nominal fee, to rewarding firefighters with golf outings, movie tickets or banquets, to providing services such as free baby-sitting.

Things started to turn around in San Juan County, N.M., when fire Chief Larry Marcum launched a \$50,000-a-year advertising campaign that included recruiting videos on YouTube.

In Ogallala, employers who let workers respond to emergency calls get a steak dinner once a year, courtesy of the local fire department.

"We pat them on the back as hard as we can," Fortune said.

Measures approved this year in state legislatures include:

- Colorado passed a law that bars large employers from firing employees who leave work to respond to emergencies.
- Nebraska lawmakers passed a law that bars employers from punishing employees who arrive to work late because they have responded to emergencies.
- Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell recently signed a law that offers volunteer emergency responders a \$100 income tax credit.
- Louisiana lawmakers passed a similar measure last year.



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