

# Staffing, Recruiting, and Retaining Volunteer Firefighters:

## Best-Practice Recommendations for the City of Victoria's Volunteer Fire Department



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### Prepared on Behalf of

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and  
The City of Victoria Volunteer Fire  
Department

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## Table of Contents

<b>Overview .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Staffing .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Operating Procedures for Firefighters.....</b>	<b>2</b>
Duty Crews.....	2
Specialization.....	3
Turnout gear (gear bags).....	3
<b>Support staff.....</b>	<b>3</b>
Interns.....	3
Auxiliary groups .....	3
Volunteer Support Staff.....	3
<b>Recruiting.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Intrinsic Motivation .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Competitors and Differentiating Characteristics.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Marketing .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Helping prospective recruits to decide whether to apply .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Retention.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Time Commitment.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Motivation .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Burnout .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Communication .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Presentation to City of Victoria Fire Department and City Administrator .....</b>	<b>8</b>

## Overview

The City of Victoria's Fire Department (VFD) posed two main questions for our Resilient Communities Project study:

1. *Is the current staffing model for the fire department the most appropriate for Victoria given its growing population?*
2. *What are state and national best practices for recruitment and retention of firefighters?*

Our recommendations are based on information from a broad array of sources. We consulted national best practice guides, trade journals/magazines, academic journals, specialized book, and studies by independent researchers, volunteer fire departments, and regional and national volunteer firefighter organizations. We also conducted interviews with city officials and collected survey responses from VFD's current volunteer firefighters.

In an attempt to address all of the components of VFD's questions, we have organized our research into three main topics: (1) staffing, (2) recruitment, and (3) retention. The extended executive summary that follows highlights our key findings and recommendations.

## Staffing

Potential staffing models for VFD have been synthesized from our interviews with city officials, reviews of current models from cities comparable to Victoria, and from assessing the city's needs. We propose a few alternative models for the city to follow and we provide a rough timeline for when to implement these models. Staffing models are broken down into two broad categories: (a) changes to operating procedures for the firefighters and (b) implementing support staff positions to ease the burden on firefighters.

### Operating Procedures for Firefighters

We reviewed a wide variety of staffing options and operating procedures for volunteer fire departments and identified three especially relevant options: (a) duty crews, (b) specialization, and (c) turnout gear or gear bags.

#### Duty Crews

We recommend that VFD consider implementing duty crews 5-10 years down the line. While more expensive than the current paid-on-call model, duty crews offer a variety of benefits that outweigh the increased monetary cost associated with them. Namely, duty crews provide predictable schedules, fast responses during peak call times, and extra staffing for station maintenance during downtime. To optimize duty crews, it is important to examine trends in calls to ensure duty crews are scheduled during times most prone to emergency calls. It is also beneficial to take volunteers for shifts to minimize backlash from the firefighters. With the present call volumes, it is difficult to identify blocks of time when duty crews would be necessary; continuous monitoring of call types and call volumes as the

community grows will be necessary to decide when implementing duty crews will become a viable option.

### **Specialization**

Considering Victoria's FD already has a rotating-specialization program, we propose a more formalized specialization model. Given Victoria's needs, the proposed specialization model would revolve around medical calls and non-medical calls. This would also help in recruitment by hiring a more diverse set of people and by reducing the overall call volume for employees. The current state of training may make a formal specialization difficult to implement but, with a move toward online training and inter-community training collaborations, it may become much more feasible.

### **Turnout gear (gear bags)**

Many departments comparable to Victoria have had great success after providing firefighters with turnout gear (i.e., a duffle bag of essential equipment kept with the individual firefighters). We recommend Victoria's FD consider turnout gear as an option for the very near future. Turnout gear helps to achieve the fast response times usually associated with duty crews by allowing firefighters to travel directly to the scene without first stopping by the station. The use of turnout gear will become increasingly helpful as the city limits expand and VFD assumes responsibility of a larger geographic area.

### **Support staff**

We recommend that VFD consider reducing the workload of firefighters' off-task duties (e.g., organizing the annual open house) by enlisting the help of the community. A variety of supporting roles were examined, but three are identified for potential use in Victoria: (a) interns, (b) auxiliary groups, and (c) volunteer support staff.

### **Interns**

A variety of non-emergency tasks may be delegated to local teens and young adults (e.g., students from nearby high schools and colleges) to ease the burden on firefighters, as well as build community support for VFD. Many FDs across the US have had success with creating internship opportunities, both paid and unpaid. Interns have carried out roles such as public outreach, event coordination, and equipment inspection and maintenance, which may benefit the FD by reducing the workload of its volunteer firefighters.

### **Auxiliary groups**

Typically, auxiliary groups are comprised of firefighters' significant others. They provide a number of behind-the-scenes services to benefit the firefighters and the FD as a whole. Most notably, auxiliaries have prepared home-cooked meals for FDs during training nights. Auxiliary groups do not necessarily serve a single purpose; they can be dynamic so as to meet the needs of the overall FD.

### **Volunteer Support Staff**

Lastly, we encourage VFD to seek volunteers from the community to meet the FD's specific needs. These volunteers could be brought in on a recurring basis (e.g., a person that spends a few hours a week helping with recruitment) or on an as-needed basis (e.g., a person that helps set up the ice fishing contest or coordinates open house activities). Additionally, the

FD may recruit volunteers to help on a single project, such as building a website or handling social media.

## Recruiting

Based on a review of best practices from around the country, as well as survey responses for VFD's firefighters, we have identified a number of recommendations that could increase the efficacy of VFD's recruiting efforts. These recommendations rely on an appreciation of (a) the intrinsic motivation of volunteer firefighters, (b) the types of experiences and opportunities offered by VFD, (c) the characteristics of VFD that differentiate it from other local volunteer organizations, (d) marketing principles, and (e) best practices for helping prospective recruits to decide whether to apply.

### Intrinsic Motivation

We recommend emphasizing the intrinsically motivating aspects of the job (e.g., helping the community, helping those in need, taking on challenges) in recruiting messages and featuring related themes prominently in ads. These types of motivations are strongly aligned with the self-reported motivations of national and local samples of firefighters. These needs often go unmet in people's "day jobs" and are more important to volunteers than monetary compensation, especially in a high-median-income community like Victoria.

### Competitors and Differentiating Characteristics

Regarding the aspects that set VFD apart from other volunteer organizations, we recommend that VFD focus on correcting misconceptions about the fire department by informing the public about what it does. While we know that many of Victoria's citizens are unaware that the fire department relies on volunteers, it is also highly likely that they are unaware of the types of calls the department handles. It may interest the community to know that roughly half of all calls are rescue and EMS calls and that fires represent a relative minority of the workload. Awareness of common call types and frequency of calls may ease potential applicants' misplaced concerns about combating fires on a daily basis and encourage more people to volunteer.

### Marketing

Marketing and sales techniques are central to successful recruitment. From this standpoint, we offer a number of key recommendations:

- Encourage each member of the department to engage in personal recruiting as the department's primary mode of recruitment.
- Train volunteers in personal recruiting to give them the confidence and information to convey realistic expectations that are consistent with the department's brand.
- Use department-specific social media accounts to share news, safety information, and departmental advertisements with followers.
- Create branded advertisements to represent the fire department in effective, attention-grabbing ways.
- Pilot test each advertisement to increase its effectiveness and refine its appearance, message, and theme.

Personal recruiting, which is based on the strategies behind personal selling, should be the department's primary method of recruitment. Over half of the firefighters surveyed said that they joined the department because of the influence of family and/or friends; this number closely resembles data from fire departments nationwide. Referrals and recommendations are not only more effective in building recruits' interest, but are also associated with better staffing outcomes for the organization (e.g., better-qualified hires, better performance, and longer tenures). By formalizing this already existing recruiting method, VFD will be able to reach more individuals who would be willing to join the fire service.

Careful attention to the development of appealing advertisements is critical in creating successful ads. Using slogans, images, and recurring themes can take "help wanted" advertisements to the next level. Pilot audiences can provide high-value feedback during the development stages and help create more effective ads by identifying and correcting aspects of the ads that do not work as expected. Nearby high schools' and colleges' business and graphic design programs could be excellent sources of assistance in ad development while simultaneously providing students with applied experiences.

Use of department-run social media accounts could boost community engagement by educating the public about home and fire safety, posting news about fire-department events, and sharing images, videos, and summaries from calls and training events. Some nearby departments log their call responses via social media, along with pictures, which gives the community opportunities to see what firefighters do. Effective use of social media, along with continued presence at community events, can increase awareness of the fire department and build an audience who will be receptive to recruiting messages.

### **Helping prospective recruits to decide whether to apply**

After a successful marketing campaign, the department will still need to help prospective recruits decide whether to apply. The current practices of hosting informational nights, giving realistic previews, and following up with interested individuals should certainly continue. In addition to current practices, we recommend creating shadowing opportunities, developing videos, and allowing people to try out firefighting tasks. Shadowing on training nights could be a valuable experience for prospective recruits to see firsthand what life in the department is like. Videos and sampling opportunities could also be helpful for people to see or try out tasks that firefighters typically do. Additionally, we recommend considering a formal mentoring program for all levels of the department. Such a program could ease concerns about joining the department and completing training by assuring applicants that they will have support throughout their time with VFD.

## **Retention**

We reviewed the research literature and best practices from across the nation and around the world in order to identify a number of recommendations that could increase the efficiency of Victoria FD's retention efforts. We also collected survey responses from VFD's firefighters to gain deeper insights into their needs. We examined a number of major



retention challenges, namely (a) time commitment, (b) motivation, (c) burnout, and (d) communication. We have provided recommendations to tackle these challenges.

### **Time Commitment**

The amount of time Victoria volunteer firefighters have to invest in the department is the leading reason that Victoria volunteer firefighters leave the position. Training requirements and community activities for the department often result in conflicts with family needs and full-time work. Since the vast majority of Victoria firefighters are employed full time, we recommend recognizing companies that are supportive of volunteer firefighters' service to their community (i.e., maintaining a list of accolades for supportive employers, recognition through a monthly newsletter or social media). The survey results indicate that all firefighters either have to make up the time they missed for calls or do not get compensation for time-off due to fire department duties. Recognizing companies could boost employer cooperation by emphasizing the importance of firefighters and enhancing the reputation of companies. We also recommend adjusting the timeline and format of trainings to the burden of time commitments (e.g., providing online training, offering tiered training for specialization in collaboration with neighboring departments). Lastly, providing daycare service could help alleviate time pressures for single parents, stay-at-home parents, and dual-working households. Our survey of VFD firefighters indicates that one-fourth of firefighters are parents to children under the age of five. Partnering with community groups or nearby daycare centers could provide viable childcare options for VFD's volunteers.

### **Motivation**

We recommend motivating the firefighters through (a) incentives, (b) recognition, and (c) more social gatherings. Even though Victoria is a high-median-income community, providing monetary incentives could still enhance firefighters' levels of motivation. VFD could coordinate with local stores to provide discounts to firefighters in exchange for recognition (i.e., at stores or through newsletters or social media) of the stores' support for volunteer firefighters. Their recognition could advertise the stores and enhance their reputations as good businesses. Also, recognizing firefighters internally and externally may enhance the commitment of firefighters to VFD (i.e., within-department newsletters, family support recognition, and exposure through other forms of media). Finally, the survey results indicate that when Victoria's volunteer firefighters consider leaving, friends and socialization are the top reasons they would stay in the department. The majority of survey respondents believe that they need more social gatherings than are offered at present. More frequent and systematic social gatherings would provide firefighters opportunities to make new friends in the department and manage their levels of emotional exhaustion, which may help them to stay in the department longer.

### **Burnout**

While enhancing motivation encourages firefighters to stay in the department, alleviating burnout also helps with retention. Providing more information to prospective firefighters and their family members about the job, training, and schedule expectations would help to give a realistic preview of the position. A concrete realistic job preview would increase retention through helping firefighters make more informed decisions. VFD currently gives

previews through hosting informational nights. We would recommend expanding the current practice through providing more systematic and concrete previews by collecting opinions from current firefighters regarding their jobs. Psychological counseling services can also be very helpful for firefighters due to the nature of their duties. We would recommend providing formal, external counseling to both firefighters and their family members to help them cope with their unique demands. Moreover, forming an internal social support network could enhance social support among firefighters, which alleviates the emotional exhaustion from their work. It could be beneficial to train firefighters on empathetic, non-judgmental listening skills through online lessons or in-person training sessions with external trainers.

### **Communication**

Although the survey indicates that communication is not a major problem in VFD, enhancing communication may still help with retention. We recommend conducting systematic entrance interviews to learn about volunteer firefighters' goals in order to help them meet their expectations and get the most out of their work with the fire department. This could help to make each volunteer's service more personally fulfilling. We also recommend providing an outlet for anonymously expressing opinions using social media or an online survey form. While VFD currently uses a physical suggestion box where firefighters can voice their opinions, providing an anonymous outlet could enhance the quality and quantity of feedback from firefighters. Taking actions based on feedback can resolve individual concerns and lead to department-wide improvements. Lastly, we recommend systematically and consistently collecting data from everyone who leaves the department through structured exit interviews. Keeping written records of the interviews could help to gauge the satisfaction of firefighters and inform future practices.

**Presentation to City of Victoria  
Fire Department and City Administrator**

**Recommendations for  
Staffing, Recruiting, and Retention  
in the City of Victoria's  
Volunteer Fire Department**

**Presented  
February 11, 2016  
Victoria City Hall**