

Lack of Fire Volunteers Becoming Critical

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so we had to call for those additional resources, which obviously takes time. Banks and Mist are our closest resources and they're both about the same distance away, which is about 30 minutes. There would have been much more damage if our one firefighter had not responded."

This, in essence, is the crucial issue facing our local fire department. With only a handful of certified firefighters, the duty officer can never be sure who, or how many firefighters, will respond in the event of a fire, or if someday no one will respond.

Smith says that last year he did a review of the four most recent fires that VRFPD responded to. "The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) recommends that fire engine doesn't roll with less than three people, because in fire service, 'one means none,' in other words, we don't do anything alone - it's a buddy system. If we had followed NFPA recommendations on those four previous fires, and this last one, we would not have had any response."

"On this most recent fire, the family did lose property, and that is obviously not good" says Chief Smith. "But we can also look at the positives - no lives were lost, and everything that was lost is replaceable."

Currently VRFPD has two paid personnel, Chief Smith and Captain Steinweg. In addition to responding to emergency calls, both have other responsibilities; Chief Smith has numerous administrative duties and Captain Steinweg is responsible for training the volunteers. VRFPD has just 15 total volunteers, but only seven of those are trained as firefighters and certified to operate the specialized equipment; the VRFPD does have two new recruits who are currently training to become firefighters, but that training can take up to a year to complete, usually longer depending on the recruit's availability for training. The remaining volunteers are part of a logistics unit that can help with tasks around the fire station and some of them are certified to drive emergency vehicles and run water pumps, but that's it. Chief Smith, Captain Steinweg, and two Lieutenants are the only officers in the department, and act as duty officers - one of them is always on duty, 24 hours a day, so someone is assigned to respond to an emergency call. They depend on vol-

unteers to round out a crew in the event of a fire or rescue operation.

"One of the key issues is that I don't think the community realizes how thinly spread out we really are," says Steinweg.

One big misconception about the VRFPD is that many community members don't understand that the Fire District and the ambulance service are two separate entities. Metro West Ambulance, a private for hire company, currently provides the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) response in Vernonia. Metro West furnishes two ambulances and a full time, 24 hour Paramedic, along with a daytime Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) during the week. The Vernonia Volunteer Ambulance Association provides a volunteer to partner with the Metro West Paramedic during evening and weekend shifts. Several of those medical volunteers also volunteer with the VRFPD.

VRFPD is dispatched to all medical calls with the VRFPD duty officer always responding, along with any available volunteers, in order to provide additional personnel to assist the medics.

"When someone calls 9-1-1 we always show up, 100% of the time," says Steinweg. "About 80 to 90% of our calls are medical so we show up with an ambulance and I think the community thinks those Metro West ambulances are part of Vernonia Fire. Metro West has a paramedic here 24/7, weekends, holidays, everyday. Vernonia Fire, with the exception of the Chief and myself, is strictly volunteers. It seems like the community thinks things are fine here, but we're struggling for volunteers. When we have a fire, we don't know how many firefighters we'll have responding. It's really a roll of the dice."

"It used to be that VRFPD would respond with a rescue unit with two or three volunteers to any medical calls or accidents," adds Chief Smith. "Now we just don't have the personnel, so it's usually just the duty officer."

Smith says the number of calls that VRFPD responds to continues to increase year after year. We're at that point where it's really hard for this entity to respond to 600 calls a year, without more paid people, or more volunteers," says Smith.

Volunteerism is down across all sectors of community groups and

schools. "People have families, more people have jobs, or more than one job. People have long commutes," says Steinweg. "We get that."

Fire departments have the added hurdle of rigorous and time consuming training requirements and standards that volunteers must meet and maintain. "Because of the safety issues we face as firefighters, and because of accidents involving firefighters, they've increased the number of hours of training you need before you can go out and fight a live fire incident," says Steinweg.

Smith adds that household materials - furniture, carpeting, clothing, computers and televisions - are all more likely to be made of plastic and other synthetic materials, rather than natural materials, making a fire scene more toxic and dangerous for firefighters. "The fires burn so fast now, that by the time we show up a structure fire can be fully involved and unsafe for us to enter or go onto the roof. We've had to change our tactics in the last 20 years or so, because the fuel load in a structure, and its flammability, keeps increasing. Added danger requires more training. Our volunteers have to have the same training as professional fire fighters getting paid \$60,000 to \$70,000 a year."

Not only are the training hour requirements prohibitive for some potential volunteers, but a lack of adequate training facilities also makes training burdensome. Steinweg says his volunteers often team up with volunteers from Mist-Birkenfeld for training

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