

Hudson Valley fire departments need more volunteers



(Photo by Will Dendis)

Most of the people who fight fires in the Hudson Valley — and the state — are volunteering their time. Nevertheless, it's a common misconception that they are being paid to do that work. It's true that in some cities it's a municipal job, but for the most part the risky business of putting out fires is done for free, following a tradition started by Isaac Paschall in 1736. Paschall was the first person to volunteer for a fire brigade organized by Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia. In the 283 years since, firefighting has become established as a volunteer culture throughout the country, with many people “catching the bug” from family members.

Likely, Franklin did not intend this to become a family tradition, but that model is nevertheless no longer producing enough volunteers to do the work. In a panel discussion at SUNY New Paltz on May 15, community leaders and fire service experts spoke about changes needed to continue the volunteer model of firefighting, factors which make it more difficult to recruit volunteers in fire departments more broadly, and what the impacts might be if more firefighters were paid instead.

According to firefighter and New Paltz Village Trustee William Wheeler Murray, who facilitated the panel, which was co-sponsored by the village fire department and the Benjamin Center, 89% of fire departments in the state are volunteer, which saves

taxpayers an estimated \$3 billion annually in New York. He estimates that a shift to a professional department could result in property tax increases of anywhere from 25 to 70%. Nevertheless, volunteers are on a slow decline in New Paltz and other departments, from a high in 1987. The average age of current volunteers continues to rise as a result, while the physical demands don't diminish.

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Mayor Tim Rogers called the volunteerism at the village fire department in New Paltz “incredibly humbling.” Responsible for the village — with a college within its borders — as well as the remainder of the town through a fire protection contract which helps pay for equipment, New Paltz firefighters answer on average two calls a day. In the extreme, that has meant 24 calls in 24 hours. Rogers said there is significant sacrifice to volunteering as a firefighter, and “nothing we can compare it to.”

Murray laid out some of those sacrifices. There's a level of constant vigilance which is needed, as one never knows when the call will come. Man-made building materials not only burn hotter and faster, they also release more toxic smoke than when it's only natural materials burning. Cancer is commensurately on the rise among volunteer firefighters. Managing modern materials, as well as modern firefighting methods, takes a lot of training: 175 hours for the full slate, with continuing education necessary.

KT Tobin, deputy director at the Benjamin Center, spoke about what trends in volunteerism generally might reveal specifically about recruiting firefighters. Overall, fewer people are now volunteering in any capacity, although Ulster County's rate is far above the national average, with 45% of the population pitching in locally while only one in four do so in the country as a whole. The types of people more likely to become volunteers include women, people with children, those with a college education and those who are employed. Here in Ulster, 97% of those who volunteer help through more than one organization, while 72% nationwide prefer to spend all their volunteering time on just one venture. Ulster County volunteers also show a much stronger interest in public safety, including fire service: 11% of them volunteer in a public safety role, versus just one percent of the volunteers in the entire United States. Looking at these data, Tobin sees some opportunities for firefighting recruitment by leveraging existing volunteer networks, raising awareness of both the need and the different levels of commitment possible, and targeting women, who tend to volunteer more in general but very rarely in fire departments. There's one

female volunteer in New Paltz at this time.

Everyone on the panel agreed that there's a high level of satisfaction to volunteering for any reason. It's a way to contribute to the web of invisible benefits which result from living in community.

People can volunteer at any age — John D'Allessandro, secretary of the Firemen's Association of the State of New York, started when he was past 50 — but one advantage of legacy recruiting is that people learn if they have the firefighting bug early on in life. In New Paltz and elsewhere, efforts are being made to give young people that same opportunity by signing on in a junior capacity. These young people aren't allowed in dangerous situations, but can provide support and build camaraderie as they spend time at the station. Camaraderie is a very important quality, because in a burning building one is trusting one's life to every other firefighter present.

Chief Cory Wirthmann of the New Paltz Fire Department has introduced the varied levels of commitment of which Tobin spoke. By carefully breaking down the critical tasks into discrete categories, he and his leadership team have made it possible to only volunteer as a driver, for example, or in controlling traffic. Supporting in such ways doesn't require as much training, and ensures that someone capable of interior firefighting is able to do so when needed. "We're all nuts," the chief said of volunteer firefighters in general, and he'd like the barriers to entry to be lowered a bit if possible in order to help find others similar "nuts." Wirthmann is himself a product of the legacy model of recruitment, having spent time in the firehouse from a young age and joining when he was 17 years old. Greater mobility among Americans makes depending solely on those who grow up and then work in the same town much more impractical.

"Training is a big issue," agreed D'Allessandro. "I don't advocate less," but finding new ways to deliver training can help. That includes online sessions, but some of it will always need to be hands on.



It's also costly to train a firefighter. Wirthmann doesn't like to see that money wasted, and if a member of his department moves, he's likely to call the chief in the new location and suggest reaching out. That's how Ethan Smith came to the New Paltz department, in fact: he'd joined in his home town and was invited to continue his service here when he started at SUNY New Paltz. He's remained local and a

member for several years since his graduation. When someone catches the bug, it's likely to stick around no matter where they roam.

Increasing the number of women who fight fires will require a specific effort to make them feel welcome, panelists agreed. Tobin thought that the varied levels of commitment now available in New Paltz could be central to such a campaign locally. D'Allessandro remarked that his daughter "is a better firefighter than I'll ever be," reinforcing the fact that there are no legal or physical barriers to women volunteering in this way.

"All we want is firefighters," Wirthmann agreed, gender notwithstanding.

Murray called firefighting "community service on steroids," and expressed that current ways of finding and retaining members are not as effective any longer. Certainly that's true of depending on members bringing their children to the firehouse where they might themselves gain an interest, but Murray particularly singled out RecruitNY days, when members of participating departments hold open houses and information sessions. "They're a lot of work, but have little impact on volunteer numbers," he said.

D'Allessandro thinks the value of RecruitNY is more in terms of long-range marketing: someone who attends an open house might read articles about firefighting in a different light, or start noticing other recruitment efforts like posters and web sites if it's now on their mind. It's not a small commitment, and it's a decision which might take time. More events of this nature means more opportunities to increase awareness, one of the themes Tobin also suggested as a focus. The FASNY secretary framed recruitment as a "hands-on sport" because "we take for granted what people in the community know about us." Case in point: the number of people who don't even realize that most firefighters in the Hudson Valley do not get paid. "Don't assume people know it's volunteer, and we need people," D'Allessandro said.



There are some incentives which exist for these volunteers, such as service awards which can't rise above a few hundred dollars a year, but not everyone is convinced that money is a good motivator. "Compensation has little value" for recruiting, D'Allessandro believes; if it works at all, he expects a lesser quality of person to sign on, when "the real true reason we do this is to protect the community."

In communities where there's insufficient volunteers to answer calls, mixing paid firefighters with the volunteers may be needed because fire protection is always necessary. According to John Mancini, an attorney for the New York Council of Mayors, some villages have had to dissolve over the issue and the cost. Mancini recognized that leaders in New Paltz help in firefighter retention by simply maintaining open lines of communication with Wirthmann and other chiefs; that has a direct impact on morale. In years past, when New Paltz firefighters had to fight to get bottles of water paid for by elected officials, or when they threatened to evict the government-run department from the member-owned firehouse, there was not the same level of enthusiasm around the firehouse. Current leaders, Rogers and Neil Bettez, the town supervisor, seem to have learned from the mistakes of their predecessors and meet with Wirthmann regularly to discuss what's needed.

Recruitment "is a problem, but it's one we can fix," said D'Allessandro. Readers may do their part by giving a call to their local department (on the non-emergency number, please) to express interest in learning more. A full list of volunteer departments can be found at fireinyou.org.

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