Please see the short overview below regarding the Lopez FD. They've been at this for many decades and even with 3,000 or so residents and a ferry system, struggle to staff their volunteer needs.

Emergency Fire Response on Outer Islands

Structural Limits of the Volunteer Model

Outer island communities are often told that emergency services can be addressed through volunteer firefighting. While volunteers are essential to rural emergency response, the assumption that a fully functional system can simply be organized in very small communities does not reflect how these systems actually operate. Understanding what a volunteer department requires helps explain the challenges facing outer islands.

Volunteer Firefighting Is Highly Structured

Even in volunteer departments, firefighting is a trained and regulated profession.
To join a department such as Lopez Island Fire and EMS, applicants must:

- Pass a background check and physical exam
- Demonstrate physical ability through an agility test
- Maintain a valid driver's license and insurable driving record
- Meet departmental eligibility standards

Before responding to emergencies, volunteers must complete extensive training.
Typical initial training includes:

- Approximately 100 hours of fire suppression training
- Live fire training at the Washington State Fire Training Center
- EMT volunteers complete about 130 hours of medical training, plus hospital ride-alongs

In practice, this means a volunteer must invest months of training before becoming operational.

The Commitment Does Not End After Training

Active volunteers must remain current through continuous training and certification.
Typical expectations include:

- Attending 75% of scheduled training drills

- Maintaining CPR and first aid certifications
- Completing annual safety and equipment training
- Participating in wildland fire training

Volunteers are also expected to respond to emergency calls whenever available, often at any hour.
Compensation is symbolic, about $13 per drill or call, reflecting the volunteer nature of the work rather than the time invested.

Why This System Works on Lopez

The Lopez Island Fire District is often cited as a successful volunteer model. However, it operates within a much larger support structure.
Key factors include:

- A population of roughly 3,000 residents
- A tax-funded fire district
- Career firefighter-paramedics on staff
- Multiple stations and maintained apparatus
- Administrative staff and leadership
- A large enough population base to recruit and retain volunteers of

The volunteer component works because it is supported by professional infrastructure and stable funding.

Outer Islands Operate Under Different Conditions

Decatur Island and similar outer islands face very different realities.

- Roughly **60–80 full-time residents**
- Many seasonal residents
- No career firefighters
- No dedicated training or administrative infrastructure
- A limited and aging volunteer pool

The requirements for training, certification, and response remain the same regardless of community size.

The Planning Implication

Emergency services on outer islands rely on a small number of residents willing to undertake significant training and maintain readiness year after year.
When population is small and seasonal, the volunteer pipeline becomes unstable.