



**National Volunteer Fire Council**  
7852 Walker Drive, Suite 375, Greenbelt, MD 20770; 202/887-5700 phone; 202/887-5291 fax  
www.nvfc.org email: [nvffoffice@nvfc.org](mailto:nvffoffice@nvfc.org)

## Volunteer Fire Service Fact Sheet

The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) is the leading nonprofit membership association representing the interests of the volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services. Organized in 1976, the NVFC serves as the voice of the volunteer fire and emergency services in the national arena and provides invaluable resources, programs, education, and advocacy for first responders across the nation. Each state firefighter's association elects a representative to the NVFC Board of Directors.

We welcome you to browse our web site at [www.nvfc.org](http://www.nvfc.org) to learn more about the volunteer fire and emergency services and information regarding membership, training, legislation, and meetings.

This Fact Sheet was produced in order to provide an overall picture of today's volunteer fire and emergency services.

- **Volunteers comprise 65% of firefighters in the United States.**

Of the total estimated 1,056,200 firefighters across the country, 682,600 are volunteer.<sup>1</sup>

- **Communities served by volunteer firefighters depend on them to be their first line of defense for many types of emergencies.**

Volunteer firefighters are summoned to a wide array of emergencies across the country every day including fires, emergency medical incidents, terrorist events, natural disasters, hazardous materials incidents, water rescue emergencies, high-angle and confined space emergencies, and other general public service calls. The public relies on the volunteer emergency services to be their first line of defense in these emergencies. Volunteers spend an enormous amount of time training to prepare for these emergencies.

- **The majority of fire departments in the United States are volunteer.**

Of the total 29,819 fire departments in the country, 19,313 are all volunteer; 5,405 are mostly volunteer; 2,316 are mostly career; and 2,785 are all career.<sup>2</sup>

- **The time donated by volunteer firefighters saves localities across the country an estimated \$46.9 billion per year.<sup>3</sup>**

The cost savings provided by fire service volunteers is tremendous. For many communities, switching to a career staffing model is not feasible.

---

<sup>1</sup> *U.S. Fire Department Profile 2017*. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA, March 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Total Cost of Fire in the United States*. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA, October 2017.

- **Many local volunteer fire departments are struggling to meet staffing needs.**

The number of volunteer firefighters in the U.S. reached a low in 2019. At the same time, call volume has tripled in the last 30 years, due in large part to the increase in emergency medical calls. Major factors contributing to recruitment challenges include increased time demands, more rigorous training requirements, and the proliferation of two-income families whose members do not have time to volunteer. Fire departments today are also expected to provide a wide range of services and multi-hazard response, creating further challenges for resource-constrained departments. (See chart on page 3.)

**Number of Volunteer Firefighters in U.S. by Year<sup>4</sup>**

Year	Number of Volunteer Firefighters	Year	Number of Volunteer Firefighters
1984	897,750	2001	784,700
1985	839,450	2002	816,600
1986	808,200	2003	800,050
1987	816,800	2004	795,600
1988	788,250	2005	823,650
1989	770,100	2006	823,950
1990	772,650	2007	825,450
1991	771,800	2008	827,150
1992	805,300	2009	812,150
1993	795,400	2010	768,150
1994	807,900	2011	756,400
1995	838,000	2012	783,300
1996	815,500	2013	786,150
1997	803,350	2014	788,250
1998	804,200	2015	814,850
1999	785,250	2016	729,000
2000	777,350	2017	682,600

**Number of Fire Department Calls by Year<sup>5</sup>**

Total Number of Calls for U.S. Fire Departments, 1986-2011			
Year	Total	Year	Total
1986	11,890,000	2002	21,303,500
1987	12,237,500	2003	22,406,000
1988	13,308,000	2004	22,616,500
1989	13,409,500	2005	23,251,500
1990	13,707,500	2006	24,470,000
1991	14,556,500	2007	25,334,500
1992	14,684,500	2008	25,252,500
1993	15,318,500	2009	26,534,500
1994	16,127,000	2010	28,205,000
1995	16,391,500	2011	30,098,000
1996	17,503,000	2012	31,854,000
1997	17,957,500	2013	31,644,500
1998	18,753,000	2014	31,644,500
1999	19,667,000	2015	33,635,500
2000	20,520,000	2016	35,320,000
2001	20,965,500		

- **The age of volunteer firefighters is increasing.**

Departments are finding it difficult to attract younger members due to a range of reasons, including increased demands on people's time, longer commuting distances to and from work, the prevalence of two-income households, and increased training requirements.

**Age Profile of Firefighters by Community Size, 1987<sup>6</sup>**

*\*Mostly volunteer firefighters*

Size of Community	% Under Age 30	% Age 30-39	% Age 40-49	% Age 50 & Up
10,000-24,999	33.0%	33.8%	20.6%	12.6%
5,000-9,999	35.8%	32.4%	19.1%	12.7%
2,500-4,999	34.6%	32.5%	19.3%	13.6%
Under 2,500	29.7%	33.5%	20.9%	15.9%

**Age Profile of Firefighters by Community Size, 2017<sup>7</sup>**

*\*Mostly volunteer firefighters*

Size of Community	% Under Age 30	% Age 30-39	% Age 40-49	% Age 50 & Up
10,000-24,999	28%	30%	24%	19%
5,000-9,999	30%	27%	20%	23%
2,500-4,999	30%	25%	19%	25%
Under 2,500	24%	23%	21%	32%

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Fire Department Profile 2017. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA, March 2019.

<sup>5</sup> National Fire Protection Association Survey. Accessed June 13, 2018. <http://www.nfpa.org/news-and-research/fire-statistics-and-reports/fire-statistics/the-fire-service/fire-department-calls/fire-department-calls>

<sup>6</sup> Survey of Fire Departments for U.S. Fire Experience, National Fire Protection Association, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Fire Department Profile 2017. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA, March 2019.

Retention and Recruitment Challenges: Root Causes <sup>8</sup>

Sources Of Challenge	Contributing Factors
Time Demands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the two-income family and working multiple jobs</li> <li>• increased training time demands</li> <li>• higher emergency call volume</li> <li>• additional demands within department (fundraising, administrative)</li> </ul>
Training Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• higher training standards and new federal requirements</li> <li>• more time demands</li> <li>• greater public expectation of fire department's response capabilities (broader range of services such as EMS, Hazmat, technical rescue, etc.)</li> <li>• additional training demands to provide broader range of services</li> <li>• recertification demands</li> </ul>
Increasing Call Volume	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fire department assuming wider response roles (EMS, Hazmat, technical rescue)</li> <li>• increasing emergency medical call volume</li> <li>• increase in number of automatic fire alarms</li> </ul>
Changes In The "Nature Of The Business"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• abuse of emergency services by the public</li> <li>• less of an emphasis on social aspects of volunteering</li> </ul>
Changes In Sociological Conditions (In Urban And Suburban Areas)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• transience</li> <li>• loss of community feeling</li> <li>• less community pride</li> <li>• less of an interest or time for volunteering</li> <li>• two-income family and time demands</li> <li>• "me" generation</li> </ul>
Changes In Sociological Conditions (In Rural Areas)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• employers less willing to let employees off to run calls</li> <li>• time demand</li> <li>• "me" generation</li> </ul>
Leadership Problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• poor leadership and lack of coordination</li> <li>• authoritative management style</li> <li>• failure to manage change</li> </ul>
Federal Legislation And Regulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fair Labor Standards Act interpretation</li> <li>• "2 in, 2 out" ruling requiring four firefighters on scene before entering hazardous environment</li> <li>• Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) live-fire burn limitations</li> </ul>
Increasing Use Of Combination Departments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• disagreements among chiefs or other department leaders</li> <li>• friction between volunteer and career members</li> </ul>
Higher Cost Of Housing (In Affluent Communities)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• volunteers cannot afford to live in the community they serve</li> </ul>
Aging Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• greater number of older people today</li> <li>• lack of economic growth and jobs in some towns</li> </ul>
Internal Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• disagreements among departmental leaders</li> <li>• friction between volunteer and career members</li> </ul>

<sup>8</sup> *Retention & Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services: Challenges & Solutions*. National Volunteer Fire Council and United States Fire Administration (FA-310), May 2007.

- **Recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters are two of the key issues being addressed by the NVFC.**

In 2014, the NVFC received a SAFER grant from FEMA to implement a nationwide recruitment and retention campaign. Through the Make Me A Firefighter™ program, the NVFC has developed resources, tools, and customizable outreach materials to assist local departments in recruiting and retaining personnel. Departments can access these free resources and post their volunteer opportunities through the department portal at <http://portal.nvfc.org>. The campaign also seeks to raise awareness among the public of the need for fire service volunteers. The public can learn more about the volunteer fire service and find a local opportunity at [www.MakeMeAFirefighter.org](http://www.MakeMeAFirefighter.org).

Since 2004, the NVFC has administered Fire Corps™, a national initiative to recruit community members into local fire and EMS departments to perform non-emergency roles. This allows department members to focus on training and emergency response while at the same time increasing the services and programs the department can offer. For more information, visit [www.firecorps.org](http://www.firecorps.org).

To address the aging of the fire service and foster the next generation of firefighters and EMS personnel, the NVFC launched the National Junior Firefighter Program in 2007. The program serves as an umbrella for junior firefighter programs nationwide to promote youth participation within the fire and emergency services community. In addition, youth can use the program to locate a local junior firefighter program and keep track of their hours of service. The goal is to get more youth interested in the fire service, thus fostering a lifelong connection with the emergency services where they can continue to serve as volunteer or career firefighters or community supporters of the fire service throughout their adulthood. Learn more at [www.nvfc.org/juniors](http://www.nvfc.org/juniors).

- **Small and mid-sized communities rely heavily on volunteer firefighters.**

Small communities (populations under 10,000) across the U.S. are typically protected by all volunteer departments. In some cases, however, these communities have hired a few paid firefighters to assist. Mid-sized communities (populations between 10,000 and 100,000) are typically served by departments that use a combination of volunteer and paid firefighters. Large communities (populations over 100,000) are most often protected by combination paid and volunteer departments that consist of primarily paid staff. There are few strictly paid fire departments in the U.S., but those that exist are primarily found in very urban areas.

<b>Career and Volunteer Firefighters in the U.S. by Population Protected, 2017<sup>9</sup></b>			
<b>Population Protected</b>	<b>Career</b>	<b>Volunteer</b>	<b>Total</b>
1,000,000 or more	43,100	1,800	44,900
500,000 to 999,999	39,600	4,800	44,400
250,000 to 499,999	27,700	1,700	29,400
100,000 to 249,999	59,000	900	59,900
50,000 to 99,999	48,100	6,800	54,900
25,000 to 49,999	50,600	19,100	69,700
10,000 to 24,999	56,800	65,400	122,200
5,000 to 9,999	22,200	91,700	113,900
2,500 to 4,999	15,400	169,400	184,800
under 2,500	11,100	321,000	332,100
	373,600	682,600	1,056,200

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Fire Department Profile 2017. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA, March 2019.

- **48 of the 87 firefighters who died in the line of duty in 2017 were volunteers.**<sup>10</sup>

The leading cause of on-duty death for firefighters was stress/overexertion, resulting in 52 deaths. Of these, 50 were caused by heart attack. The second leading cause of death was struck by object, claiming 14 firefighters, followed by vehicle collision, claiming 10 firefighters.

Heart attack is continually the leading cause of on-duty firefighter fatalities. The NVFC administers an aggressive campaign to reverse this trend. The NVFC Heart-Healthy Firefighter Program is the nation's only heart attack awareness campaign targeted at all fire and emergency medical personnel, both volunteer and career. Visit the program's web site at [www.healthy-firefighter.org](http://www.healthy-firefighter.org).

Other critical health and safety issues facing firefighters are cancer, behavioral health (such as PTSD, depression, and suicide), and vehicle safety. The NVFC encourages firefighters to Serve Strong by recognizing the dangers and proactively addressing these issues. Resources and programs are available on the NVFC web site at [www.nvfc.org/ServeStrong](http://www.nvfc.org/ServeStrong) regarding a variety of health and safety issues.

- **Volunteer firefighters and emergency medical technicians across the country meet national and/or state training standards.**

Each state adopts its own training requirements that apply to volunteer firefighters. Many states require that volunteers meet the National Fire Protection Association's *Standard 1001: Firefighter Professional Qualifications*. This establishes a very rigorous course of classroom and practical evolutions for basic training. This same standard is commonly used to train paid firefighters. The NVFC recommends all volunteer fire departments set a goal that personnel attain, at a minimum, a level of training that meets or exceeds NFPA 1001 or an equivalent state standard in order to engage in fire suppression. Likewise, volunteer emergency medical responders are trained to the national training criteria established by the U.S. Department of Transportation and other standards setting bodies.

- **Volunteers invest a large amount of time serving their communities.**

There is no national average of the amount of time a volunteer firefighter gives to his or her community. Volunteering in the fire and EMS service, however, is one of the most demanding volunteer activities today. Time commitments include operational responses (often at a moment's notice), training, fundraising, vehicle and station maintenance, and various administrative duties.

- **The cost to train and equip a firefighter can exceed \$20,000.**

Below are average expenses associated with firefighting. Please note product costs vary depending on a variety of factors, and these are just estimates. Certain pieces of equipment, such as radio and thermal imager, may not be provided to every firefighter. Training costs vary considerably from state to state and jurisdiction to jurisdiction, depending on what level and types of training are required.

<b>Helmet</b>	\$ 300	<b>Gloves</b>	\$ 95
<b>Coat</b>	\$ 1,200	<b>SCBA</b>	\$ 6,300
<b>Pants</b>	\$ 875	<b>Radio</b>	\$ 3,700
<b>Boots</b>	\$ 300	<b>Thermal Imager</b>	\$ 1,200
<b>Hood</b>	\$ 40	<b>Training</b>	\$ 7,800

---

<sup>10</sup> *Firefighter Fatalities in the United States in 2017*, U.S. Fire Administration, Emmitsburg, MD, September 2018.

- **Firefighting and emergency medical equipment is very expensive.**

The cost of firefighting equipment is listed below. Equipment can range in cost depending on features and specifications.

Fire pumper: \$150,000 - \$400,000

Ladder truck: \$400,000 - \$750,000

Ambulance: \$80,000 - \$150,000

Advanced life support medical equipment: \$10,000 - \$30,000

- **The U.S. has one of the higher fire death rates in the industrialized world, with 10.9 deaths per million population in 2016. However, its standing has greatly improved over the last two decades, and the fire death rate in the U.S. has declined by 15.8 percent from 2007 to 2016.<sup>11</sup> In 2017:**

- Every 24 seconds, a fire department responds to a fire somewhere in the nation.
- 3,400 civilians lost their lives as the result of fire.
- 77 percent of all civilian fire deaths occurred in residences.
- There were 14,670 civilian fire injuries reported.
- There were an estimated 1.32 million fires.
- Direct property loss due to fires was estimated at \$23 billion.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> *U.S. Overall Fire Death Rate Trend (2007-2016)*. U.S. Fire Administration. Accessed April 11, 2019. [https://www.usfa.fema.gov/data/statistics/fire\\_death\\_rates.html](https://www.usfa.fema.gov/data/statistics/fire_death_rates.html)

<sup>12</sup> *Fire Loss in the United States During 2017*. National Fire Protection Association. October 2018. <https://www.nfpa.org/News-and-Research/Data-research-and-tools/US-Fire-Problem/Fire-loss-in-the-United-States>