

We all agree that there are many issues facing the volunteer fire service in Indiana County and in our Commonwealth. Recruitment and Retention is certainly one of the greatest challenges we face. Today, we were asked to specifically address educational incentives as a mechanism to address the retention and recruitment challenge. I think I have a unique perspective as I am serving my 14th year as the Fire Chief and 23rd year treasurer of the Cherryhill Township Volunteer Fire Company, and entering my 28th year as a public school educator and 12th as the high school principal for the Homer-Center School District. Thus, I offer my views based on my experience as a fire officer, fire finance officer, public school teacher and public school administrator.

I will come back to specifically address the educational incentive concept. However, I wish to focus on the broader concept of recruitment and retention first. In any incentive program there must be ACCOUNTABILITY, INTEGRITY and EFFECTIVE OVERSIGHT of any program to prevent fraud, mistrust and in the program. I believe the first question must be, who qualifies for the incentive program? The answer cannot be as broad as firefighters. SR6 recognizes that the fire service has evolved into numerous specialized services such as fire suppression, vehicle rescue, hazardous materials mitigation, severe weather response, search and rescue and more. I mention this expansion because I believe there needs established a clear definition of what defines a firefighter or emergency responder. In an era of specialization our fire company (Cherryhill Township), as I would assume others, accept members who specialize in one or multiple areas of our provided services. Fortunately at Cherryhill Township most of our members are trained in several specialized areas. However, we have members who specialize in one or two specialized areas such as driver/operators, emergency medical technicians, traffic control, fire suppression and vehicle rescue specialist. Any incentive program needs to consider this era of specialization and include multiple definitions of various recognized specialist and the training/criteria they need to meet to be eligible for an incentive program.

I believe state, national or as often referenced, pro board certifications should be the standard to qualify for participation of an individual in any incentive program. For example, Firefighter I, Driver/Operator, Hazardous Materials Technician or Vehicle Rescue Technician. Each of these certifications require one to demonstrate their knowledge on a written exam and application of practical skills. This certification attainment model establishes a clear standard one must meet to qualify for any incentive. Also, these certifications are not too easy nor too difficult to obtain but requires a commitment and dedication to being a skilled and productive first responder and not just a name on a roster to get a handout.

I also believe any incentive program needs to be expanded to include a recognition of volunteers who serve and specialize on the business side of our fire departments. How often do you read a fire house closed because the firefighters used a wrong strategy or tactics fighting a fire? It is much more common to read a fire house closes because a mismanagement, fraud, or lack of organizational control. I have taken a PANO fire administrator course at the state fire academy. Personally, I need more help managing the business affairs of our fire department than I do on the emergency response side of the house. Providing incentive and establishing the training or criteria for those who serve on the business side of the house needs strong consideration. A growth in members with this designation lessens the burden of time the responders need to invest in fundraising and business management affairs in turn making the time commitment required to be a skilled firefighter more palpable.

SR6 references training requirements are chasing candidates away, particularly in rural areas implement risk based training requirements versus minimum of Firefighter I Certification. I do not completely agree with this opinion. Many of our current models of onboarding of new members fail to recognize the specialization of the fire service and we continually use a one size fits all approach to new members. This is antiquated thinking. Time and finances are the enemy of recruiting and retention. There is a lot of foundational basic training required to be an asset on an emergency scene and to be eligible for pro board certification. I do not believe it is the training requirements chasing recruits away, it is time to complete the training requirements and still meet your professional and family obligations as well. I think incentives for employers to permit paid time off for volunteers to complete basic training and relief in the form of training reimbursement for fire departments would encourage more training and better prepared and skilled responders.

To demonstrate the need for financial relief for fire departments sending firefighters to training can be illustrated in this one basic example. It costs \$200 for an individual firefighters to take the Firefighter 1 preparatory course and sit for the Firefighter I exam. If a department has 10 members wishing to take the prep course and exam this would cost the department \$2,000. There are many departments that are forced between sending members to training or paying their utility bills. This dilemma is more real than most care to admit.

To summarize my key points

1. We need a clear definition of who qualifies for an incentive program and what standards must one reach to earn that designation
2. There exists a need to expand any incentive program to those who volunteer on the business side of the house and do not respond to emergency alarms.
3. Employers need incentives to encourage paid time off (within reason) for employees to complete entry level or pro board certifications

Specifically as it relates to educational incentives, it is obvious the overarching goal is to enhance recruitment and retention efforts in the Commonwealth and specifically the volunteer fire service. I believe educational incentives is one possibility and the SR6 report provided a menu of potential incentive options. For the perspective of post high school educational incentives I believe conceptually that could potentially produce an improvement in retention, but I would not start at that point.

If we explore the recommendation in SR6 to provide credit for emergency service preparedness programs for high school students and/or development of program offerings for our career and technical educational programs. I believe it is best to include these opportunities in a career and technical school program setting. Most, if not all, technical school programs curricula are competency based and conclude with a practical and written competency exam giving the graduate an industry certification to enter the workforce. Obstacles to implementation of this recommendation include, but are not limited to:

- The specialization of emergency services, especially the fire service, to provide fire suppression, vehicle rescue, hazardous materials, weather related etc, response.
- The cost to implement such a program
 - Instructor cost
 - Resource cost
 - Availability of training facilities
 - Transportation cost and logistics to have students off site
- Child Labor Laws that restrict what a 16-17 year student is permitted to do on alarms and in training making it difficult for a student to graduate with an industry standard certification. This is not consistent with the high stakes accountability standards schools must meet per governmental regulation.

This is minimal listing of the obstacles. Locally our public schools own and operate the ICTC and share the costs to operate ICTC based on a specific formula developed by the joint operating committee. The monies from the school district are from the general operating budget and are already strained. Thus, if this concept for programs in high schools and/or career and technology schools, the funding source must be identified as schools cannot absorb any additional unfunded mandates.

Furthermore, our ICTC is a half day program in which our sending schools transport students to the ICTC for half day session in the specific program areas, the students then receive their general education courses such as Math, Science, Social Studies and English, at their home school. Thus, if a student from Purchase Line or Saltsburg would enroll in an emergency services preparedness program offered through the ICTC this would create various logistical and cost issues if

students needed to access training facilities off ICTC site to train. This also potentially limits availability of students to return in an adequate time window to maximize their time and learning opportunities in their core subject courses at their home school.

Mr. Jody Rainey, Fire Chief, Cherryhill Township Fire Company
Principal, Homer-Center High School