



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 critical resources, programs, education, and advocacy for first responders across the nation. Forty-seven state firefighters' associations appoint up to two representatives to serve on the NVFC Board of Directors.

We welcome you to browse our web site at **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.



National Volunteer Fire Council

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1.

Volunteers comprise 65% of firefighters in the United States.

Of the total estimated 1,041,200 firefighters across the country, 676,900 are volunteer. ¹

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, vehicle accidents, terrorist and active shooter 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.

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

Of the total 29,452 fire departments in the country, 18,873 are all volunteer; 5,335 are mostly volunteer; 2,459 are mostly career; and 2,785 are all career. ²

The time donated by volunteer firefighters saves localities across the country an estimated \$46.9 billion per year. ³

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

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¹ U.S. Fire Department Profile 2020. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA, September 2022.

² Ibid.

³ Total Cost of Fire in the United States. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA, October 2017.

5.

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

The number of volunteer firefighters in the U.S. reached a low in 2020. At the same time, call volume has more than tripled in the last 35 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 ⁴

YEAR	NUMBER OF VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS	YEAR	NUMBER OF VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS
1984	897,750	2003	800,050
1985	839,450	2004	795,600
1986	808,200	2005	823,650
1987	816,800	2006	823,950
1988	788,250	2007	825,450
1989	770,100	2008	827,150
1990	772,650	2009	812,150
1991	771,800	2010	768,150
1992	805,300	2011	756,400
1993	795,400	2012	783,300
1994	807,900	2013	786,150
1995	838,000	2014	788,250
1996	815,500	2015	814,850
1997	803,350	2016	729,000
1998	804,200	2017	682,600
1999	785,250	2018	745,000
2000	777,350	2019	722,800
2001	784,700	2020	676,900
2002	816,600		

Number of Fire Department Calls by Year ⁵

YEAR	TOTAL	YEAR	TOTAL
1986	11,890,000	2004	22,616,500
1987	12,237,500	2005	23,251,500
1988	13,308,000	2006	24,470,000
1989	13,409,500	2007	25,334,500
1990	13,707,500	2008	25,252,500
1991	14,556,500	2009	26,534,500
1992	14,684,500	2010	28,205,000
1993	15,318,500	2011	30,098,000
1994	16,127,000	2012	31,854,000
1995	16,391,500	2013	31,644,500
1996	17,503,000	2014	31,644,500
1997	17,957,500	2015	33,635,500
1998	18,753,000	2016	35,320,000
1999	19,667,000	2017	34,683,500
2000	20,520,000	2018	36,746,500
2001	20,965,500	2019	37,272,000
2002	21,303,500	2020	36,416,000
2003	22,406,000	2021	36,624,000

⁴ U.S. Fire Department Profile 2020. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA, September 2022.

⁵ National Fire Protection Association Survey. Accessed November 11, 2022.

<https://www.nfpa.org/News-and-Research/Data-research-and-tools/Emergency-Responders/Fire-department-calls>

6.

Recruitment and Retention Challenges: Root Causes ⁶

SOURCES OF CHALLENGES	CONTRIBUTING FACTORS
Time Demands	• The two-income family and working multiple jobs • Increased training time demands • Higher emergency call volume • Additional demands within department (fundraising, administrative)
Training Requirements	• Higher training standards and new federal requirements • More time demands • Greater public expectation of fire department's response capabilities (broader range of services such as EMS, hazmat, technical rescue, etc.) • Additional training demands to provide broader range of services • Recertification demands
Increasing Call Volume	• Fire department assuming wider response roles (EMS, hazmat, technical rescue) • Increasing emergency medical call volume • Increase in number of automatic fire alarms
Changes in the "Nature of the Business"	• Abuse of emergency services by the public • Less of an emphasis on social aspects of volunteering
Changes in Sociological Conditions (In Urban and Suburban Areas)	• Transience • Loss of community feeling • Less community pride • Less of an interest or time for volunteering • Two-income family and time demands • "Me" generation
Changes in Sociological Conditions (In Rural Areas)	• Employers less willing to let employees off to run calls • Time demand • "Me" generation
Leadership Problems	• Poor leadership and lack of coordination • Authoritative management style • Failure to manage change
Federal Legislation and Regulations	• Fair Labor Standards Act interpretation • "2 in, 2 out" ruling requiring four firefighters on scene before entering hazardous environment • Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) live-fire burn limitations
Increasing Use of Combination Departments	• Disagreements among chiefs or other department leaders • Friction between volunteer and career members
Higher Cost of Housing (In Affluent Communities)	• Volunteers cannot afford to live in the community they serve
Aging Communities	• Greater number of older people today • Lack of economic growth and jobs in some towns
Internal Conflict	• Disagreements among departmental leaders • Friction between volunteer and career members

⁶ Retention & Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services: Challenges & Solutions. National Volunteer Fire Council and United States Fire Administration (FA-310), May 2007

7.

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 ⁷

**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, 2020 ⁸

**Mostly volunteer firefighters*

SIZE OF COMMUNITY	% UNDER AGE 30	% AGE 30-39	% AGE 40-49	% AGE 50 & UP
10,000-24,999	26%	29%	24%	20%
5,000-9,999	30%	27%	20%	23%
2,500-4,999	28%	25%	20%	27%
Under 2,500	22%	23%	20%	34%

⁷ Survey of Fire Departments for U.S. Fire Experience, National Fire Protection Association, 1987.

⁸ U.S. Fire Department Profile 2020 Supporting Tables. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA, September 2022.

8.

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.

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.

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. 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.

9.

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.

**Career and Volunteer Firefighters in the U.S. by
Population Protected, 2020 ⁹**

POPULATION PROTECTED	CAREER	VOLUNTEER	TOTAL
1,000,000 or more	35,600	1,900	37,500
500,000 to 999,999	41,400	5,100	46,500
250,000 to 499,999	28,200	800	29,000
100,000 to 249,999	55,500	3,200	58,700
50,000 to 99,999	45,900	7,400	53,300
25,000 to 49,999	50,500	15,200	65,700
10,000 to 24,999	58,400	56,600	115,000
5,000 to 9,999	27,900	89,000	116,900
2,500 to 4,999	11,100	169,800	180,900
Under 2,500	9,800	327,700	337,500
	364,300	676,900	1,041,200

⁹ U.S. Fire Department Profile 2020 Supporting Tables. National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA, September 2022.

44 of the 102 firefighters who died in the line of duty in 2020 were volunteers.¹⁰

There were 37 more on-duty fatalities in 2020 than in 2019. The leading cause of on-duty death for firefighters was stress/overexertion, resulting in 37 deaths. Of these, 29 were caused by heart attack. The next leading cause was exposure, with 36 firefighters dying from complications of COVID-19. Vehicle collision was the third leading cause, claiming 15 firefighters.

Heart attack is continually a leading cause of on-duty firefighter fatalities. The NVFC administers an educational 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.

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 regarding a variety of health and safety issues.

10.**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.

11.

¹⁰ *Firefighter Fatalities in the United States in 2020*, U.S. Fire Administration, Emmitsburg, MD, March 2022.

12.**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.

13.

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

14.**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. (See chart on page 9.)

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 11.5 deaths per million population in 2021.¹¹ Although progress has been made over the last two decades, recent trends paint a troubling picture. The fire death rate in the U.S. increased by 7.4 percent from 2011 to 2020.¹² In 2021:

- Every 23 seconds, a fire department responded to a fire somewhere in the nation.
- 3,800 civilians lost their lives as the result of fire.
- 75 percent of all civilian fire deaths occurred in residences.
- There were 14,700 civilian fire injuries reported.
- There were an estimated 1.35 million fires.
- Direct property loss due to fires was estimated at \$15.9 billion.¹³

15.

¹¹ *Fire Loss in the United States During 2021*. National Fire Protection Association. September 2022.
<https://www.nfpa.org/News-and-Research/Data-research-and-tools/US-Fire-Problem/Fire-loss-in-the-United-States>

¹² *U.S. Overall Fire Death Rate Trend (2010-2019)*. U.S. Fire Administration. Accessed November 23, 2022.
<https://www.usfa.fema.gov/statistics/deaths-injuries/>

¹³ *Fire Loss in the United States During 2021*. National Fire Protection Association. September 2022.
<https://www.nfpa.org/News-and-Research/Data-research-and-tools/US-Fire-Problem/Fire-loss-in-the-United-States>