Executive Development

The Impact of Firefighter Retention Rates in the Beach Park Fire Department

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Beach Park, IL

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Appendices Not Included. Please visit the Learning Resource Center on the Web at http://www.lrc.dhs.gov/ to learn how to obtain this report in its entirety through Interlibrary Loan.
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Signed:_______________________________________
Abstract

Retention of qualified firefighters is an issue affecting fire departments throughout the United States; including the Beach Park Fire Department (BPFD). The problem is the BPFD has not been successful in retaining qualified personnel which impacts service delivery.

The purpose was to investigate causes of poor retention. The descriptive research method was used to identify factors of low retention, components of successful retention programs, to discover exceptional retention practices and the resources available for a retention program.

Procedures included a literature review, surveys of current employees, former employees and outside departments. The results indicated that positive practices are in place; however, improvements could be made in several areas.

Recommendations include altering recruitment strategy, increasing pay, benefits, and training for volunteers.
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The Impact of Firefighter Retention Rates in the Beach Park Fire Department

Introduction

Retention of qualified personnel is paramount for any organization to successfully compete in their respective market place (Heathfield, 2007). While many organizations are experiencing difficulties in retaining qualified employees in their industries, service and volunteer organizations have been hit the hardest.

According to Scott et al. (2004) and the United States Fire Administration (2007), volunteer and combination fire departments throughout the nation are experiencing recruitment and retention difficulties that have impacted services to the communities they serve. This is a significant problem as two-thirds of the estimated 1.2 million firefighters in the United States are volunteers (Fire Chief, 2007a).

Feldheim (2007) identifies common retention difficulties that are affecting departments in the Midwest as they try to find the personnel and the means to properly staff vehicles for emergency calls.

The problem is the Beach Park Fire Department (BPFD) has not been successful in retaining qualified emergency service
personnel, which has resulted in understaffed shifts and limited 
manning situations.

The purpose of this applied research project is to investigate employee retention in the BPFD to identify causes of poor employee retention. The descriptive form of research was used to answer (a) what are the factors of low employee retention in the BPFD, (b) what are the components of a successful employee retention program, (c) what are other organizations doing to successfully retain employees, and (d) what resources are available for an employee retention program in the BPFD?

Background and Significance

The Beach Park Fire Department is located in the far Northeast corner of the state of Illinois protecting a population of 15,000 in a 10 square mile fire district. The BPFD protects the largest part of the Village of Beach Park and the unincorporated areas of Lake County surrounding the village while participating in automatic aid and mutual aid agreements with other local fire departments (Beach Park Fire Department, 2007a).

The BPFD was officially formed in May 1942 as the Bonnie Brook Fire Protection District and renamed the Beach Park Fire Department in November 2002 (Beach Park Fire Department, 2007b).
The BPFD response area also includes Illinois' largest state park, Illinois Beach State Park and resort that attracts nearly 3 million visitors annually (Marin, & Mosely, 2007).

Responding to nearly 1200 calls in 2006; the BPFD recently hired their first full time employees in December of 2006 to respond to emergency calls. The new hires were made possible through the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant award from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The BPFD is made up of 45 part time and full time employees that supply fire suppression and advanced life support (ALS) ambulance service to the district. Three full time employees work a 24/48 hour schedule and are supplemented during the day by a staff of 4 part-time paid employees working a shift from 0600-1800. Additionally, the night staffing is made up of the 24-hour firefighter paramedic and 5 to 7 paid-on-call employees that work a rotating shift of 12 hours on from 1800-0600 with 60 hours off.

Up until the hiring of full time employees, the BPFD has been a traditional paid on call department relying on paid-on-call personnel to cover shift assignments, calls and callbacks for manning situations.

The surrounding departments are split between fully paid organizations, and part-paid and paid-on-call departments.
Development in the Northeast corner of the state has grown to the point that fire departments are experiencing difficulties in finding volunteers for assignments and work duties which is similar to what is occurring in many departments throughout the country (Scott et al., 2005).

The BPFD has been experiencing many of the growth issues that come with hiring the first full time employees while progressing from a traditional paid-on-call department to a combination department.

A major issue that has plagued the department is the long-term retention of firefighters and emergency medical service (EMS) workers. The Volunteer Firefighter Task Force (2002) concluded that volunteers are staying half the time they did ten years ago in volunteer emergency service units, and it shows. In the BPFD many of the new recruits are individuals in their early twenties that join for a short period of time to gain experience and leave when they obtain a position in a full time fire department or emergency service organization. The BPFD has trained most recruits to the basic firefighter II and emergency medical technician levels prior to separation from service.

Constant recruitment and training costs have placed a burden on the department as the BPFD tries to train personnel and fill work assignments. Additionally, this revolving door of new
personnel creates a situation where very few senior firefighters and EMS workers exist. While this has been an ongoing issue, it has become more apparent when considering the costs associated with training and outfitting new employees.

This applied research project (ARP) is supported by the United States Fire Administration (USFA) (2006) Executive Development course themes that correspond to adaptive leadership, change management and applied research. Additionally, this ARP is further supported by the USFA operational objective (e) “To respond appropriately in a timely manner to emerging issues” (United States Fire Administration, 2005, p.II-2).

Literature Review

A comprehensive literature review was conducted that included exploring fire service books, journals, publications and manuals in addition to management books, newspaper articles and internet web pages. A majority of employee retention information was found combined together with recruitment information. Although recruitment and retention go hand in hand, they are separate subjects that need individual attention. Buckman et al. (2006) identifies this with the statement, “The best recruiting program is a high retention rate” (p.7).
Fire Service

As a whole, volunteerism is down across the United States and in other countries including Australia and England. Volunteerism in the fire service has been on the decline the past 20 years in the United States. D'Intino (2006) reports that state and local governments have been concerned about this decline since the early 1970s. From an all time high of 880,000 volunteer firefighters in the mid 1980s, there has been approximately a 10% drop to an estimated 800,000 in recent years (Scott et al., 2004,). This is occurring while more demands are being placed on volunteers including time commitments, training requirements and increased call volumes.

The estimated annual retention rate for a volunteer firefighter in the United States is 4 years. Couple this with the increased costs to outfit and train a firefighter that stands at $4,000 and the consequence of poor retention is very apparent in the impact to the organization (Scott et al., 2004).

McLennan and Bertoldi (2005) found that the Australian fire service has reported an annual “4.5% decline in volunteer firefighter participation from 1990 to 2001” (p.17). Bain, Lyons, and Young (2002) state that firefighter retention and recruitment in England is 20% short of standard while finding it difficult to attract and retain qualified recruits.
There are many reasons for the poor retention of volunteer firefighters in the United States and abroad that include: increased time demands, increased training requirements, increasing call volume, changes in the nature of the business, changes in population and social conditions, leadership issues, internal conflicts, state and federal legislation, and lack of benefits, incentives, rewards and pay (D'Intino, 2006). The United States Fire Administration (2007) reports the number one reason volunteer’s leave the fire service is no time to volunteer followed by conflicts in the organization and then leadership problems.

Zigmont (2007) reinforces D’Intino’s claims by identifying these issues and adding that while departments can’t change a volunteers time dedication towards the department, the things that can be changed are reducing conflict within an organization and improving leadership, training, attitudes, criticism and camaraderie to retain employees.

Business and Industry

The business world is also finding it difficult to retain qualified employees in high tech and professional industries. Heathfield (2007) suggests that key employee retention is critical to successful business operations if a company is going to stay healthy and compete in their marketplace. Heathfield
reports critical aspects of employee retention include training employees, making them feel valued, providing clear expectations and feedback while maintaining an open environment where employees can speak their minds and provide ideas without being criticized or ridiculed.

In the information technology (IT) field Lee (2007) concludes; the employees that feel undervalued are more likely to look for greener pastures. This can be averted by providing training, professional development opportunities and offering flexible schedules in addition to keeping employees involved in new product development which can be a powerful retention tool.

Some of the main factors in employee retention are compensation, training, trust and strong leadership. Borland (2006) expounds on this by identifying that while compensation is important to attain good employees it is not the sole reason people stay. When spending on employee retention, the best value for your dollar is leadership training, developing trust within the organization and improving communication channels. Borland points out the primary reasons employees give for staying in their positions includes positive leadership and the trust they have developed with their immediate supervisors.

McCarter & Schreyer (2000) emphasized this point by identifying that employee retention efforts should be built on a
solid foundation formed from positive values instilled in the organization to retain talented employees.

The Gale Group (2004) found that many of these same values apply in business organizations. They outlined that chief executive officers believe that money is the sole reason people stay in an organization. This is erroneous, while salary must be competitive, employees give other reasons that include autonomy at work, opportunity to grow, enjoyment of the job, empowerment and their direct relationship with supervisors as reasons that outweigh compensation to stay in an organization.

**Health Care Industry**

In the health care industry, a local chapter of the Service Employees International Union (2007) demonstrated positive leadership, value for the employees and encouraging communications with a Madison, WI hospitals’ management team recently when they decided to reduce the high turnover rate of new nurses. Working collaboratively, they renegotiated limits on overtime, longevity rewards, new scheduling and affordable health care benefits as items to help reduce the turnover. This example illustrated leadership on both sides of the labor and management teams to arrive at a mutual solution.

A similar situation in a New York City hospital that was experiencing a 50% turnover rate of new nurses led to the
hospital administration and union meeting to identify a solution to their problem. They created better staffing ratios, hired additional staff, established a mentoring program, created a new float team and allowed nurses to self-schedule and switch shifts to accommodate their personal schedules (Service Employees International Union, 2007).

Non-Profit Industry

In the non-profit industry Moderi (2005) points out the problems non-profits have in competing for talent with the business industry on salaries and bonuses. Moderi finds it is important to address the individuals’ common and unique needs to retain employees. These needs include clear direction from supervisors, a respectful work environment, accountability, trust, training, recognition and the tools to complete assignments.

Foote (2005) expands on this by suggesting career progression is more important than salary and bonuses. Foote believes the main reason for poor retention is the inability to develop a combined strategy that includes pay, rewards, recognition, professional development and career advancement throughout the organization.
Fast Food Industry

Some fast food outlets have a turnover rate as high as 250% which can cost the average outlet $52,500 per year in training and staffing costs. Williams (2007) found that some restaurants reduced their high turnover rates by 50% or more through positive leadership practices that included hiring strong leaders. Good leaders will provide a vision and direction on where the organization is going in addition to encouragement and praise towards fellow employees.

King (2007) believes one of the top reasons employees leave the fast food industry is that they do not feel recognized. King points out Taco Bell reduced their turnover rate from 200% to 98% in a 3-year period through employee recognition and regular communications by upper management. The reduced turnover was reflected in increased sales, as the top 20% of Taco Bell stores in retention were 55% more profitable than those at the bottom 20% in employee retention.

Human Resources

While the secret of talent management is finding managers and supervisors that have well developed people skills. Ahlrichs (2003) found the most important relationship an employee has is with their immediate supervisor, which includes trust, relationship building, flexibility and fairness as the key to
employee retention. Ahlrichs includes mentoring, competitive compensation, training and a respectful work environment as key ingredients to increasing employee retention. The importance of these items are reinforced in the statement that a 10% turnover rate can be disruptive and expensive due to continued training and development costs associated with new hires.

Buckman et al. (2006) brings many of these important retention tools together in the White Ribbon Report. The document includes recommendations for human resource management, recruitment, retention, leadership, training, and strategies used to deal with issues affecting the volunteer and combination fire service. Outlined are values chief officers should follow along with competencies and expectations of all individuals associated with a fire service organization.

Moderi (2005), Ahlrichs (2003), and the Gale Group (2004) reinforce Buckmans’ claim that a direct connection is made between how an organization manages their human resources and the retention of personnel (Buckman et al. 2006).

Retention of high performing personnel is key to an organizations success; however, high turnover rates indicate there is a problem in the organization that diminishes the quality of service to the citizens (Buckman et al. 2006, p.14).
A good practice to use in an effort to identify why people are leaving your organization is to use exit interviews (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 1995). McCarter and Shreyer (2000) suggest that most employees, especially those leaving on good terms, will provide honest answers through frank discussion regarding their time and experiences with the organization. Exit interviews provide valuable information to the leadership team, if used appropriately, to help make adjustments in processes or programs to improve the organization (United States Fire Administration, 2007).

Recognition and Rewards

Buckman et al. (2006) addresses recognition and rewards that are available to the volunteer fire services including offering incentives, rewards and benefits. In an effort to maintain qualified firefighters, it was identified that firefighters families should also be recognized and involved in the organization through picnics, awards ceremonies and special events geared towards family attendance. Buckman notes that special drills designed to showcase firefighter’s talents and skills along with recognition for length of service awards and exceptional customer service go a long way in recognizing the volunteers’ efforts.
Recognition and rewards are an important part of retaining personnel in most industries. In volunteer and combination fire departments, recognition and rewards play an integral part in maintaining low turnover rates. Aldridge (2003) makes note of how fire departments can recognize employees through newsletters, length of service awards programs (LOSAP), incentives and benefits geared toward volunteer firefighters.

Rewards can be anything a person values, and to make the reward important, it should be tailored to the individual. Although rewards should be delivered on a fair and equitable basis, McCarter and Shreyer (2000) believe timing of rewards have a dramatic impact on employee retention.

Kaye and Jordan-Evans (1999) point out that praise is the universal reward for employees. Praise should be unplanned, specific, deliberate and personal. Praise can be accomplished in several ways, including expressing gratitude through written or oral communications or through the presentation of gifts and awards. Other incentives include offering personnel flexible schedules and special work assignments.

Furthermore, Buckman et al. (2006) provides ideas that can be used towards employee recognition and rewards programs in an effort to retain firefighters. Suggestions include training opportunities for all employees such as basic and advanced fire
certifications for firefighters, regular skills training, advanced training opportunities and leadership training for all officers. McCarter and Shreyer (2000) suggest it is important to tie the reward to the individual in an effort to make the reward meaningful.

Length of Service Award Programs

A length of service awards program (LOSAP) is an incentive geared toward rewarding the volunteer firefighter for their years of service. According to the National Volunteer Fire Council (2007) 35 states either have LOSAP programs, laws geared toward retirement incentives or guidelines for implementing retirement benefit programs for volunteer firefighters.

LOSAP benefits vary widely throughout the country. Implementation of a program generally requires identifying whether the program would use a defined benefit or defined contribution basis of payment on the employees’ behalf. A report by the New York State Office of the Comptroller (2001) indicates there are over 500 service award programs for volunteer firefighters in the state of New York alone. The defined benefit plans (84%) outweigh the defined contribution plans (16%) by a wide margin.

Most LOSAP programs are based on years of service. Some are based on years of service with a predetermined minimum age
requirement for obtaining benefits. Vesting occurs in some states as early as 10 years, however in other states the requirement is to attain a minimum of 20 or 25 years to receive any benefits. There are as many programs and variations as there are ideas on what an individual LOSAP should provide to the individual organization (National Volunteer Fire Council, 2007).

Recent legislation to bolster volunteer firefighter participation is geared toward the retention of firefighters (Fire Chief, 2007b). This includes the House of Representatives bill H.R. 2160 the Volunteer Emergency Services Recruitment and Retention Act and the companion bill recently introduced in the Senate, S. 1840.

Leadership

While many professionals identify that leadership is at the core of good employee retention efforts, leadership comes in many forms. Leading (leadership) as defined by Webster (1998) is (1) to direct, as by going before or along with, and (2) to guide by influence.

Schermerhorn, Hunt, and Osborn (1997) qualify leadership as a special case of interpersonal influence that gets an individual or group to do what the leader wants done. Behaviors that are used by successful leaders include leadership though charismatic, authoritative, collaborative, situational,
transactional and transformational methods to lead and manage personnel.

The United States Fire Administration (2007) suggests the national trend in management of the volunteer fire service is a participatory management style. Many of the volunteers today are supervisors and or managers in their full time careers. Volunteer and combination departments can capitalize on the skills and abilities of their membership through the utilization of their special talents. Participatory management styles can include establishing committees of volunteers for equipment and supply purchases, to identify safety and fundraising issues, and to help operate the ancillary side of the fire department.

The literature review provided valuable information on what a retention plan could include. Several different reward, recognition and retention strategies were identified to retain employees. Although volunteer retention efforts differed somewhat from other industries, many similar components and skills were identified as being useful across all industries including leadership, trust, value and opportunities for employees.

Procedures

The procedures used to facilitate this research project were a literature review, a review of internal department staffing
documents, developing research questions, the implementation of surveys for current and former members of the BPFD and the distribution of a survey to other volunteer and combination fire departments. An interview was also conducted with the BPFD Fire Chief.

**Literature Review**

A literature review was conducted that included exploring fire service books, journals, publications, manuals and websites in addition to reviewing management books, newspaper articles and internet web pages. The literature review included evaluation of documents at the National Fire Academy (NFA) learning resource center and local public libraries. Additional analysis of literature included utilization of business, management and fire service books. Further research included the review of fire service and business and industry documents found on web sites.

**Review of internal staffing documents**

An internal review of staffing documents included night duty staffing reports, fire reports, training reports and employment dates for all personnel. The department training and employment logs were reviewed for the time period from July 06, 2002 to July 06, 2007 for this report, representing a 5-year time period for the BPFD.
The BPFD type-of-incident reports were reviewed from January 01, 2005 through June 26, 2007. The incident reports were broken down into calendar years 2005, 2006 and the first part of 2007. The type of incident reports were reviewed to identify if the BPFD has an increasing number of calls, and to see if the type of calls, specifically general callbacks for manpower have been increasing. The firehouse brand software system and internal documents were used to obtain the results for this report (See Appendix A).

**Internal Surveys**

A detailed survey (Appendix B) was drafted and distributed to all firefighter-paramedics (FF/P) and firefighter-emergency medical technicians (FF/EMT) in the department. Twenty-four personnel returned their surveys from a total population of 34 employees currently working and available to respond to the instrument yielding a 70.58% (24/34) return rate. Excluded from the survey were all officers, supplemental vehicle maintenance personnel and 1 part-time employee of the BPFD.

The 19 question internal survey was distributed to individuals with specific instructions that the survey was a feedback instrument designed to gain information on their experience(s) and ideas with the BPFD. The participating members were asked to freely express themselves to assist with the
opportunity to provide feedback to improve the department. Furthermore, internal respondents were assured this was a blinded survey and that all responses would be kept confidential in an effort to gain truthful responses and to alleviate any bias or retribution towards the employee.

Questions 1 through 3 were designed to gain information on tenure with the BPFD, living distance from the fire department and other fire or EMS employment. Questions 4, 12, and 15 were designed to obtain information on leadership, fair and respectful treatment and feedback from officers. Questions 5 and 6 were intended to identify how active the individual was in the department including working volunteer night shifts and paid day staffs. Questions 7 through 15 were designed using a Likert scale and were used to indicate the employees opinion of the work schedule, department values, individual training and skills including EMS and firefighting, treatment by others and feedback from department members.

Question 16 helped to identify the employees’ highest certification level. Questions 17 through 19 were designed to identify the most pressing issues that the individual employees had regarding improvement within the department. Question 19 was an open-ended request for information that revealed extensive information on 17 of the 24 returned surveys where the
respondents supplied written or typed page length responses to this question.

Former Member Survey

Former fire department members were selected to complete a survey of their experience and time on the department. The main emphasis of this survey was to determine (a) if core values were present in the organization, (b) if there was any correlation to existing department retention issues and (c) to identify improvement initiatives within the organization.

Fire department records indicated that 75 members have left the department within the past five years. Of the 75 former members, 35 verifiable address or phone numbers existed as potential respondents for the survey. Former members were contacted via phone or existing e-mail address and informed of the survey, the instructions on confidentiality and each individual was provided the website link for access to complete the survey. The survey was conducted using the SurveyMonkey.com (2007) website and consisted of 20 questions (see Appendix B).

The questions for this survey were closely aligned with the current members survey in an effort to identify issues that included core values, leadership, training and reasons that could have extended the individuals service with the BPFD.
Outside Department Survey

An electronic memo was sent to the fire chief or administrative officer of 44 different fire and rescue departments asking for their assistance in completing a survey that dealt with firefighter retention issues (Appendix B). The memo included instructions and the web link to complete the survey at the SurveyMonkey.com (2007) website. The departments were selected due to locality and those identified as “Model Combination Fire Departments” (Scott et al., 2005, p. 26). The survey consisted of 18 questions that would help identify type and size of department, population served, retention programs, employee work schedule, tenure with the department, living radius and the retention rate over the past 5 years.

All surveys conducted for this research allowed the respondents to complete only the questions they felt comfortable answering. There were no forced answer questions, nor were there any requirements to respond to specific questions or narratives to continue with the remainder of the survey instrument.

Fire Chief Interview

An interview with BPFD Fire Chief Paul Tierney was conducted on September 18, 2007 at 1300 hrs. Four interview questions were asked to identify retention issues in the BPFD and the potential funds available for a retention program.
Results

The results of reviewing literature, internal documents, the survey instruments and an interview revealed useable information related to firefighter retention issues in the BPFD.

Research Questions Answered

Research question 1. What are the factors of low employee retention in the BPFD? Research conducted through literature review and the completion of internal and external surveys reveal several reasons for low employee retention.

With increasing requirements placed on volunteers for training and duty assignments it is no surprise that employees have limited time to volunteer in their communities (Scott et al., 2004). Internal survey results indicate that 25% of BPFD volunteers already work as full time fire or rescue personnel in another organization. Increased work hours and a minimum training requirement of 20 hours per month (SOP 1:1.92 App. A) placed on volunteers for fire and EMS training and it is understandable how little time is available to volunteer.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Are you employed by another fire department? (n=24)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Respondents to the outside survey indicate that few organizations have volunteers [(7.90%) or (112/1417)] that work for another full time fire department.

Another factor in employee retention identified through the internal surveys is that 54.16% (13/24) of the BPFD respondents indicate they live more than 5 miles from the station while only 16.66% (4/24) live in town or the fire protection district. This is in contrast to the outside departments surveyed, which many reported their requirements are for volunteers to live in town or within 5 miles of the station. One department required their volunteers to live within 1 mile of the fire stations in their community. None of the departments surveyed allowed their volunteers to live more than 15 miles from the station.

Table 2
Where other department members live in relation to the station?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distance</th>
<th>In town/FPD</th>
<th>Within 5 miles</th>
<th>5-10 miles</th>
<th>10-15 miles</th>
<th>More than 15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Firefighters</td>
<td>970</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>68.45%</td>
<td>25.26%</td>
<td>3.67%</td>
<td>2.54%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n=1417

While D'Intino (2006) and Zigmont (2007) outline that conflict within an organization can have negative effects on employee retention efforts. Several BPFD respondents [(45.83%) or (11/24)] revealed that conflict with other members are a concern, while 25%
specified they had conflicts with an officer. This is in contrast to former members [(46.15%) or (12/26)] who commented on the high level of leadership and professionalism that was exhibited by the current fire chief and deputy fire chief.

While many volunteers enjoy serving their communities with or without any form of payment, most volunteer firefighters receive some type of payment or stipend for their services. The external survey results suggest the average hourly rate is $13.66 per hour. The BPFD survey results indicate that the 3 most pressing issues were night stipend (16), low pay rate (13), and lack of recognition (13).

Table 3

What are the five most pressing issues to BPFD members?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concerns</th>
<th># responded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of supervision</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor apparatus</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Night stipend</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long work hours</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict with others</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity for promotion</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of leadership</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of benefits</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor equipment</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The internal survey document also attempted to identify what would extend the BPFD employees length of service time. Several of the same issues were identified. The BPFD fire and EMS employees top 4 reasons that would potentially extend their service time included night stipend (13), increased pay (12), longevity pay (10) and benefits (10). Some respondents replied to more than 5 items in the survey.

Table 4
What would extend your service time with the BPFD?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concerns</th>
<th># responded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased pay</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Night stipend</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirement plan</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chance for promotion</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less conflict with others</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longevity pay</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced work hours</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased benefits</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More shift camaraderie</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better equipment</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better fire training</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better EMS training</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better use of skills</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced night shifts</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased safety</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

A total of 120 employees have worked for the BPFD in the 5-year period from July 06, 2002 to July 06, 2007. The BPFD maintains 45 employees as active members. A total of 75 employees have left service with the BPFD in the past 5 years.
This is an average of 15 employees discontinuing service per year, which is the equivalent of one shift leaving per year.

The average length of service was calculated for all BPFD employees during this 5-year period, including those who discontinued service. The longest time served was 14 years and the shortest time served was 1 month, the average (mean) was 1.759 years (standard deviation of 1.819 years), the range was 13.9 years of service (see appendix A). The median service time was 1.2 years and the mode was 0.1 year.

With several employees leaving each year, there has been a shortage of senior firefighters to pass on the traditions and experience needed to mentor new members. This is identified in the survey responses that indicate the mentor program has provided limited value and that members do not feel all employees are qualified to perform their jobs.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal survey questions and average</th>
<th>Strongly agree 5</th>
<th>Agree 4</th>
<th>Undecided 3</th>
<th>Disagree 2</th>
<th>Strongly disagree 1</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel the department values your service/commitment?</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel fire training provides the needed skills?</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel EMS training provide the needed skills?</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel all members are qualified to perform their duties?</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel the mentor program has helped you?</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Likert scale (5 for strongly agrees and 1 for strongly disagrees) was used to tabulate the results in table 5 and it indicates that members are undecided (3.0) when identifying if the department values their service and time commitments. Additionally, the indication is that employees feel fire and EMS training provides above average skills that are needed to perform their job duties.

Another potential factor of low employee retention could be the increasing percentage of general callbacks placed for additional manpower along with increased manning requirements. General callbacks have increased as a percentage of the BPFD calls each of the past 3 years.

Table 6
General callbacks 2005 to 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total calls</td>
<td>1211</td>
<td>1172</td>
<td>584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General callbacks</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>16.84%</td>
<td>17.83%</td>
<td>20.37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 2007 year includes January 01 to June 26, 2007

An additional factor, which has placed a burden on volunteers, has been increased manning requirements. As of April 2007 the night shift manning requirement was increased to a minimum of 6 personnel. See Appendix A for BPFD policy 1:1.62.
Table 7

Night shift staffing for 2006, 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understaffed shifts 3,4,5</td>
<td>10.41%</td>
<td>13.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimally staffed shifts 6</td>
<td>29.58%</td>
<td>34.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum staffed shifts 8</td>
<td>9.58%</td>
<td>7.25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 2007 year includes January 01 to June 26, 2007

The benefits of treating employees well can provide dividends that can translate into higher retention rates. The internal survey also indicates that employees have had positive experiences with fellow employees and supervisors.

Table 8

Leadership, fair treatment and feedback in the BPFD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree 5</th>
<th>Agree 4</th>
<th>Undecided 3</th>
<th>Disagree 2</th>
<th>Strongly disagree 1</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do the officers provide good leadership for the department</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has your immediate supervisor treated you fairly?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you receive feedback from other officers and members</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there fair and equitable treatment of all members</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The external surveys also identified the need to provide enjoyable experiences for all employees. One respondent stated his department tries to be accommodating while attempting to get the volunteers’ families involved as much as possible.
Research Question 2. What are the components of a successful employee retention program? There are several items that should establish the framework for a successful retention program.

Leadership was listed as one of the most important factors identified from the survey instruments. While nearly half (45.5%) of the outside survey respondents indicate they have a mentor program, most programs are geared toward new recruits.

Table 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External survey questions</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does your dept have a dedicated retention program?</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your dept have a mentor program</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your fire dept have a line officer mentor program?</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your fire dept have a staff officer mentor program?</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your fire dept have a new EMS member mentor program?</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The core components of a successful employee retention program should include a combined strategy of compensation, rewards, recognition and opportunities for the volunteer. Opportunities should include free training, career advancement
and advanced skills training. Table 10 identifies what other departments feel are important to employee retention efforts.

Table 10

Components of a retention program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annual awards banquet</td>
<td>Yes 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firefighter of the year program</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department paid firefighter training</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid benefits</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotional opportunities</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire department picnic</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal recognition program</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOSAP</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health insurance</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results also support the concept that it is important to provide value, fair treatment, feedback and equitable consideration towards all employees.

Table 11

Value, feedback and fair treatment of BPFD employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has your immediate supervisor treated you fairly?</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you receive feedback from other officers and members</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there fair and equitable treatment of all members</td>
<td>2.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 3. What are other organizations doing to retain employees? It is apparent from the research that individual fire departments have tried to identify what retention issues are important in their organizations and to their employees. The research has identified several measures that other departments have undertaken to retain employees. Most departments are using varied techniques to retain employees.

The surveyed departments found it is important to provide good leadership, employee value, rewards, incentives, benefits and opportunities for employee involvement if the organization is going to establish a successful employee retention program.

Several departments that participated in the outside department survey suggest that an annual awards banquet is a priority as 100% of the volunteer and combination departments indicated they have one. Additional rewards and incentives include paid training, paid benefits, firefighter of the year programs and promotional opportunities as parts of their retention efforts.

More than half (63.6%) have a fire department picnic and 9.1% of the respondents stated they hold department fundraisers. Holding social events allows the employees to interact with each other and with other families thereby providing a closer camaraderie within the organization.
It appears that an equal number of respondents value some form of a retirement program while others do not have a LOSAP program. One respondent identified they have an excellent retirement program that requires 20 years of service and if employees work any less than 20 years they receive nothing.

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does your dept have a LOSAP program?</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>45.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>45.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pension</td>
<td>36.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longevity pay</td>
<td>27.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 4. What funds are available for an employee retention program in the BPFD. An interview was conducted on September 18, 2007 with Fire Chief Paul Tierney of the Beach Park Fire Department. The interview consisted of 4 questions; (a) What would you consider to be the most important factors affecting employee retention in the BPFD, (b) what incentives do you envision could be used for an employee retention program, (c) What funds are available for a future employee retention program and (d) What time frame would you consider to be adequate for implementing a firefighter retention program.
What would you consider to be the most important factors affecting employee retention in the BPFD? Chief Tierney believes the factors that most effect employee retention are training and education of the personnel in a volunteer or combination fire department. “Volunteers come to learn” and by offering a solid training program the BPFD is able to present quality opportunities that are not available to our members elsewhere. By offering classes and seminars to our members that otherwise would not be available to them at their full time jobs, we are able to retain some highly qualified personnel (P. Tierney, personal communications, September 18, 2007).

Some of the advanced course offerings through the Illinois State Fire Marshals Office like Firefighter III help further our training plan. The reason many young people come here is for the training opportunities (P. Tierney, personal communications, September 18, 2007).

What incentives do you envision could be used for an employee retention program? Our strong point is the outside training opportunities that we make available to our members. Additional incentives include taking our training to a higher level; monetary rewards that include increased pay for paid-on-call employees with higher levels of certification and the
opportunity for members to work day staff positions (P. Tierney, personal communications, September 18, 2007).

One of the issues we have is that several members live substantial distance from our station. Although this is a difficulty, it does provide an incentive to young people interested in beginning a fire service career (P. Tierney, personal communications, September 18, 2007).

What funds are available for a future employee retention program? Currently our training budget is essentially used for retention practices. The BPFD offers specialty courses, seminars, officer development opportunities and the development of paid on premise employees. There is no current employee retention budget, nor are there any funds budgeted for an employee retention program at this time (P. Tierney, personal communications, September 18, 2007).

What time frame would you consider to be adequate for implementing a firefighter retention program? If a comprehensive plan were developed with regard to the budget or funds available, it would be 6 to 12 months to establish a funding mechanism to support it (P. Tierney, personal communications, September 18, 2007).
Discussion

The literature review and research for this applied research project support best practices that if implemented should help retain firefighters and emergency medical service employees.

The research indicates that several factors affect the retention of volunteer firefighters. The most important factors in volunteer retention efforts include providing good leadership, reducing conflict in an organization, reducing time demands, increasing pay, benefits and incentives in an effort to retain volunteer and combination firefighters (D'Intino, 2006).

Additional employee retention factors identified through this research project include offering challenging training, professional development opportunities, the chance for advancement, a rewards program, a mentor program and developing trust within the organization.

A comprehensive retention plan should be established within a volunteer or combination emergency service organization that addresses many of these factors in an effort to retain qualified employees (Buckman et al. 2006). The research identifies that many organizations have found that retention of volunteers is difficult at best. Research efforts have revealed that 75 members have left the department in the past five years. This rate of turnover is equivalent to one entire shift leaving each
year. Furthermore, the research suggests that other departments are experiencing similar difficulties. A conscious effort needs to be made within volunteer organizations to address retention efforts, causes of poor retention and possible solutions. These efforts should be addressed on the local level by identifying the needs of the organization, gaining input from volunteers and developing a plan that specifically fits the department.

The number one reason volunteers give for leaving an organization is time demands. Time demands can be related to working too many shifts, increased training requirements or just limited time that is available to be spent with families (Scott et al., 2004).

The next two leading causes that employees give for leaving a volunteer organization are leadership issues and conflict within an organization. The research supports these retention issues whether it is a volunteer organization, a business enterprise or a specific industry. The best practice for an organization is to hire exceptional leaders with the requisite skills to lead and manage human resources. Good leaders provide direction within an organization and help reduce conflict through the use of problem solving skills and interpersonal influence to obtain results (Schermerhorn et al., 1997).
According to current BPFD members the virtue is that leadership (3.96/5.0), feedback (3.16/5.0) and fair treatment (4.16/5.0) from supervisors is occurring on an above average basis.

It has been identified through the literature review that leadership is a key factor in employee retention; but less than half (45.5%) of outside departments that responded to the survey report leadership training specifically designed to retain employees is provided to officers.

In the BPFD it was identified that 45.83% (11/24) of the current members had conflict with others in the organization and 25% (6/24) had developed conflict with an officer. While serious conflict in an organization should be addressed, former members of the BPFD had positive things to say when asked to add their experience. The former members [(8/26) (30.76%)] identified in written comments (question 20 of the former members survey) that the current fire chief and deputy fire chief have provided good leadership and a rewarding opportunity to the employees. All but one former employee said they would rejoin the department if the opportunity existed.

The top 3 pressing issues identified by current BPFD members were no night stipend, low pay rate, and lack of recognition. While compensation is important, many people volunteer in an
organization for other reasons including commitment to the community, family history as a firefighter, camaraderie and the ability to make a difference. Borland (2006) believes that compensation is important, but it is not the sole reason people stay in an organization.

A below average rating was indicated on how current employees feel; the department values their service, qualifications of fellow members and if the mentor program has provided value to them. It is important to make sure that the individuals feel valued in their positions and the work that they perform because an employee that feels undervalued will look elsewhere for opportunities (Lee, 2007).

Recognition and rewards are important factors in employee retention especially in volunteer organizations. Recognition can include annual awards banquets, picnics, service awards and praise.

Praise is the universal recognition award when it is delivered spontaneously, deliberatively and publicly. Praise encourages the individuals to perform at accepted and higher levels without any cost to the organization (Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 1999).

Recognition usually occurs at annual awards banquets for volunteer and combination firefighters. For some this is not
enough to keep them motivated throughout the year. Research results reveal annual awards ceremonies occurring in most organizations include firefighter of the year (72.7%) and EMS employee of the year (9.1%). Not one of the outside departments surveyed identified they have an officer of the year award. This is in contrast to the BPFD where both a firefighter and officer of the year award is presented.

Rewards for volunteer and combination departments can include anything that motivates the members to participate. Rewards include advanced skills training, a LOSAP program, leadership opportunities, increased pay, benefits and other incentives.

The BPFD presents quality training opportunities that are not available to members elsewhere and the research supports this with above average numbers on fire (3.70/5.0) and EMS (3.91/5.0) training provided by the department. The BPFD offers classes and seminars to members that otherwise are not available to them at their full time jobs. In doing this, the BPFD is able to retain some highly qualified personnel (P. Tierney, personal communications, September 18, 2007).

One reward that suggests increased involvement in an organization is a LOSAP. Although there are LOSAP programs in 35 states, no program is available to volunteers in the Northern
Illinois area (National Volunteer Fire Council, 2007). While our neighboring state Wisconsin has a program that requires a minimum of 20 years of service to collect benefits, no benefit is paid if the employee does not complete a full 20 years of service.

Another option available to fire departments is a longevity program or plan that pays for length of service within the organization. Outside organizations surveyed [(27.27%) or (6/22)] reportedly offer a yearly stipend for increased length of service based on a predetermined set of years. In other organizations a graduated stipend is paid at increments of 5, 10, 15 and 20 years of service.

Other organizations reported that they distribute pay on an annual basis, applied to a point system determined on how many trainings, calls and assignments each individual participated in. This is an option for many departments to set aside a predetermined amount of money to be distributed on an annual basis for individuals and paid based on yearly activity.

While the literature review and surveys of current and former members revealed issues that were presumed, the outside departments that were surveyed also identified useable information that can be applied to the BPFD. The research supports the concept of developing a plan for employee retention
efforts within an organization. A plan should combine employee retention and recruitment techniques into a comprehensive program that will help maintain a healthy volunteer force.

Recommendations

Several recommendations come from the research developed during this project. Some of the considerations for improving retention efforts in the department require funding mechanisms while other recommendations would not. Firefighter and officer development should occur through the current mentor program and by offering advanced training opportunities. The BPFD should also hold an annual picnic and increase pay, benefits and incentives for current members. Additionally, an integrated retention and recruitment program should be developed.

Leadership

Leadership recommendations for the BPFD include improving aspects of the current mentor program to provide a more rewarding and educational experience for new members and current volunteers. The research identifies that well developed employees provide positive dividends to the organization as a whole. One person, preferably an officer or senior firefighter should be assigned the responsibilities of directing and administering the current firefighter mentor program.
Additionally, an officer mentor program could be implemented with limited or no funding mechanism through the development of current senior firefighters. An acting officer program should be developed that includes setting joint goals and objectives by the participants.

Continued progress needs to occur with the development of current and future officers on the department. Outside seminars, classes and leadership opportunities should be available to current and future leaders of the BPFD. Senior firefighters that could become officers should be encouraged to complete advanced firefighter certifications and fire officer I classes as a minimum for advancement.

All current and future officers shall become well versed in identifying the employees’ value and time commitment to the organization. Through the use of praise and responsible involvement, employees can be provided the opportunity to exhibit talents and skills that would otherwise go unnoticed in the organization. A conscious effort should be made to provide all officers with the necessary skills and training to properly lead and manage volunteers.

Recognition and Rewards

Recognition and rewards can be anything that is important to the individual employee. For some people a simple thank you or
expression that a great job was done is enough. For others, a form of monetary or physical award expresses thanks for a job well done. Monetary rewards can be awarded to employees in the form of additional opportunities. This can include working staffed positions, increased pay for advanced certifications or increased responsibilities within the organization.

The research indicates that several current and former members identified that the leading recognition and rewards issues include providing a night stipend, lack of recognition and increased pay rate as the items that concern them the most.

A strong recommendation is made to provide a night stipend for each individual working a night staff position. A night stipend of $40.00 per 12 hr shift for each employee is reasonable and compares favorably with other departments providing pay for standby. A $40.00 stipend equates to $3.33 per hour per individual for 12 hours and appears extremely reasonable as it relates to $16.66 per hour for a five-person firefighting and rescue crew. The yearly pay for night stipends would come to $73,000 (5 stipends at $40.00/night = 200.00 X 365 nights = 73,000/year). This figure would allow the department to sufficiently staff all night shifts while providing a benefit to the employee. Paying a reasonable stipend for coverage is extremely economical when compared to paying full-time
Firefighter Retention

Firefighter salaries and benefits as calculated by the independent sector ($18.04/hr x 5 personnel = $90.20 x 12 hrs = $1082.40 x 365 = $395,076 per year) for a 12 hour manned shift (Buckman et al. 2006). This substantial cost reflects the value that the volunteer provides to the organization.

Another recommendation is to increase pay per hour for volunteers responding to calls or to the station on callbacks. A salary study should be completed to identify a reasonable and customary rate of pay per hour for volunteers. The recommendation would be to pay at or above the 70th percentile of the comparable departments surveyed.

An additional recommendation is to provide increased recognition for employees that would include an annual picnic and a more formal awards banquet. An annual picnic or outing should help bring all individuals together to meet and greet each other’s families and thereby provide camaraderie between the different shift personnel and work groups.

The final recommendation is to integrate a coordinated recruitment and retention strategy within the organization. This includes implementing a more local approach, which should consist of advertising and marketing the BPFD to citizens of the community and surrounding areas within 5 miles of the station. The research identifies that several current members live
substantial distances from the department making it impractical to utilize them for callbacks or secondary emergency calls. One additional component that should be integrated into the recruitment and retention strategy should include the use of exit interviews for all employees leaving the BPFD. It is hoped that departing members could provide valuable information about the organization in an effort to improve operations and communications throughout the department.


Buckman, J. M., Bettenhausen, R., Buchanan, E., Curl, L., Farmer, K., & Fulmer, D., et al. (2006, September). The white ribbon report: managing the business of the fire department: Keeping the lights on, the trucks running and the volunteers responding. [Electronic version]. International Association of Fire Chiefs.


