

Preservation of the Volunteer Fire Fighter in a Composite Department



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By Student #230037

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Port Colborne is protected from fire related emergencies by a composite fire service since the early 1940's. For residents, it means rapid medical care in a tiered response with Niagara Emergency Medical Services (NEMS) from career staff. It also provides a cost effective means to staff a fire ground in conformance with National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards and industry best practices by using volunteer fire fighters to supplement labour. Of the 455 fire departments within the Province of Ontario, volunteers serve in 423 of them whether in a composite or 100% volunteer model.

This report examines the human resource side of the volunteer fire fighter. Regulations that may affect them along with why they do it; finishing off with the obstacles life provides. The focus on the soft skills of human resources to provide the personal touch that many employees say have disappeared in the modern workplace. The ability for Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services to adjust and accommodate to the new normal of family dynamics will dictate the future of the service. The recommendations offered in this report reflect the challenges the volunteer fire fighter faces and how Port Colborne Fire Services can manage these challenges to preserve the volunteer and provide a cost effective, superior service to the residents of the City.

Before any recommendations are brought forward it must be declared that any change or deviation from current practices must be in the best interest of the resident that Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services protects, in either a service level or meeting applicable legislation. The first key recommendation is to actively promote the composite belief within the department. That being, career and volunteer appreciate each other's roles in the department and understand that they must rely on each other. By sponsoring such a belief, the volunteers sense of need is established which in turn promotes participation. Understanding the keys to why volunteers come out or stay home will dictate future hiring and possible disciplinary action for attendance issues. Family life in the modern age is a direct reflection on the volunteer's ability to commit. Understanding the social demands on personnel and having early discussions with staff on such issues may

differ discipline which can have a negative long term effect. The Fire Department's Regulating By-law (Colborne, 2007) states attendance of the volunteer fire fighter will be reviewed every six months, giving senior staff a legitimate reason to hold face-to-face meetings with staff to discuss any obstacle and remedy it. Time commitment of the volunteer fire fighters is reviewed in regards to fire fighter certification as prescribed in O Reg. 379/18 (Ontario, O Reg 379/18 : Firefighter Certification, 2018). During the research time of this paper, a new provincial government has taken power and has stated they will scale back or eliminate the requirements of O Reg. 379/18. Port Colborne Fire & Emergency at a minimum should create a plan for all new recruits to meet the requirements with the understanding that future health and safety goals will no doubt include many of the requirements of this regulation. Investigating a retention plan for volunteers should also be a priority. The plan at a minimum, should include a pension plan with the possibility of other medical benefits. Lastly, recruitment for future volunteer fire fighters requires a fresh and updated look due to changing demographics in the city and desires of the residents. The need to recruit the grounded family person is essential. The fire service can no longer look at the 20-something year olds and believe that they are committed to the city and the service. We must look and actively recruit from the older demographic in the city. With that, we must also tailor our look for the non-thrill seeker that views the fire service as the adrenalin rush. We must make our human resource decisions with long-term relationships with staff our priority.

The composite fire service model gives the residents of Port Colborne superior, early response service with the cost effectiveness of the volunteer fire fighters providing additional manpower when needed. The volunteer fire fighters serving the community are frankly the "make or break" portion of the composite department. The volunteer fire fighter must be understood and the fire service must adapt and respond to the challenges of the volunteer fire fighters so they can commit; communication is the key.

SCOPE and METHODOLOGY

This report will concentrate on what attracts a person to first, become a volunteer fire fighter and then, commit to a long-term employment relationship with the City of Port Colborne. Essential areas like regulations, age demographics, training, workload and incentive retention plans may be investigated. Furthermore, the report will look at past practices of Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services to discuss previous obstacles faced during recruitment and how to address these issues in future recruitment and retention. The findings of this report will spur multiple recommendations that will overcome the barricades many volunteer fire fighters struggle with and ultimately provide a strong viable and cost effective fire service. The ultimate goal is to supply the residents of the city with a superior level of service that is financially viable over the long term.

I have been fortunate enough during my time in the fire service to experience firsthand the volunteer system in two departments, one full-time career and one composite fire department. Understanding what a volunteer brings to a department and how volunteering affects all aspects of their life. Working in a unionized environment, I have witnessed the strained relationship between full-time and volunteer staff. Along with my personal experiences, my research material will include various internet sources, City of Port Colborne policy and multiple interviews with volunteers from two different fire departments.

INTRODUCTION – Economics of Fire Fighting

The fire service has come a long way in Canada since its inception in Halifax, Nova Scotia back in 1751 (Wikipedia, 2018). The early days of organized fire fighting saw groups of citizens join fire clubs; these fire clubs existed only for the protection of its members. A “bucket brigade” of ill-equipped, good intentioned residents doing what they could for the good of their community started. In essence, the volunteer fire fighter was born. The do-gooder of old received little to no compensation for his or her actions other than that feeling of helping someone in crisis.

The modern day volunteer fire fighter is well equipped, well trained and in the City of Port Colborne, paid for their service time. There are several different remuneration models used in the fire service; hourly pay or the point system are the most popular. Port Colborne utilizes a point system that sees the volunteer that attends an emergency response get one (1) point for every hour worked. For training, a volunteer receives three (3) points for every two-hour training session. The point system allows a municipality to have a fixed wage budget and in turn more financial control of expenses.

Large municipalities due to call volumes cannot operate solely under the on-call system. Not being able to predict the ability to staff the fire ground has forced many cities and towns to have full-time staff at the fire hall 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Many cities like Port Colborne work under a composite fire service model; one (1) engine staffed full-time; with volunteer fire fighters providing supplementary staffing. A breakdown of the fire service in Ontario (Lai, 2016) shows:

- 455 fire departments in Ontario
- 227 are 100% volunteer
- 196 are composite
- 32 are 100% full-time

In human numbers, the province has 19,363 volunteer, 11,318 full-time, and 274 part-time fire fighters.

Full-time staff come at a cost; most recently due to large arbitration settlements, fire fighters are some of the highest paid employees. For a smaller municipality, the fire department can be one of the largest budget items (Wente, 2018).

The modern age fire service is no longer viewed as an untouchable city department. As taxes go up, every city must find efficiencies. With the total number of fires decreasing across Ontario (Safety, 2018) while still seeing a significant growth in the population, justification of fire department budgets are being demanded by the tax payer. In the case of Port Colborne, an aging demographic demands the luxury of having full-time fire fighters for emergency medical response but with a lack of growth and an industrial tax base to pay. The volunteer fire fighter provides a cost effective way for the municipality to meet staffing requirements on the fire ground, while providing a cost effective service.

Regulating the Fire Service

Municipally

In Ontario, elected officials from each municipality dictate the level of service for that fire service through the Establishing and Regulating By-law (Colborne, 2007). The by-law prescribes staffing levels (full-time and volunteer, along with how many of each) response levels for medical, prevention, and suppression activities. Council is ultimately responsible for the service level provided to the residents. The choices Council makes directly affects standard operating guidelines that directly influence a volunteer's ability to sustain a long-term relationship. Operating policies will be reviewed and discussed later in this paper.

Provincially

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) is a global non-profit organization, established in 1896, devoted to eliminating death, injury, property and economic loss due to fire, electrical and other related hazards. NFPA delivers information and knowledge through more than 300 consensus codes and standards, research, training, education, outreach and advocacy; and by partnering with others who share an interest in furthering our mission. NFPA membership totals more than 50,000 individuals around the world

(Association, 2018). These codes and standards have been adopted by The Office of the Fire Marshal and are a measuring stick of the fire service in Ontario.

One such standard is NFPA 1720 “Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations and Special Operations to the Public by Volunteer Fire Departments.” This standard in general, provides the following benchmarks for staffing levels.

Urban Zones with >1000 people/sq. mi. call for 15 staff to assemble an attack in 9 minutes, 90% of the time.

Suburban Zones with 500-1000 people/sq. mi. call for 10 staff to assemble an attack in 10 minutes, 80% of the time.

Rural Zones with <500 people/sq. mi. call for 6 staff to assemble an attack in 14 minutes, 80% of the time.

Remote Zones with a travel distance =8 mi. call for 4 staff, once on scene, to assemble an attack in 2 minutes, 90% of the time.

Furthermore, the standard states:

“4.7.1. The fire department shall have the capability for sustained operations, including fire suppression; engagement in search and rescue, forcible entry, ventilation, and preservation of property; accountability for personnel; the deployment of a dedicated rapid intervention crew (RIC); and provision of support activities for those situations that are beyond the capability of the initial attack.”

“4.7.2. The capability to sustain operations shall include sufficient personnel, equipment, and resources to efficiently, effectively, and safely conduct the appropriate operations.”

While there are other, numerous legislative requirements like the Occupational Health and Safety Act, which apply to the fire service, the majority of workers in Ontario also fall under these regulations. The two referenced items above are a direct impact on Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services; Councils decision to have a composite department means they have chosen a more cost effective service, putting the weight of staffing requirements firmly on the volunteer fire fighters back.

The NFPA standard holds the fire department accountable to staff the fire ground with an adequate amount of fire fighters. Having well trained, motivated and loyal volunteers is essential to the survival of the composite fire department. Also, if these levels are not met, it may open a municipality up to legal action for extensive property loss or worse, loss of life. In order to stave off costly litigation, the City must balance the cost of full-time staff with the reliability of volunteer fire fighters.

City of Port Colborne

The City of Port Colborne is a vibrant community known for its beautiful shoreline along the coast of Lake Erie. With a population of 18,306 people, swelling to over 35,000 in the summer months and spanning over 122 square kilometers (Canada Census, 2018), the City is a mix of country, urban and cottage country rolled into one destination.

The City was industry driven in the early 1950's with major employers like INCO, Algoma Steel and Sherwood Flour Mills. This industry helped to determine the need for a full-time fire department and more importantly, help fund through the taxes it paid. Like most manufacturing municipalities in Ontario, the City has fallen on difficult times as major industrial employers have either downsized or vanished completely. Industry was the volunteer fire services best friend 20 years ago. Many of the members of the Port Colborne volunteers worked at Inco. Being a community minded company, they would let their employees leave work to respond to emergencies, i.e., fires. Without a strong business base in the city, many of the volunteers now work out of the city which makes daytime response nearly impossible.

Modest housing costs have helped transform Port Colborne into a retirement destination. A high-level breakdown of the demographics are as follows:

Total private dwellings – 9,825 Multi-residential dwelling units – 3,820

English as a first language – 90% Median age – 50 years

A demographic profile with an aged community, along with the lack of employment opportunities in Port Colborne suggest that future recruitments may be difficult at best. The 20-something community minded male is no longer standing in line to commit to the

fire service; changes to “how it’s always been done” must occur to attract and retain the next generation of fire fighters. Fact being, the next generation of Port Fire may have to come from the 35-45-year-olds that have settled into life.

Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services – How we Operate

Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services operates out of one central hall within the west side city limits, directly overlooking the Welland Canal. Positioned carefully to allow access to two lift bridges on either side of Lock 8; this allows certain access to provide service to the east side residents.

The City’s Council has chosen to be protected by a composite department that sees Engine 1 staffed with a Captain and 2 Fire Fighters 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Engine 1’s crew is capable of handling medicals, unknown 911’s, carbon monoxide and simple investigation responses on its own. Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services responds to an average 1,100 calls a year. Approximately 75% of all calls received are single engine responses.

Currently 42 volunteer fire fighters provide back-up to full-time staff for all multi-apparatus responses including, but not limited to, structure fires, motor vehicle accidents and alarm system activations. Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services also provides technical rescue services like water rescue and high angle to the residents and visitors to the community. The ability to muster fire fighters to the old standard of 10 in 10 minutes or meet the NFPA Standard 1720 is tested during daytime calls. With little industry in the City, the majority of the volunteer fire fighters work out of the City limiting their ability to respond to daytime calls in a quick and efficient manner. With the roles of Safety Officer, Entry Control and Accountability, manpower is quickly exhausted.

The City of Port Colborne does have Mutual Aid Agreements with its neighbouring Municipalities (Welland and Fort Erie) for manpower. All but one Department in the Region use St. Catharines for dispatching services; it is easy to request aid if required; patches to each other’s radio frequency, are available to link communications in a large event.

The Volunteer Fire Fighter

Why They Do It

Many people do not understand what is involved to being a volunteer fire fighter. Why would anyone tie their life to a pager and respond to a life threatening event with a few seconds notice. Once the event has been mitigated, they return home to pick up where they left off, preparing dinner, putting the kids to bed or going to work.

To formulate a plan for future recruitments, it is imperative that the City of Port Colborne understands what makes a good volunteer fire fighter, and how to work within their limitations to keep the good ones. Listening to them is the first step. Volunteers from two different departments were interviewed to create a cross sectional view of what makes them tick. When interviewing the volunteer fire fighters, common themes emerged. Some of the other reasons that I have heard often from these men and women through the talks, in no particular order, the top 5 are:

1. Past family member was a volunteer fire fighter (family tradition)
2. Excitement factor
3. Supplement family income
4. Hopes of turning fire fighting into a full-time career
5. Being part of the community

Family Tradition

I truly understand this reason for being a volunteer fire fighter. Starting my career with the Grimsby Fire Department as a volunteer. I was a 3rd generation Lawson and 5th to be part of the department. While my family's service to the Town of Grimsby did skip one (1) generation, the sense of pride I have for continuing a legacy of community service is unmeasurable. During interviews with Grimsby volunteers, I talked to one volunteer that also has a brother that recently retired and another brother volunteering with another municipality. He beamed with pride as he discussed his family's involvement in the fire service.

In Port Colborne, sons and daughters of fathers and mothers that had served the City are carrying on multiple legacies. The city's first female volunteer fire fighter now has her daughter carrying on the family tradition. That tradition led to the daughter being the first full-time fire fighter hired. One trend that was evident from this group is the service time. The volunteers that distinctly specified a family tie to the fire service had more than a decade of time served. Loyalty to the family extended into each distinct department; the fire department being an extension of the family itself. Many of these volunteers expressed fond childhood memories of fire department functions that their families participated in. This emotional tie should be explored further in future recruitments. The fire department may need to expand future events to include more family functions to create the bonds the next generation of fire fighters need in order to make the commitment to the department.

Excitement Factor

Since the creation of the fire truck, children have grown up playing with toys that idolize them. As we grow up, nothing is more exhilarating than watching a fire truck racing down a street, lights and sirens. Traffic pulls to the right, making way for the cherished brave fire fighters on board to make the rescue and put the fire out. That ideal instilled during childhood has kept fire fighting in the top professions of what we want to do when we grow up (Doyle, 2018).

Many of people who expressed the "excitement factor" as the first factor for becoming a volunteer had low service time. Many were still in the honeymoon stage of their careers. As a long service member myself, I can recall the excitement of jumping on the fire truck and responding to an emergency. After 15 years of missing birthday parties, waking up at 2 am and finishing a cold dinner on my return; the excitement factor is no longer there. Many of the long service volunteers I spoke to had the same feeling; it is not the excitement that keeps them engaged.

Supplement Family Income

Financial pressures on today's young family can be huge. Mortgages, car payments, dental/medical bills can crush a family. The ability to pick up a few extra dollars without leaving town can be a lure. Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services, under the point system has seen volunteer fire fighters receive remuneration in the tens of thousands of dollars. The more committed the fire fighter, the higher the year-end payment is. While not one volunteer boldly stated the only reason they commit to a disruptive lifestyle is monetary in nature, every volunteer did mention the financial advantages the job does have. Therefore, I believe financial compensation plays a role in the why of volunteering.

Hopes of Turning Fire Fighting into a Full-time Career

Fire fighting wages have sky rocketed due to large arbitration settlements, making them some of the highest paid employees in the municipality (Wente, 2018). When viewing this year's Sunshine list; the list of government workers that make over \$100,000 a year, the list is peppered with fire department personnel. Many fire departments have switched to the 24-hour shift. This advantageous work schedule sees the average fire fighter now work 7 days a month, 84 days a year. High wages and an abundance of time off make the job desirable to many.

Likewise, with training costs being labour expensive, many career fire departments look for the trained and practical experienced volunteer as a go to for hiring new staff. This does leave the volunteer department at a disadvantage due to the fire fighter unions' view on "double hatting". Many volunteers are forced to quit their part-time job as it is viewed as a conflict with the unions regulation of membership. With this in mind, the person who becomes a volunteer fire fighter with it being a stepping-stone to future career advancements may not be the ideal candidate for future recruitments. It should also be mentioned that Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services has a tradition of hiring its full time career fire fighters from its own volunteer base.

Being Part of the Community

Being part of the community was the go-to answer for the majority of persons answering the “why they do it”. When pushed to elaborate on their answer, many could not. Pondering the response over time, it must be asked if that is a realistic answer if it can’t be expanded on. Is it an act of unselfishness or the easy answer that makes a person seem valiant? The fire service has long been held in high regard for its apparent service to the people or as stated earlier, unselfish act; why would anyone not want to be associated with that. Without being too pessimistic in the modern age of “what is in it for me”, I feel this answer was more of a self-serving explanation than on what is truthful in nature. If this is truly a false statement, perhaps the persons that give this explanation when interviewed should be viewed as a negative instead of a positive.

Likewise, should the answer of “community involvement” be considered an intangible, unmeasurable feeling that cannot be expressed with words? Drawing from my own experiences as a volunteer, there is satisfaction on helping people in the community; is there a correlation between the people and the community, that, I cannot answer.

Stumbling Blocks for the Volunteer Fire Fighter

Life

Today’s volunteers usually juggle a full-time job and many times, family obligations that compete for their off time. The volunteer fire fighter does not choose when their shift starts, instead they wait for the pager to sound and then jump into action. Many times the pager will sound during family dinners, their children’s birthday party and while they sleep (Gollom, 2017).

With a change in lifestyle and the need for dual income families (Reynolds, 2018), many times the ability of the volunteer to respond is reduced. Long gone are the days of mom stays home, cooks, cleans and takes the kids to their activities while dad goes to work and comes home. Dads during the last quarter century have quite often become the primary care giver to the family’s children. Parents are not as willing to forgo their child’s recital for what was previously believed as the greater good; family is first, fire hall is second.

Legislation and Standard Operating Guidelines

The day of hiring as you need to add to your volunteer staffing compliment are gone; we must forecast the need for additional staff, get them trained before we are short of staff. Ontario Regulation 379/18 was introduced to Ontario's fire departments in the spring of 2018. As of 2021, sweeping changes to the training of new fire fighters will see each new volunteer put in an estimated 300 hours of training and pass certification testing before being permitted to ride a fire truck. Currently, Port Colborne Fire & Emergency Services conducts approximately 80 hours of training with one weekend at the live fire-training tower before being allowed to go to emergency calls. Under this previous system, the Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ) had the authority to provide training to the level of service the municipality dictated. O Reg. 379/18 will now dictate the level of training to become certified, which in essence, triples training hours for a new recruit. The added commitment each volunteer will have to show will exceed anything seen in the fire services history. Fire departments like Port Colborne will have to accelerate training by condensing the training calendar to get volunteers on the fire ground so we can meet staffing requirements. Alternatively, we must forecast our needs and train to our current schedule with the understanding that this next generation will not be ready for a year.

Policy #5-07 "Attendance Policy" is the benchmark for the volunteer to meet in regards to training and emergency response attendance. Reviewed twice yearly, each volunteer must make 50% of all training and 35% of all emergency responses. In theory, over a six-month span, calls should even out between day and night so any peak times a volunteer is unavailable, they should be able to achieve compliance. To date, the majority of the volunteers in Port Colborne met this requirement, however; the thresholds should be monitored in the future and adjusted if it appears compliance is too demanding to meet. The quality of response, i.e., quick response times may have to dictate over the quantity.

False calls

As life safety standards increase in the Building Code that dictate how our buildings are built, so will the increase in false alarms. The sophisticated fire alarm systems of today are prone to false activations. Likewise, as the building stock in Port Colborne ages, the dated life safety devices that currently protect the residents will start falling at an increased level. As these devices fail setting off alarm systems, they will generate a response from the fire department. In 2017, Port Colborne's volunteers responded to 146 false fire calls; no action was required due to faults in the life safety device or accidental activation (human error). These unnecessary responses by the volunteers add to overwhelming pressures that "life" has on them. The volunteer may have only left for 45 minutes to an hour, the guilt or inconvenience of leaving work or their family is there.

An increase in fire prevention, pro-active inspection and public education may hold or even decrease the number of false calls. Full-time fire fighters who currently do some in-service inspection can step up the frequency of said inspections. Ideally, an additional fire prevention inspector should be added to the ranks of full-time staff. While there is an upfront increased staff cost by adding the full-time position, the comparison of full-time department versus a composite department sees extensive cost savings over a year.

Human Conflict

Whether its tension between the full-time staff and the volunteer fire fighters, internal or external strife, human conflict can be a serious issue to morale or worse yet the existence of the organization. Recently in North Huron Ontario, 42 volunteer fire fighters resigned following the appointment of a new, interim Chief (Kitchener, 2017). While a deal to protect the residents of the municipality was made between neighbouring departments, the conflict between the volunteers and North Huron's Council took days to settle. Political tensions can and have unravelled great organizations.

I believe the most concerning conflict in a composite department lies between the career and volunteer fire fighters. The majority of career fire fighters take their jobs very seriously and hold the profession above all else. They can at times, add pressure to the volunteer fire fighters that might not meet the skill set or dedication they believe they should have.

Likewise, the volunteer fire fighters can see the full-time as prima donna that forget they don't have the opportunities to train during shifts to raise their competency. The career fire fighter must become the cheerleaders for the department. Unfortunately, many still believe the way to expand the union membership is to see the volunteers fail. This mind set must be changed and it must be changed quickly. Any misunderstanding that comes to light between the career and volunteers must be handled quickly and properly. The message must be clear, the volunteers are a much needed resource to the department and the City.

The volunteer will not stay if they do not feel appreciated or valued. Port Colborne must do a better job of listening to their volunteers and treating them as individuals. A minimum of one job performance, ideally two evaluations should be completed yearly with each volunteer. Job performance, along with attendance issues could be discussed openly and any problems resolved before they fester. This would be a huge commitment in time by management towards the volunteers but with the open communication, issues may not have the chance to become issues.

Retention Plans

First, let's look at the definition of Retention Plan:

“An effort by a business to maintain a working environment which supports current staff in remaining with the company. Many employee retention policies are aimed at addressing the various needs of employees to enhance their job satisfaction and reduce the substantial costs involved in hiring and training new staff.” (Inc, 2018)

There is an unmeasurable cost associated with turnover of staff. You can dismiss the obvious costs associated with training, special ordered protective gear and wages. Real life fire experience at real live fires cannot be bought, sold or traded. Experience comes with time and can be the difference between success and failure. In career departments, experience is a luxury; fire fighter turnover is limited at best. For the composite department, the reality of who responds to the incident can and will dictate its outcome; in the fire service, experience is earned.

Retention plans have always been a debatable topic on the volunteer side of the fire service. An increase in wages has always been a part of the discussion; with the introduction of Bill 148 ‘A Plan for Fair Workplace and Better Jobs’ (Ontario, A plan for fair workplaces and better jobs ((Bill 148, 2018)), equal pay for casual, part-time, temporary and seasonal employees may see the volunteers being paid per hour what the career fire fighter receives. Also noteworthy is the stipulations that an employee be paid a minimum of three hours for each shift that lasts less than three hours. With the majority of calls lasting less than an hour, this may be viewed as compensation above and beyond thus, part of a retention plan. With this change to the “three-hour rule” scheduled to come into effect January 1, 2019 and with the recent change in government, we must sit back to see what transpires as further exemptions are expected.

A lack of pension plans and benefits also dominated the conversation. Many volunteers are not fortunate to have the benefits at their day jobs and pension plans in private business are almost a thing of the past. Research on the topic found limited articles on the subject in Ontario. From my experience, Ontario Municipal Employees Retirement System (OMERS) required a minimum number of hours of work before an employee qualified. The majority of volunteer fire fighters would never meet these thresholds.

Further research found the State of Minnesota understands what the volunteer provides. A report summary stated: “Like most states, Minnesota has a strong tradition of relying on volunteers to provide fire protection services. As a reward for their service, the state allows them to receive pension benefits upon retirement. Today, there are more than 700 pension plans covering nearly 20,000 volunteer fire fighters statewide. Each plan is administered by a non-profit corporation known as a volunteer fire fighter relief association” (Auditor, 2007).

The plan above, on the retirement of the volunteer, sees the volunteer receive a one-time payment of \$800.00 for each year of service. Looking at different options, I believe a self-directed Registered Retirement Saving Plan (RRSP) may be the best solution. Payroll deductions could be matched by the City up to a capped level of 5%. This is a typical matching plan that could see a volunteer reach a sizable amount to help them enjoy retirement. The win-win for this plan is that the more involved the volunteer is, the greater

their plan is worth. The win for the City is they have an engaged employee and a staffed fire ground.

Benefits would be a different animal for any municipality to arrange and a sizable cost. At a minimum, a pro-active health care approach offering chiropractic and massage would be appreciated. Typically, the above services have a capped cost and can be administered through the City's current benefit provider for full-time staff. While investigating a plan should be done, added costs may not make it feasible.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to take a closer look at the volunteer fire fighter and how to maintain their involvement in the service. Focusing on how they are regulated, why they volunteer and the stumbling blocks that test commitment; we hope to strengthen their involvement and dedication. The scope of this paper could easily be expanded to include other facets of the fire service including, but not limited to equipment, self-regulation, and education to name a few. As the research developed through conversations with the volunteers, the path of regulations, the why and stumbling blocks took the forefront. While policies and programs drive the level of service in the fire hall, personal interaction make or break every business, institution and organization. The recommendations needed to sustain the City of Port Colborne composite department are of the human factors that cannot be purchased.

Unlike many composite departments, Port Colborne's one (1) fire hall houses both career and volunteer apparatus. The need to coexist and act as one department is crucial to a cost effective fire service in the City. With the recent competition within the volunteer ranks to appoint volunteer captains was a step in the right direction in showing the volunteer base they have the ability to walk as equals to the career staff on the fire ground. Understanding the volunteer and helping them succeed in a long dedicated tenure needs to be a priority for management. The true key to any successful relationship in any workplace is communication. With that said, communication must be a two-way street with equal commitment from the volunteers to communicate issues as they arise to senior management.

Another key factor to future hiring and retention of current staff is making the fire hall a family oriented building. Repeatedly over a week of talks with volunteers the common theme of fire hall involvement in their youth was reported. This early imprint in the memory lasted a life time that drew them to the fire service later in life. A conscious effort must be made to bring family back to the hall. With recent involvement in submitting a float in the Christmas parade that saw the young families of the fire fighters riding it is a step in the right direction. Expanding the event to include coming back to the fire hall should be examined.

The fire service can be a dynamic, rewarding and at times, an overwhelming workplace. With how society has developed over the past 50 years and even more so over the past 20 years, the fire service has remained steeped in tradition. While tradition should never be forgotten, the need to evolve to change is crucial to sustaining the new volunteer fire fighter. Understanding the demands of life on the volunteer and helping that person cope will ensure a sustainable composite fire service in the City of Port Colborne for future years.

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