



Presentation Title: A CRR Approach to Volunteer Recruitment

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I. Formative Evaluation – Planning

Fire departments across the nation face difficulties when it comes to the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters; the Columbia/Richland area has experienced the same challenges. A needs assessment performed by the Volunteer Coordinator of Columbia-Richland Fire Rescue demonstrated the average age of the department's volunteer officers is 51-years-old. We needed to increase our training levels to prepare new members to become leaders in the department. Staffing levels were at about 84 volunteer firefighters; only 32% of the staff budgeted for by Richland County. The 260 volunteers in the county budget allow each volunteer station to have anywhere between 20 and 40 members per station. These numbers are based on historical staffing numbers and are in the joint contract between the county and city for county-wide fire protection. An additional evaluation also concluded that the department struggled to provide training for volunteers that met their schedule. The paid members of the Training Bureau are typically assigned to work the hours of 8-5 with some flexibility but the volunteers were more available on nights and weekends.

The needs assessment included interviews of longstanding members, elected officials, and members of the executive staff to document the historical data of the program. Unfortunately, the few department responses and activity records that were maintained appeared to be invalid and incomplete.

Historically the department has strived to recruit members of the community that want to serve in the capacity of "firefighter." That same pool of people appears to be shrinking on a national level. If the department cannot recruit volunteers that will respond to emergencies, the department needs to recruit volunteers that will work to prevent emergencies from ever taking place.

II. Process Evaluation – Implementation

We began using all social media platforms, including using the Neighbor app. This app allows us to focus on particular areas where we need volunteers as opposed to simply sending out blanket social media blast. This strategy helped us target specific regions of the county lacking volunteers.

We worked with the City of Columbia's marketing team, rebranding the entire program, including new flyers, printed media, and other items, and worked with the South Carolina State Firefighter's Association on a recruitment program that would be used statewide by multiple departments. We started more recruiting at our local college. The University of South Carolina (U of SC) is in our response area, and through a simple word of mouth program of current volunteers enrolled in the school, we recruited more college students.

We defined our support roles and associated duties, including how the department will use the support volunteers. Our primary focus was to recruit for administrative, training, and public education positions. By updating our policies, this now allowed for such a position that formerly did not exist.

We identified several community partners that have allowed us to increase our presence within the community, such as private businesses and local schools.

We redefined how we conducted our volunteer recruit school and adjusted the schedule to be more convenient for volunteers. By working with the Training Bureau, we were able to send out a full year's schedule at the beginning of the year, including driver training, officer training (a priority), and recruit training.

III. Impact Evaluation – Short-Term Results

By working with our partners within the city as well as the community, we have been able to increase our presence in the community. The major highlight of all of our work comes in the form of a great addition to our department. We were able to recruit a U of SC student that is currently completing her Master's in Geography with a focus on Hazards and GIS. Tracy Whelen came to us with previous firefighter training and wanted to continue her training as a firefighter. Through our new training schedule, we were able to work with her demanding schedule as a student. She completed her training and became a certified firefighter.

More importantly, we were able to capture and use Tracy's GIS skills by focusing on additional ways she could serve our department other than simply responding to emergency calls. Tracy is working with us to complete her thesis which will serve as our department's new Community Risk Assessment (CRA), our first CRA in department history. Through Tracy's work, we have been able to make several presentations to Command Staff showing them real-life data, opening many eyes to how we can use data to serve our community better.

We increased our presence within the community. Through a partnership with a local high school, we have been able to provide a fire truck for their home games, allowing community members to engage with our volunteers in a non-traditional setting. Community partners have assisted in fundraising. At our recent fall festival, a local HVAC company purchased enough food for 1,500 attendees while the fire department provided fire prevention education and recruited firefighters.

IV. Outcome Evaluation – Long-Term Results

Some of the long-term results we are beginning to see is an increase in our number of volunteers. There are now four support volunteers, three of whom support our volunteer training program. These individuals work very flexible hours including many nights and weekends. Through their service, we have a 20-member cadre of volunteer training with more waiting for an opening.

Volunteer membership has increased by 10% and an additional 14 volunteers are about to graduate from our recruit class. We have been able to measure the overall success of the program not only through an increase in volunteers but also by an increase in applications and interest forms. We went from four applications in January 2016 to 64 in January 2019.

Recommendations for others:

Don't get discouraged, and take your time with the implementation of any projects. Understand that the risk facing your community may be unique to your department, but no matter what, DO SOMETHING! Whether it's installing smoke alarms, recruiting career firefighters and volunteer firefighters, or developing a new program, do your best to make a positive impact within your community.