



Grassroots Forums Report

M I C H I G A N , O R E G O N , T E X A S , V I R G I N I A

JUNE 2009 - FEBRUARY 2010



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Photos courtesy of:

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Texas Grassroots Forum

SYNOPSIS

Fire Corps works to support fire and emergency service departments and agencies who want to implement and sustain non-emergency, community volunteer programs. The national office provides resources and tools, networking opportunities, and best practices to better equip these agencies to operate and manage Fire Corps teams who provide additional services to their communities and supplement their first responders.

Fire Corps held a series of Grassroots Forums to further assess local needs and identify how national and local Fire Corps efforts can better achieve the program's mission to increase the capacity of volunteer, career, and combination fire and EMS departments through the use of community volunteers. The goals of the Fire Corps Grassroots Forums were to allow the national Fire Corps office to identify best practices, challenges, and effective retention and recruitment methods, and to garner recommendations and feedback from the local and state levels. In addition, these Forums provided opportunities for in-person networking and collaboration of local Fire Corps teams, Citizen Corps Councils, and other key stakeholders to help with program implementation and sustainability in their departments and agencies.

METHODOLOGY

A total of four Grassroots Forums were held between June 2009 and February 2010, each hosted in a different state to allow for geographic diversity of participants. Fire Corps State Advocates and State Citizen Corps Council representatives assisted in identifying the location of each Forum, in addition to planning and hosting them. Forum dates and locations were as follows:

- June 13, 2009 - Virginia Department of Fire Programs in Glen Allen, VA
- August 14, 2009 - Macomb Township Fire Station #4 in Macomb Township, MI
- February 5, 2010 - San Antonio Fire Training Academy in San Antonio, TX
- February 12, 2010 - Hermiston Fire Station Three in Hermiston, OR

In order to capture both local and state feedback and encourage collaboration among all agencies with a vested interest in the program, invitations were sent via email and postal mail to State Advocates, Fire Corps program managers and volunteers, State Citizen Corps Councils, and other stakeholders.

The agenda and layout for each meeting was designed to encourage networking and information sharing among attendees and focused around six key topics:

- Topic 1: Innovative Practices
- Topic 2: Funding
- Topic 3: Building a Program
- Topic 4: Liability
- Topic 5: Training
- Topic 6: Retention and Recruitment

These topics served as a foundation to guide discussions and focus on areas of prominent local Fire Corps needs. Attendees were divided into smaller groups during breakout sessions which covered each of the above focus areas. Groups then reconvened as a whole to discuss and report back their discoveries.

OUTCOMES

Many things were learned from the Forums, some that are already existing practices and others that are new ideas and needs. The information garnered will serve as a foundation for future growth and expansion of Fire Corps efforts at the local, state, and national levels.

TOPIC 1: Innovative Practices

Fire Corps teams provide a variety of services, both in the day-to-day fire department operations as well as in preparation for and response to emergencies. Previous surveys of registered Fire Corps programs, interviews with local teams, and everyday communications with Fire Corps stakeholders have helped to uncover common activities among programs. These include fire prevention and life safety education, rehab/canteen services, administrative duties, disaster preparedness initiatives, home safety checks, and more.¹ The purpose of discussing innovative practices within the Forums was to identify atypical activities conducted by local Fire Corps teams as well as distinctive local needs these programs are helping to meet.

Many Forum participants noted that a needs assessment of the fire department and the community was essential to their ability to develop and put into practice specific Fire Corps volunteer activities. These needs assessments most often included an evaluation of existing programs and initiatives, demographics, community characteristics, and potential volunteer skill sets. Others who had not performed such an assessment affirmed it would be beneficial to do so.

Some participants indicated that they were not aware of existing Fire Corps resources that can assist departments with their program assessments, such as the *Fire Corps Resource Guide: Second Edition*.² National efforts will be made to increase publicity of available tools such as this *Guide* and others and to monitor their use more closely in the future.



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¹ 2008 Fire Corps Survey, October 2008:
www.firecorps.org/files/documents/2008_Survey_Report.doc

² *Fire Corps Resource Guide: Second Edition*, 2009:
www.firecorps.org/files/documents/FC_Resource_Guide.pdf

Existing innovative practices identified through each of these Forums include:

- Activities targeting or involving special needs, such as youth, elderly, mentally or physically challenged, non-English speaking, and low-income populations:
 - > “Shop with a Cop” during the holiday season
 - > Fire Camp: children ages 7-12 attend a one-week camp designed to teach them the roles and functions of a fire department. Camp components include:
 - Youth are split up into different battalions with a volunteer assigned to each
 - Participants are provided t-shirts, backpacks, and other flare
 - Bike rodeo consisting of inspection and safety gear
 - Junior combat challenge
 - > Bike helmet registration
 - > Utilizing Boy/Girl Scouts to distribute and teach smoke alarm battery checks and safety information literature
 - > Map Your Neighborhood: identifies the location of useful materials in neighborhoods, like natural gas and propane tanks, residents that have helpful skills for emergency response, and residents who have specific needs that must be attended to in an emergency
 - > Gathering supplies for special needs: for example, oxygen tanks that may be needed by residents during power outages
 - > Fire and life safety activities at assisted living homes
 - > Identification and evacuation of residents with special needs during an emergency
 - > Pet safety
- Fire prevention and life safety programs:
 - > Smoke and carbon monoxide alarm donation, inspection, and installation
 - > Fire safety house
 - > Pool safety
 - > Fire extinguisher training to both volunteers and residents
 - > Fire prevention dogs/K9 educators
 - > Car seat inspection and safety education for families
- > Support for community events outside of the fire service, including:
 - County/local fairs
 - Public/private school programming and school outreach programs using “Sparky”
 - Airshows
 - Rodeos
 - Health Fairs: consider partnering with the local health department
- Community programs and services:
 - > Community preparedness assistance and literature distribution, such as through the Ready Campaign³
 - > Homecare, child care, or pet care for spouse or victim involved in emergency
 - > “After the Fire” programs and post-disaster support for victims. Examples include:
 - Providing necessities, such as blankets, dog food, eye glasses, etc. Consider partnering with the Red Cross.
 - “After the Fire” booklet distribution directing families to available resources
- Direct department assistance:
 - > Pack, change out, and refill self-contained breathing apparatuses (SCBA) for department
 - > Fire Corps training and familiarization with cascade air breathing systems
 - > Department photographer/emergency photo capture
 - > Traffic control during community events and emergencies
 - > Pre-planning, including establishing standard guidelines for indexing, updating, drawing, printing, filing, and distributing pre-fire plans
 - > Brush and debris clearing around hydrants so they can be easily located
 - > Street and residential address marking to increase visibility and decrease response times
 - > Database logistics, including training volunteers and department members to perform database entry
 - > Securing corporate partnerships and funding for department and program

³Ready Campaign: www.ready.gov

One value of Fire Corps is the ability to network and share information from program to program, which provides innovative ideas and lessens the likelihood of a department exhausting its efforts to create something that has already been established, commonly called “reinventing the wheel.” Participants agreed that information sharing was essential for local programs to expand and/or enhance their activities. Current mediums to network include contacting surrounding or profiled programs from the Fire Corps [web site](#); however, this presents limited communication with only select programs. An open, online forum to post messages, share ideas, and ask for feedback was requested by many participants.

Feedback on the innovative practices topic provided insight that while many programs utilize their volunteers for a variety of commonly shared functions, there are also a number of innovative activities and methods in which the services are performed. This feedback appears to confirm the belief that Fire Corps is a flexible program that can be tailored to meet local needs.

TOPIC 2: Funding

Fire Corps is intended to be a low-cost program; however, as with any program, expenses to operate may exist depending on the activities performed and level of volunteer involvement. The goal of this topic was to uncover the challenges and successes local Fire Corps teams have encountered in securing funding through department capabilities, 501(c)(3) designations, corporate sponsorships and partnerships, government assistance and grants, and nonprofit partnerships.

A variety of funding methods are listed here to help Fire Corps teams gather ideas about how other programs operate and potential untapped sources to initiate or enhance their services. Participants indicated that no matter which funding source(s) a program uses, having a clear mission, goals, and objectives, and also outlining the needs to accomplish these, will factor into the costs programs require to operate.

Forum attendees noted that programs should consider items such as travel, training, food, uniforms, public education program and rehab unit supplies, and more. Additionally, a general consensus among all participants is the value of

volunteer time.⁴ Counting your volunteer hours can be extremely helpful in justifying why your program should be awarded a grant or support.

Participants emphasized that while a method of funding may be successful for one program, conditions in other departments, agencies, communities, geographical regions, and other factors may deem that source unavailable or inappropriate for another program.

Department/Sponsoring Agency Funding

Some participants said that their fire department funds their Fire Corps program. Expenses for Fire Corps activities are budgeted into yearly operations and may claim tax-exempt status because they fall under the department and share their tax exemption. However, like many nonprofit, for-profit, and other government agencies, fire and emergency service departments are experiencing budget cuts and financial hardships. If funding is available through the department, participants suggested a specific line item should be designated for the Fire Corps program. Participants suggested that the department may also consider charging yearly program dues to help offset costs. While this may be a minimal contribution, financial outlay may increase the motivation to stay involved. Many participants indicated that fundraising specifically for the program has also been helpful to offset costs.

If this is an option for a program, participants identified several factors for consideration. For instance, how does receiving funding affect others within the organization? Will career first responders find the value of the non-emergency volunteers beneficial, or will they feel as if such money could be used for career salaries and benefits? Will there be misconceptions about how the funds are used? For example, if volunteers are rewarded with an annual banquet, but the first responders in a volunteer or combination department are not, this may cause tension among the groups and a negative attitude towards the Fire Corps volunteers. These examples provided by Forum participants illustrate the need for successful program implementation and evaluation.

Becoming a Separate 501(c)(3) or 501(c)(4) Organization

Participants suggested that if a department or sponsoring agency is unable to fund a Fire Corps program, then the program may consider separating itself as a nonprofit 501(c)(3) charitable organization⁵ or even a 501(c)(4) social welfare organization⁶ to claim tax-exempt status and gain

⁴ Value of Volunteer Time: www.independentsector.org/volunteer_time

⁵ Tax Information for Charitable Organizations: www.irs.gov/charities/charitable/index.html

⁶ Social Welfare Organizations: www.irs.gov/charities/nonprofits/article/0,,id=96178,00.html



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the ability to secure funds for the program outside of the department. This has been successful for some programs; however, they noted that their Fire Corps teams remain intrinsically connected and under control of the fire department or other fire and/or emergency service agency responsible for its implementation.

By obtaining tax-exempt status and financially operating outside the constraints of the departments, many programs have been able to apply for public and private funding opportunities, receive in-kind donations, and become eligible for state and federal exemptions. Participants noted that some attorneys may provide pro-bono work for a community program to help obtain its tax-exempt status.

Corporate Sponsorships and Partnerships

Many businesses have philanthropic endeavors to help community programs achieve their missions. For example, some programs said they have had success in working with companies that match fundraising efforts or provide donations, such as Wal-Mart, McDonalds, and Farmer's Insurance. Participants noted that insurance agencies in their communities have a particular interest in mitigating damages caused by fire or other disasters, and these sources even have materials already established and are looking for a medium to deliver them, such as their Fire Corps program. However, many participants mentioned that ethics laws in their state have restricted donations to individuals and organizations, so they must be careful when securing donations.

Several participants noted that competition for corporate funds is at its highest, and therefore it has been beneficial

to outreach to multiple companies, businesses, and other sources to help with their efforts. For example, one program secured three sponsors to purchase bottled water. The Fire Corps team added the sponsors' logos on the bottles and sells the water, with the department receiving the full profit.

One funding challenge noted by some participants is that funders are looking for sponsorship opportunities that are in an area close to their corporate headquarters or business operations. Participants said a possible solution to this problem is finding a community outreach division within the corporate structure or focusing on partnerships with local businesses. Additionally, because every program varies depending on need, attendees said that the Fire Corps concept and mission has been difficult for some businesses to understand. Therefore, participants emphasized that it is important for local programs to develop an individual mission statement and action plan with goals and objectives so potential sponsors have an understanding of their intentions.

A suggestion from participants is for the national office to create packet template for local departments to take with them when meeting with prospective funders. This may include a facts sheet, handouts, list of accomplishments, and tips and tools for partnering. It was suggested by attendees that the national office find corporate sponsors that can donate directly to departments to help fund their activities.

Government Assistance and Grants

Many participants discussed government funding opportunities through which they have applied, such as the sources listed on the following page.

Citizen Corps Funding: Many participants have had success in obtaining Citizen Corps funding for their activities, such as purchasing a rehab/canteen trailer, uniforms, and other items. However, the ability to apply for Citizen Corps funding at the state level was a recurring topic among participants. Some were unaware of Citizen Corps funding opportunities or were unfamiliar with the application process and its requirements. Each state varies as to how or if such funding is available; therefore, it was noted that participation in local Citizen Corps groups is critical in order to voice Fire Corps needs and gain state funding for local programs.

Many participants also stated that there is a need to streamline grant processes at the state level. A recurring problem noted by some participants is that the grant is awarded, but the funds are not released in time to accomplish tasks outlined in their grant applications. A solution was proposed to eliminate the state level administrator and allocate funds directly to programs from the national level. This would also help distribute funds evenly throughout the state. Some participants attested that a large sum was going to few and recommended that distribution be made evenly so eligible, smaller programs are not left out.

Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program (AFG): The AFG program is designed to assist local fire departments and other organizations in protecting citizens and firefighters against the effects of fire and fire-related incidents.⁷ Many Fire Corps teams have applied for such funds through the Fire Prevention and Life Safety Grant and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Grant, which now includes a provision to allow for hiring a recruitment coordinator. While Fire Corps is mentioned in the AFG Grant Guidance, participants said it would be helpful if Fire Corps had a specific amount of funding pre-allocated for departments and written into these grants to help secure funding through this medium.

Urban Areas Security Initiative: This program focuses on enhancing regional preparedness in major metropolitan areas.⁸ Please note that not all counties are eligible and most are metropolitan.

Metropolitan Medical Response System (MMRS) Program: The MMRS program supports the integration of emergency management, health, and medical systems into a coordinated response to mass casualty incidents caused by any hazard.⁹

Additional government institutions to consider include:

- City Councils
- State Fire Marshal's Office: Partner to receive items such as smoke alarms
- Medical agencies such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the National Association of City and County Health Officials, or the Office of Women's Health: Partner to provide safety information, supplies, and possible victim services
- Grants.gov is a source to find and apply for federal grants. Participants noted that some counties have grant coordinators that may be able to help your Fire Corps team.
- State gaming commissions: Participants noted that state gaming commissions may give a percentage of income back to the fire services

Nonprofit and Other Partnerships

Several participants indicated that nonprofit partners played a role in their programs' success. Many nonprofit missions are closely aligned with Fire Corps. For example, if Fire Corps volunteers are providing victim assistance, programs may look into church organizations that give a percentage of income back to the community. Some Forum participants reported that their Fire Corps programs have teamed up with other agencies (fire, EMS, police, Citizen Corps partner programs, etc.) to show collaboration and accomplish additional tasks.

Many participants emphasized that when evaluating what activities your Fire Corps team can perform, it is important to research other nonprofit entities that currently exist in the community to see what possible partnerships, sponsorships, or joint fundraising efforts are available.

⁷Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program: www.firegrantsupport.com

⁸ Urban Areas Security Initiative: www.fema.gov/government/grant/hsgp/index.shtm#2

⁹ Metropolitan Medical Response System Program: www.rkb.us/contentdetail.cfm?content_id=227138&GetAELSELcats=1

Suggested funding alternatives and tools participants want established from the national and state levels include:

- State funding through emergency management agencies
- Congressional earmarks/line items
- Corporate donations established from the national level (i.e., Wal-Mart, McDonalds, Baskin-Robbins)
- Local business partnership tools and resources, such as the partnership packet template suggestion under Corporate Sponsorships and Partnerships section
- Training opportunities for securing funding and fostering partnerships
- Free grant-writing classes
- Create and authenticate a Fire Corps purchasing list. Reference the FEMA Preparedness Grants Authorized Equipment List¹⁰
- Help from the Fire Corps National Advisory Committee to publicize local program funding needs



Virginia Grassroots Forum

TOPIC 3: Building a Program

Forum participants indicated that the work that goes into creating a program is almost as important as the program itself. Success is achieved through establishing a sound infrastructure with a clear mission, goals, and strategies to fulfill the needs for which the program was created. Having set expectations, proper operations and procedures, volunteer training, monitoring, and evaluation will increase the productivity of Fire Corps units and ensure their longevity and sustainability.

Program Support and Buy-In

From the Department: Participants indicated that the first critical step to starting a program is having the support of the department – its leaders and staff. Whether a community member is interested in starting a Fire Corps team or the department decides to implement the program, the program must have a defined vision which illustrates its benefits and that it is worth the time commitment and possible funding needed to operate.



Ingleside Fire Corps, Texas

¹⁰ FEMA Preparedness Grants Authorized Equipment List, FY2005 and Later Fiscal Years: www.rkb.us/mel.cfm?subtypeid=549

Leadership support may vary. Some participants reported their chief and/or board was responsible for the creation and establishment of their Fire Corps team, while others noted an ongoing challenge in gaining support from department leadership and staff. In either case, without this backing, the program will not reach its full potential and may dissolve. The department is ultimately responsible for the program; therefore, its image and reputation are at stake if the program is not managed properly. One participant representing a state firefighter association shared a model for educating department leadership on a new program or initiative. This model addresses four focus areas, including funding, personnel, purpose, and future goals. These items should be addressed and thoroughly examined to determine if the program will work in the department.

Solutions to gaining support from department leaders include educating leaders and staff about Fire Corps before its inception, providing updates about current initiatives, and building relationships between Fire Corps volunteers and existing staff members. Others noted the benefits of branding the Fire Corps program under the department name and crediting the department for the program's accomplishments. Illustrating first responders and Fire Corps volunteers working alongside and in support of each other is a great recruitment tool and acknowledges the firefighters.

Several Forum participants indicated that their departments transitioned existing non-emergency programs, such as an auxiliary, under the Fire Corps name. Educating current volunteers and asking for feedback about program enhancements is also important as some volunteers may be comfortable with their current activities and reluctant to expand. Furthermore, in career or combination departments, some paid department staff are weary of additional volunteers due to the fear of their non-operational functions being replaced with volunteer efforts. Some enjoy overtime work and the financial benefits it brings.

In some cases, program managers and leaders indicated they have to 'sell' the program in order to gain support. In turn, providing value through performance will help maintain support for the program. Success of the Fire Corps program may even benefit career staffing with potential funding reallocations over time.

From the Community: If the community does not support the program, then its sustainability may be at stake. Participants agreed that the program should share its accomplishments and its need for volunteers with the community. It is a

Suggested solutions from participants to 'sell' the program include:

- Does your department have all the money it needs to do everything you want to do? Explain that the program can help achieve the goals that the department currently lacks funding for.
- Present your program as a business plan.
- Focus on one activity, such as public education or firefighter rehab.
- Promote your program in the community. When outside agencies notice how the program assists other agencies, they will likely want your support as well.
- Ensure that the program participants have an understanding of the department layout, operations, and needs.
- Find ways to reduce the time that the department must invest in order to start, expand, and maintain the program.
- Emphasize that the program does not supplant any existing personnel, it is solely to support them.
- If you encounter resistance from local union members, remind them that the International Association of Fire Fighters sits on the Fire Corps National Advisory Committee. In addition, there are multiple examples of Fire Corps successfully operating in unionized departments.

program for the community, by the community. This can be done through a variety of mediums, such as the media (i.e. press releases, public service announcements) or through department open houses and presence at community events.

From the State and Federal Levels: Participants recommended educating government officials, such as the Mayor and Council members, Congressional representatives and Senators, and other key stakeholders about your Fire Corps program. One Congressional representative actually joined a local Fire Corps program as a volunteer. Getting government officials on board with your program and demonstrating savings to government leaders can be beneficial as many officials work to improve volunteer efforts as well as the fire and emergency services in their counties, districts, regions, and states.

It was suggested that a county-wide or even statewide Fire Corps initiative is necessary to accomplish local missions, and state and regional commitment and support was needed to ensure success. Government support through bureaus such as emergency management agencies, governors' offices, state fire marshals' offices, state associations, and more can support Fire Corps efforts on a larger scale, which in turn directly affects grassroots efforts.

Development

Simply registering with Fire Corps and displaying the need for volunteers will not provide the building blocks to a sound program. Participants agreed that an administrative structure must be established before volunteers are involved. Some have had success by operating their program as a business and establishing a business plan with specific initiatives, activities, and timelines, as well as methods to achieve these.

Successful program building practices identified by participants include:

- Identify a leader or program manager. Forum participants agreed that a successful program can often be attributed to strong leadership that in turn creates a strong volunteer structure.
- The program must have handbooks, standard operating guidelines, and policies and procedures in place to ensure a safe environment for the department and its volunteers.
- Programs should screen potential volunteers through applications, background checks, and interviews.
- Establish a chain of command among volunteers.
- Clarify roles among Fire Corps volunteers and department staff. Fire Corps position descriptions should be written with explanations of what each role entails.
- Piggyback with other volunteer groups and agencies, such as Lions Clubs or insurance agencies. Create memorandums of understanding or agreements to secure partnerships.
- Recognize and reward your volunteers, program, and department or sponsoring agency.
- Focus Fire Corps duties with an emphasis on increasing retention rates – creating an environment where volunteers will thrive and continue to participate.
- Challenge volunteers – success comes from rising to challenges.
- Properly train volunteers for specific tasks. This will build trust among department personnel and leaders if volunteers are well prepared and equipped to function in the department.
- Offer additional training for volunteers to expand their roles and skills.
- Establish a clear set of activities and ensure volunteers participate when needed. If a program is unreliable, then trust and legitimacy will diminish both for department personnel and in the community.
- Maintain constant communication and have a reliable alert system when volunteers are needed. Mediums to consider include: phone tree, reverse 911, Twitter alerts, FM alert, Facebook, email accounts, and more.
- Combine team-oriented activities with individual responsibility and ownership.
- Make volunteers feel valued for their contributions and gather input about program activities from volunteers who are performing these functions.
- Record and track volunteer time to recognize the time contributions of the individual volunteers as well as the group as a whole. However, if the program partners with other agencies, be sure that volunteer hours are not duplicated. For example, if one volunteer donates time to a joint activity (i.e. CERT and Fire Corps) and reports hours to both programs, then the data becomes skewed.
- Formulate activities based on volunteer interest.
- Operate the Fire Corps program through a Citizens Fire Academy – tap into already established resources.
- Host a session specifically for department/government/stakeholder leaders to educate them about the program.
- Include program managers in the development of training prior to setting requirements for local programs.

Challenges to building a program identified by participants include:

- The need for additional best practices and highlights from other programs that can be used to gather ideas
- Volunteer or program manager time competes with other obligations or priorities
- Finding volunteer staffing to support the program if leadership is not paid personnel
- Funding, such as start-up costs and maintenance
- Union concerns – particularly in labor states vs. right-to-work states. Participants suggested that the national office could create guidelines and provide best practices to cover this issue in regards to the IAFF and other unions.
- Rural vs. urban program implementation differences. It was suggested that the national office provide information about starting or implementing a program in different settings, such as rural or major metropolitan areas, and explain the benefits of the program to each.
- Liability – see Topic 4

Recurring feedback from Forum participants centered on volunteer activities. A value of the Fire Corps concept is that the program is flexible and can accommodate any non-emergency, community program within the department or fire service agency. One participant explained it as an economy of scale approach where the least amount of defined criteria allows more room for involvement. However, some programs found that the flexibility of the program may pose a challenge as there is no set definition or stipulations for Fire Corps. Currently a list of guidelines for registration eligibility is available; however, a list of allowable Fire Corps activities would be helpful, according to some Forum participants.

Participants said other needs from the national office in regards to building and expanding a program include standardized and nationally recognized Fire Corps training. Specific training needs will be further discussed in Topic 5 of this document. Another need expressed is open communication, such as more in-person Fire Corps meetings to network and online discussion forums where local programs can post questions, comments, and best practices.



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Establishing Volunteer Roles

In order to build a successful program, Fire Corps must offer a medium for community members to volunteer while achieving the goals of the department. To gain a more intimate understanding of volunteer involvement, Forum participants were asked how they determined what roles volunteers would play in their program.

Many programs found performing a needs assessment was the first step in determining which types of activities the department needed volunteers for. Once these needs were established, volunteer roles were identified. Additionally, many programs asked their volunteers what they wanted, rather than dictating a specific role for them. If the volunteer's interest fit within the scope of the program, then the department provided proper training. Activities noted by participants consisted of fundraising, apparatus maintenance, outreach and awareness, fire safety education, technical support (i.e. web site and social networking sites), and communications (print, radio, television, and internet).

Participants noted that programs must take into consideration the demographics of their volunteers, such as sex, race, age, disabilities, mobility (in terms of travel time to work or number of vehicles available), educational attainment, employment status, and even location. These factors, along with the volunteer's talents and capabilities, can help match his/her interest with the activities that benefit all – the program, department, community, and volunteer.

TOPIC 4: Liability

Fire Corps programs offer substantial benefits to fire departments and its Fire Corps members, but like all department activities can produce unexpected results - events that are not planned outcomes of the activity.¹¹ To mitigate these risks, Fire Corps programs must consider how volunteers are held accountable in the department and also how or if the department protects its volunteers from liabilities that may occur.

Forum participants were asked if and how liability issues were addressed in their own programs, what challenges or successes their programs have encountered in regards to liability, and how prospective volunteers are screened.

Existing Methods

Participants addressed liability in a number of ways within their own programs. In some, fire departments are able to provide liability insurance for Fire Corps volunteers by classifying them as a type of member in the department. Others stated that volunteers were covered under the city or county's existing liability insurance. Depending on the types of activities in which Fire Corps volunteers participate, such as administrative functions, some participants simply have their volunteers sign a liability waiver releasing the department and local government from liability should the volunteer be injured while performing a Fire Corps function. Should a program decide that a liability waiver is the best option, participants advised that the waiver be reviewed by legal council. Finally, some participants noted that by establishing their program as a separate 501(c)(3) organization, they were able to add funding into their program budget to include liability insurance specifically for their Fire Corps volunteers. It was recommended that fire departments contact their governor's office of volunteerism, if available, or appropriate legal counsel to see what options are available since state liability laws vary.

Best Practices and Lessons Learned

Participants noted that volunteer liability should be addressed before volunteers are established in the program. Participants suggested researching existing liability options, whether through the department, state, county, a separate entity, or pre-existing agreements. It was suggested that the Fire Corps national office provide additional resources, such as a list of available insurance for volunteers as well as additional best practices in liability from other programs.

Suggestions to alleviate liability concerns in a program include:

- Create awareness of liability issues in a program. Provide standardized membership information describing the process and benefits, including written policies and procedures. Have them sign a form acknowledging that they have received, read, and understand the policies. Keep this in the volunteer's file.
- Emphasize role clarification and create position descriptions – define the activities that Fire Corps members are allowed to participate in.
- Create identification cards with expiration dates. Fire Corps members should have proper identification if they are representing the department at events or during activities.
- Establish when and where program uniforms or paraphernalia are to be worn and under what conditions volunteers are not to represent the program.
- Establish written dismissal procedures should a volunteer not comply with department and/or program standards. Educate volunteers that even though they are donating their time, they can be released from the program if they are not acting in the best interest of the program or his/her peers.
- Maintain proper supervision and management of volunteers with an established chain of command. This will alleviate self-dispatching or responding.
- Consider establishing the program as a 501(c)(3) organization and apply for liability insurance as a separate entity.
- Establish a local advisory committee with special interest in volunteer safety.
- Develop volunteer ownership and pride of the program. If a volunteer feels more connected with the organization, then risks that may harm its reputation or members, deliberate or accidental, will be less.
- Host regular meetings and discuss liability concerns with volunteers.
- Training, training, training! Ensure that all volunteers are provided with adequate training for any and all relevant functions in the department and community.
- Screen applicants.

¹¹ *Fire Corps Liability Guide: Managing the Unexpected in Fire Corps Activities*, 2009, Page 6:
www.firecorps.org/files/documents/FC_Liability_Guide.pdf



Michigan Grassroots Forum

Liability challenges identified by participants include:

- Some get too caught up in liability, which leads to fear of starting or expanding their programs. Conversely, liability may not be addressed at all.
- Finding attorneys to review policies/procedures/handbooks without cost
- Lack of affordable workers compensation for Fire Corps programs, combined with lack of federal and state support of workers compensation programs
- Financing to allow for background checks
- Supporting entity may not allow background checks
- Americans with Disabilities Act¹² compliance and understanding
- Obtaining affordable insurance coverage
- Overcoming the unknown – addressing and covering all situations or circumstances that could result in liability for the department or program
- Establishing selection criteria for volunteers

Screening

Most participants emphasized that screening volunteers before they are allowed to participate in a Fire Corps program is essential to secure the safety of current members, department personnel, and those they are serving. Additionally, unqualified individuals can be a risk to the reputation of both the program and department. Many screening practices are available and are currently being used by local programs that may alleviate risks, such as developing an initial volunteer application form to determine why the applicant wants to participate in your program.

Conduct mandatory background and driving checks with the consent of the applicant. Participants noted that these can be done through a variety of sources, such as the Department of Public Safety, local police department, or other local or state partner entities. A few participants mentioned that the State Citizen Corps program may provide a limited number of background checks to active groups with demonstrated needs. Some of these agencies provide this service for free, while others may charge minimal expenses, such as \$5. One participant mentioned that they offset this cost through members' dues. However, if the applicant does not pass the background check, then the program must incur this expense.

Additional research on an applicant can be done through the internet and social networking sites, such as Google, Facebook, MySpace, etc. This information is public so does not infringe upon privacy.

¹² Americans With Disabilities Act: www.ada.gov



Johnson County RFD #1, Arkansas

Consider interviewing applicants. This can be done in a one-on-one setting or with another advisor or leader, such as the chief of your department. The interview process will allow you to get to know potential volunteers to see if they are a good fit for your program.

Participants noted that recruiting new volunteers should be like hiring new employees in a job. Just because they are volunteering their time to serve does not mean they will be a benefit and could even potentially be a hazard or risk. Proper screening is essential to ensure everyone's safety.

TOPIC 5: Training

Fire Corps volunteers perform a variety of activities for fire and emergency service departments. Proper training is required for these volunteers to ensure they have the knowledge and resources to conduct these activities safely and accurately. Although it was noted that there is significant training available for free through fire departments and organizations, such as the National Fire Protection Association, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the United States Fire Administration, Forum attendees indicated a desire for the Fire Corps national office to provide standardized training for Fire Corps. Such training should be focused on predominant Fire Corps activities and department operations and can supplement training available through other sources.

Forum participants were asked to provide feedback regarding the training their departments or organizations currently provide to Fire Corps volunteers, what training is essential for Fire Corps programs, and what they have identified as best practices or challenges in regards to training initiatives.

Many fire departments provide Fire Corps volunteers with training on the following topics:

- Standard department operating procedures
- Cross-training with other Citizen Corps programs (i.e. CERT training)¹³
- National Incident Management System (NIMS)¹⁴
 - > IS-700.A - NIMS, An Introduction
 - > IS-800.B - National Response Framework, An Introduction
 - > Fire Department Operations
 - IS-100.a - Introduction to the Incident Command System (ICS)
 - IS-200.a - ICS for Single Resources and Initial Action Incidents
- Education methodology for fire safety
- Emergency medical operations
- First responder rehabilitation
- Individual, specialized training depending on program assessment and needs
- Administrative training (database management, PowerPoint, Excel, etc.)
- Training for public educators
- First aid/CPR training
- Traffic control certification
- Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)¹⁵
- Driver training
- Fire service terms and history
- Introduction to emergency operations
- Fire prevention/life safety education

¹³ CERT Training Materials:
www.citizen corps.gov/cert/training_mat.shtm

¹⁴ National Incident Management System:
www.fema.gov/emergency/nims/NIMSTrainingCourses.shtm#item1

¹⁵ Department of Health and Human Services – HIPAA:
www.hhs.gov/oct/privacy



Macomb Township Fire Corps, Michigan

Suggested training or mechanisms needed to provide already existing curriculum consist of the following topics below.

Participants noted that while much of this curriculum currently exists, it would be beneficial if the Fire Corps national office came up with a means to provide these standardized trainings directly to local programs as an added resource.

■ For managers or administrators

- > Program or organizational leadership
- > Human relations
- > Ethics, diversity, and sexual harassment management
- > Communications
- > Youth protection programs
- > Recruitment, such as step-by-step procedures and best practices; screening, accepting, and declining volunteers
- > Implementing a Junior Fire Corps
- > Training resource references – what is currently established, available, and relevant to Fire Corps

■ For volunteers

- > Welcome/Fire Corps introduction
- > History of the fire service and department/organization
- > Operations vs. administrative side of the department/organization
- > Fire department structure and regulations
- > Safety in the fire service
- > NIMS
- > Personal leadership and values
- > Ethics, diversity, and sexual harassment

- > HIPAA
- > Basic first aid/AED and CPR
- > Public educator
- > Principles of emergency responder rehabilitation
- > Trauma intervention programs
- > Post traumatic stress awareness/critical stress debriefing
- > Emergency care attendant (ECA)
- > Sheltering and safe havens
- > Public emergency preparedness
- > Medical modules (H1N1 virus training; blood borne pathogens)
- > Search and rescue basics
- > Job-specific training
- > Multipurpose teams/cross-training:
 - Community Emergency Response Team
 - Boy Scouts Explorer Posts
 - National Junior Firefighter Program
 - Firewise
 - Red Cross
- > Additional training based not just on activities volunteers would play, but also what they want to learn for self-benefit (i.e. fire extinguisher training)

Participants also provided feedback about the training process. Suggestions include:

- The national Fire Corps office should create a template or handbook that includes all training available with descriptions of why it might be necessary or useful in a Fire Corps program.
- The medium in which training is provided should be easily accessible and available for all involved – administrative, volunteer, and department.
- Training should be sustainable and adaptable so that they can be built or adjusted as new standards or laws are issued.
- Provide a mechanism for local programs to submit new training programs and ideas that can be shared with all.
- Programs and national office should have the ability to track training progress of local programs and individual volunteers.
- Training in local programs should match individual roles and activities for each volunteer.
- Programs should set standard policies and requirements stating that volunteers must complete specified training before performing specific functions. It was recommended that the national office provide samples of such documents.
- Establish monthly or periodic trainings and put training into action.
- The national Fire Corps office should provide training sessions for both program administrators and volunteers at national, state, and local events.

The current challenges that exist with providing training to Fire Corps volunteers include getting the volunteers to participate in training and emphasizing the self-benefit and program benefit for undertaking such training. Time constraints for both the program and the volunteer often hinder the ability to provide training and participation from members. Additionally, one of the most notable factors that inhibits training progress is lack of funding and supplies. As noted in Topic 2: Funding, local teams voiced the need for financial support to purchase needed supplies and provide training for their volunteers.



Oregon Grassroots Forum



Virginia Grassroots Forum

TOPIC 6: Retention and Recruitment

As in any volunteer program, the retention and recruitment of volunteers is critical to the success of the program, yet both can pose significant challenges to the organization seeking volunteers.¹⁶ In order to capture successful recruit-

ment and retention activities, Fire Corps asked Forum participants to provide feedback about best practices for attracting new volunteers, motivation and reward incentives to keep them actively engaged, and recruitment and retention challenges that they are currently faced with.

Methods of attracting new volunteers often depend on resources available to local programs. Below are a few examples of what local Fire Corps teams are doing to recruit new members, as identified by Forum participants.

- Enhance program branding
 - > Use the Fire Corps logo.
 - > Publicize the national Fire Corps mission and purpose of the program, while also emphasizing local goals.
 - > Grow the program image in the community as a recognized establishment to volunteer and provide services.
- Establish a retention and recruitment network within the community – utilize existing organizations, such as nonprofits or fire associations, to recruit when numbers are low
- Word of mouth – family, friends, neighbors
- Media
 - > Recruit using print, video, and audio public service announcements available from Fire Corps.
 - > Acknowledge program accomplishments – people are more likely to join a successful program where they will be recognized.
- Market the program as a family activity
- Recruit through those who the program has served – for example, an incident victim who was helped by the program may want to join the program to help others who have been in his/her shoes
- Utility bill inserts
- Flyers in church bulletins
- Special events or community events
- Fire station open house
- Homeowners associations
- Joint community service programs through schools
- Monthly opportunities/training
- “Bring a friend to Fire Corps” campaigns
- Recruit through training opportunities
- Seniors are a resource
- Use of existing organization networks
 - > Faith-based organizations
 - > Schools
 - > Volunteer centers
 - > Humane society volunteers
 - > Co-mingling with other Citizen Corps and volunteer programs – for example, cross-training with CERT and Red Cross to offer additional training and self-improvements to volunteers and expand their role in the program, such as search and rescue activities
 - > Civilian Police Academy
- Volunteer awards and recognition
- Monthly jamboree
- Utilize the media as a recruitment tool after incident response
- Internet methods and social media
 - > Facebook
 - > Twitter
 - > MySpace
 - > YouTube
 - > Grassroots.org
 - > Ning.com
 - > Wix.com
 - > Posting accomplishments and need for volunteers on agency web sites
- Dual purpose events, such as community fairs
- Fire conferences

¹⁶ *Fire Corps Retention & Recruitment Guide*, 2010, Page 3: www.firecorps.org/files/documents/FC_RR_Guide.pdf



Wild Horse Volunteer Fire Department, New Mexico



Victoria Civilian Fire Academy Alumni Association, Texas

Volunteers are donating their time with the expectation that they will not be financially rewarded for their services. However, if volunteers' commitment and work are not recognized, they may feel as if their services are unappreciated or even unnecessary. In order to retain volunteers, Fire Corps programs should reward them for their help. Below is a list of ideas and current practices Fire Corps programs are utilizing to retain their members, as identified by Forum participants.

- Say thank you. Participants commented that these two simple words speak volumes among their volunteers.
 - > Behind the scenes – verbal thanks or thank you notes and letters
 - > At public events
 - > Certificates
 - > Spotlight a volunteer each month
 - > President's Volunteer Service Award¹⁷
 - > Annual banquets
- Feature volunteers on the department web site or in the media.
- Establish award programs through the department/program.
 - > Volunteer of month/year
 - > Annual volunteer appreciation luncheons; consider having department staff or firefighters attend to recognize Fire Corps volunteers
 - > Plaques, service pins, or certificates of appreciation
- Offer volunteer 'promotions' to provide sense of achievement and progression.
- Create a tiered award system that will provide incentives for reaching a certain number of volunteer hours or achieving levels of training.
- Establish a length of service award program or present years of service pins.
- Volunteering in a program means time away from the volunteer's family; therefore, reward the volunteer with family incentives, such as movie tickets or restaurant gift certificates. Note the ethics laws under Corporate Sponsorships and Partnerships in Topic 2: Funding.
- Provide childcare for volunteers.
- Utilize Citizen Corps Councils to recognize achievements.
- Feed the volunteers during events or meetings.
- Offer specialty training.
- Provide a sense of volunteer ownership for the program.
- Keep volunteers active with relevant projects.
 - > Consider their time commitment
 - > Consider their role and position in the program
- Recognize the program's impact – volunteers must feel as if they are making a difference, otherwise they may think their time is wasted and will cease to participate.
- Highlight increased or sustained funds the program receives – this demonstrates to the volunteers that their time and efforts are recognized and rewarded.
- Provide patches, uniforms/t-shirts, and identification for volunteers.

¹⁷ The President's Volunteer Service Award: www.presidentialserviceawards.gov



Ingleside Fire Corps, Texas

With any volunteer initiative, challenges exist which may deter participation and involvement. Below is a list of recurring problems local programs have encountered to both recruit and retain volunteers for their program, as identified by Forum participants.

- Lack of program structure, direction, and clearly defined activities volunteers are to perform
- Lack of commitment from volunteers
- Members volunteering in multiple organizations, leaving little time to devote solely to Fire Corps
- People seek sporadic volunteer opportunities – retention problem
- Program inactivity or consistency – keeping members engaged
- Recognition and incentive programs are non-existent
- Little or no pool of people available to recruit in smaller communities
- Feeling that concept of volunteerism is not engrained in today's youth
- The need for a comprehensive media toolbox specifically for Fire Corps administrators or a Public Information Officer Guide. Possible solutions include:
 - > Citizen Corps media toolkit online
 - > USFA.gov media kits
 - > New editions of the *Fire Corps Department Starter Kit* and *Resource Guide*, which provide outreach and recruitment resources
- Lack of Congressional support
- Mutual respect between first responders and Fire Corps volunteers – first responders are not educated about the impact its Fire Corps volunteers are making and consider them an 'outsider' to the department. In turn, Fire Corps volunteers feel unappreciated and unaccepted.

CONCLUSION

Feedback and ideas from Forum attendees were based on individual and program experiences. While participants come from different geographical areas, a general consensus of

activities and needs were expressed at the local levels. Input addressing each of the topics will help the national and state Fire Corps staff and State Advocates better understand local needs and develop the necessary tools and resources to support local fire departments in implementing and expanding Fire Corps programs.