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Delaware County Volunteer Firefighters Launch New Recruitment Campaign

“Volunteer Now – Lives Depend On It” is more than a slogan, effort’s leaders say

Delaware County, PA...[The Delaware County Firemen’s Association](#) has launched a county-wide volunteer recruitment campaign aimed at boosting the number of volunteer firefighters, EMTs, fire police, and non-emergency personnel at all 67 Delaware County fire departments and companies.

The association, a non-profit group comprised of chiefs and firefighters from every department, took this step in response to a shortage of volunteers that threatens public safety in Delaware County and the entire state, said Association President David L. Holland, a firefighter at Ogden Fire Company in Upper Chichester Township.

In 1977, the state estimated there were 300,000 volunteer firefighters in Pennsylvania. Current estimates place that number at about 50,000.

“Delaware County, like most of Pennsylvania, is made up of towns and rural areas whose fire departments are run and staffed almost entirely by volunteers,” Holland said. If there aren’t enough local volunteers to respond to an emergency, other departments are called in. But traveling takes time, and in fires, accidents, and emergency medical situations, every second counts. “That’s why we chose the slogan, ‘Volunteer Now. Lives Depend On It,’” Holland said. “Lives literally do depend on our volunteers.”

The cornerstone of the campaign is a website that provides much information for anyone thinking about joining a local fire company, www.fightdelcofires.com. A form on the site allows prospective volunteers to fill out an inquiry form, which will result in someone from the appropriate Delaware County fire company contacting them.

Free Training is Provided, and all Skill Sets are Needed

The first stage of the battle for fire service volunteers is educating the public that volunteers are needed. “Many people don’t seem to realize that the people who come when they need help are volunteers,” said Firemen’s Association Recruitment Committee Co-Chairman Art Gorga.

Another obstacle the association is using the campaign to overcome: Perception about who can become a firefighter or EMT.

“No one is expected to walk through our doors knowing how to fight fires or resuscitate someone on their first day,” said Recruitment Committee Co-Chairman Nick Picozzi, a Fire Police Captain/EMT with the Lower Chichester Fire Company. Volunteers receive free training to become a certified firefighter or EMT and safely perform all duties required, he said.

In addition to firefighters and EMTs, it takes an army of other volunteers to run a volunteer fire company.

Gorga, a past Ogden Fire Chief and EMT, is now a fire police lieutenant with the Reliance Hook & Ladder Fire Company. Fire Police volunteers keep call scenes safe and organized by directing traffic and controlling crowds.

Teens can serve as junior firefighters, who assist firefighters and begin firefighter training that will prepare them to become full members at 18.

Non-emergency volunteers do just about everything else. Examples include administrative and office duties, building maintenance, community outreach, and teaching fire prevention and safety skills at schools and community events.

Local Help to Tackle a Local Problem

In addition to responding to calls, training in the skills needed to do so, and running and maintaining their firehouses, Delaware County's volunteer firefighters and EMTs have full-time jobs and families. Having neither the time nor the expertise to create and run the recruitment effort on their own, they used a \$5,000 state grant to bring in an expert. The expert they found has deep Delaware County roots: Leza Raffel, president of [The Communication Solutions Group, Inc.](#), grew up in Springfield and graduated from Springfield High School.

"It's truly an honor to help in the effort to find volunteers for the fire companies that protect my hometown and county, places I love," Raffel said.

Along with the geography, the issues are familiar to Raffel. Her company has crafted targeted recruitment campaigns for fire companies and rescue squads throughout Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

Many Reasons to Join

Along with a sense of pride in accomplishment, volunteer fire or emergency service comes with many other benefits, Holland said. "The training and experience of being a firefighter or EMT has helped many people advance in their career or switch careers," he said. "Many EMTs, for example, also work as EMTs, paramedics, nurses, or doctors."

The team work of volunteering forges friendships that are more like family. Some municipalities provide tax breaks for volunteers. And some firehouses and EMT squads even provide volunteers with free housing – a popular perk for students studying at local colleges.

One thing that makes Holland optimistic about the campaign is that once people volunteer, they tend to stick with the fire service, and bring family and friends, too.

"The mission of protecting your family, friends and neighbors provides a strong sense of purpose," he said. "Really, there's no feeling like it."

For more information, please visit www.fightdelcofires.com. To set up interviews, visit a firehouse, or with any questions, please contact Kellie Gates at kellie@comsolutionsgroup.com or 215-884-6499.