

CAREER vs. VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS

By Richard Schulte

A report published by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) titled "*Third Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service*" dated June 2011 contains a wealth of information on the fire service in the United States. Some of the information included in this report addresses the use of volunteer and career fire fighters used to staff fire departments. The following are a few excerpts from the report:

"Most US fire departments are volunteer fire departments, but most of the US is protected by career firefighters." (Page 5)

"More than two-thirds of US fire departments (71%) are all-volunteer fire departments, but only one of every five US residents (21%) are protected by such a department." (Page 5)

"There are no all-volunteer departments protecting cities of at least 100,000 population, while all-volunteer departments constitute nearly all of the fire departments protecting communities of less than 5,000 population." (Page 6)

"It should be noted that the number of career firefighters has increased in pace with increases in the protected population. The number of career firefighters per 1,000 population protected has changed little since at least 1986. Despite the slight decline in the all- or mostly-volunteer department share, there has been a definite downward trend in the number of volunteer firefighters per 1,000 population protected." (Page 8)

The information above indicates that volunteer fire departments still play an important role in protecting citizens in the United States from the hazard of fire. While the population protected by volunteer fire departments is principally rural, it is important to note that volunteer fire departments are finding it more and more difficult to recruit new members for these departments.

As fire fighting becomes more complex, it would seem that the commitment in time required to become proficient at fire fighting ,and then maintain that proficiency, makes it difficult for ordinary citizens to participate in volunteer fire department organizations. Fortunately, the number of fires which occur annually in the U.S. continues to decline, reducing the need for fire fighting services.

Note: According to the NFPA estimates on fire losses, approximately 1,098,000 structure fires occurred in the U.S. in 1977. Over the years, the annual number of structure fires which occur in the U.S. has dwindled, even though the population of the United States has increased by 88 million (40 percent) since 1977. NFPA estimates that approximately 482,000 structure fires occurred in 2010-a reduction of roughly 56 percent in the number of annual structure fires since 1977.

The NFPA report “*Third Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service*” can be found on the Research web page on the NFPA website (nfpa.org).

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