

A photograph of firefighters in full protective gear, including helmets and jackets, working in a dark environment. They are using a hose to spray water onto a large, intense fire that fills the right side of the frame. The fire is bright orange and yellow, creating a dramatic contrast with the dark surroundings. The firefighters are positioned on the left, looking towards the fire.

# Surviving the Staffing Shortage Crisis

Strategies for Overcoming Fire Department Staffing Shortages

# The Challenge

The fire and rescue industry is facing a critical shortage of personnel. While the number of career firefighters per capita in the U.S. remains on par with historical levels, the number of volunteer firefighters, which makes up the majority of firefighting staff, has plunged dramatically since the early 2000s. This leaves communities across the nation with less fire and rescue protection. In 2005, there were nearly 9 firefighters for every 1,000 persons. In 2020, there were 7.38 per 1,000. As a result, many fire departments are struggling to respond to emergencies and provide critical services.

This staffing shortage crisis has become a major concern for fire and rescue leaders, who are tasked with ensuring that their communities are protected and that their firefighting resources are adequate. To maintain the staffing levels necessary to meet these needs, leaders of career and volunteer personnel alike must address challenges in recruitment, retention, scheduling and burnout. In this ebook, we will explore strategies that fire department leaders can use to overcome these challenges.

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# FIRST THINGS FIRST -- WORKFORCE RETENTION

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*Firefighters have an intrinsically high level of career satisfaction in providing services to their communities. Successful workforce retention often comes down to simply understanding this, identifying what your particular members want, and providing it.*

## Many Retention Techniques are Obvious.

Creating a **positive work environment** with **adequate pay and benefits** supports long-term retention. Establishing a **culture of recognition and appreciation** with programs that acknowledge hard work and dedication to service can help to offset the inherent stressors that come with the job. Creating **opportunities for advancement** will help reduce turnover and keep more experienced personnel long term.

## Continuous, Relevant Training Builds Competency in Performance.

Continuous training programs can range from scenario-based field exercises or team building daily routines. Providing **continuous, relevant training** enables station crews feel valued, more confident as a unit and more likely to stay.

## Equally Important is Ensuring that your Personnel are Supported.

Support can take different forms. It should include **providing adequate resources** for your workforce to perform their jobs. Focus on reinforcing what motivates each member of your company. This could take the form of **job shadowing, rotations, or cross training**.

Also consider providing **programs that support your workforce as long-term members** -- such as **health and wellness screenings, fitness memberships, stress management classes, or financial planning**.

# ADDITIONAL RETENTION CONSIDERATIONS

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## Addressing Mental Health Concerns

Behavioral health is one of six critical issues identified at the 2022 U.S. Fire Administrator's Summit on Fire Prevention and Control. **Public safety personnel are at increased risk of a variety of mental health concerns.**

A 2018 report from the Ruderman Family Foundation indicates a fivefold increased risk for PTSD and depression as well as a heightened suicide risk for this population. A behavioral health study conducted by Florida State University and published in 2015 found that among 1,000 U.S. firefighters surveyed, 47% had considered suicide at some point during their careers, 19% had planned a suicide attempt, and 16% attempted suicide.

With these reasons in mind, it's imperative for fire leaders to **educate fire personnel about behavior health risks, implement behavioral health programs**, and advocate for legislation that **makes mental health resources available and accessible** for public safety personnel.

## Pay and Benefits

While the promise of a fat paycheck isn't the reason most firefighters join the profession, it's important to **keep pay and benefits as competitive as possible**. One way to do this is to **offer attractive pension plans** typically after 25 years of service and **pay incentives based on performance metrics**. Use of technology can make it easy to track this type of information throughout each members' career.



# INNOVATIONS IN RECRUITMENT

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*The efforts previously suggested to bolster retention also aid in recruitment. Recruiting new firefighters, however, requires a keener focus on younger job seekers as well as outreach programs to diverse populations.*

## Recruitment Targeting

The next generation of firefighters have been brought up to **expect more flexibility and work-life balance** in their jobs. They're also tech savvy and more likely to find out about job opportunities through social media. Understanding the **needs of younger job seekers and reaching them through the media they use** will help bolster your efforts.

Recruitment initiatives will also need to **include efforts to enhance diversity**. The U.S. Fire Administration reports that fire departments struggle to recruit and retain women and people of color. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2020, more than 95% of career firefighters were men, and 85% were white. **Implementing diversity training and helping new recruits of various backgrounds adapt** in their new positions will greatly support long-term retention.

## Lead with Inspiration and Why Your Department's Great.

In order to attract ideal candidates, you must make sure your **agency's reputation is positive**, and that you are **offering competitive wages and benefits**. Some agencies are including hiring bonuses with a portion received as of hire dates and the remainder after several years of service. Focus on the positives and **pitch the benefits about the family they'll be joining and how they'll be serving their communities**.



# LET'S TALK ABOUT APPRENTICESHIPS

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## Apprenticeship Opportunities and School Partnerships

**Apprenticeship programs can create a direct career path** for those interested in firefighting. At the 2022 U.S. Fire Administrator's Summit on Fire Prevention and Control, the **need for investment in a national apprenticeship program to address staffing shortages and increase diversity was identified as a critical issue.** While we wait hopefully for this to materialize, departments can benefit from developing their own apprenticeship programs to attract new recruits.

Additionally, departments can benefit from **partnering with high schools, colleges, and universities to promote firefighting** as a profession. Being there to promote this career path can help you attract top talent with next-generation skills.





## ADDRESSING THE VOLUNTEER CHALLENGE

Throughout the country, the number of volunteer firefighters has steadily been on the decline. Data from the National Volunteer Fire Council shows the number of volunteer firefighters has decreased from 884,600 in 1985 to 682,000 in 2022. Boosting the volunteer system will require flexibility and adapting to younger firefighters who simply don't have as much time to give.

FEMA statistics from April 2023 indicate that 53% of firefighters are volunteers, 12% are paid per call, and only 34% are career staff. The report also states that among 91% of fire departments who voluntarily register with the National Fire Department Registry, 70.1% rely completely on volunteer firefighters and 15.7% rely primarily on volunteers.

**screening requirements** and opening volunteer recruitment to **positions beyond firefighting**. This can **allow volunteers to fill more admin and logistical roles**. You'll then be able to divert resources and cross-staff stations with career personnel.

### Retaining Volunteers

To make the volunteer system sustainable, it's important to **give volunteers as much scheduling flexibility as possible**. You could also **facilitate connections between volunteers, community and business**

### Recruitment and Outreach

One way to attract volunteers is to **partner with non-profit groups that require or support volunteerism** like fraternities and sororities, 4-H clubs, and faith organizations to promote your volunteer opportunities. You might also **consider relaxing**

**leaders** to help advance their careers or be publicly recognized by local businesses that provide volunteers with discounts for goods or services. By **promoting their contributions** and **enabling scheduling flexibility**, you will appeal to a broader reach of volunteers.

# RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION TIPS

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Recruitment and retention is expected to remain a major concern for years to come. Without a new generation of talented and committed members, your workforce will be doing more with fewer alternatives. By utilizing some of these tips, you'll have better opportunities to successfully recruit and retain personnel, while creating a more efficient and effective workforce.

**1** Cultivate a positive image and reputation.

When competing for the same small pool of applicants, it is **vital that they want to work for you**. If applicants do not feel that you will provide them with a **positive work environment** in which they will be able to **grow professionally and trust their crew**, you will lose the hiring war before the first battle is even fought.

**2** Identify your target audience.

Define who your **ideal recruit** may be, **seek them out**, and **let them know you exist**. You may need to revamp your recruiting strategies to make it easier for candidates to find you. Use **social media**. Try **internal recruiting, partnering with schools or military bases**. Use **media outlets** or **hosting a day-in-the-life event**. Go to where candidates are and connect with them frequently.

**3** Provide continuous, relevant training.

Empower academies to **develop, schedule, and deliver ongoing training that is relevant**. Training **curriculum's can take various forms based on career preference** -- such as fire control, safety, rescue and extrication, water supply, first aid or hazmat awareness. Your workforce will grow professionally, have the skill sets needed to effectively perform their jobs, and will be better prepared to mitigate risks.

**4** Offer additional perks.

Extra pay and benefits can be difficult to come by. Look for **alternative means of compensation**. Offering perks like **on-site gyms, community event participation** or **schedules that allow for longer stretches of days off** can deliver returns that are far greater than their cost. Think out of the box.





## MANAGING LONG SHIFTS

Dealing with high levels of stress is part of the job for fire and rescue personnel, so proper rest is essential. While it's critical to effectively manage long shifts, it's equally important to **understand the demands on personnel and adjust workloads accordingly.**

Firefighters work long shifts that include weekends and holidays. These shifts might differ from region to region, but the two most common types of firefighter shifts are 24 hours on followed by 48 hours off, or 10- to 12-hour shifts for three to four days in a row. 10 shifts per month are typically worked, but the exact rotation depends on each organization.

*Several factors, such as staffing levels and the number of calls, are used to determine shift schedules. Ultimately, schedules are decided through negotiations with firefighter unions, HR and FLSA criteria, and staffing levels.*

Some schedules are on a rotating basis, depending on the organization. This scheduling method allows each person at the station to get some rest after completing a full shift.

But rotating shifts aren't always ideal. Many fire and rescue personnel don't prefer working rotations, which can disrupt the circadian rhythm and lead to other adverse health effects. In fact, many health and public safety employees who work on rotating shifts get less sleep.

**Better than attempting to reinvent shifts, agencies should put policies in place that help control fatigue.**

Technology can be used to **automate agency policies that support minimum staffing and fatigue management.** This could include **data alerts that prevent excessive work schedules, control overtime and shift swaps,** or **identify**

*With Fire and Rescue personnel often facing life-threatening situations, it's critical that they operate at peak performance. Working excessive overtime or on-call shifts to fill vacancies, combined with the job's inherently stressors can build-up bodily cortisol.*

*Over a prolonged time, raised cortisol levels can lead to immunodeficiency, high blood pressure, an enlarged heart, and more. The World Health Organization has linked high levels of cortisol to 'burnout,' characterized by:*

- ◇ *Feeling of energy exhaustion*
- ◇ *Feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job*
- ◇ *Reduced professional efficacy*

*While an extra shift here and there isn't a big deal, constantly picking up additional shifts and working overtime to fill staffing vacancies isn't good for your workforce, your agency and the communities you serve.*

## THE STRESS AND FATIGUE FACTOR

As fire departments across the country face the current staffing shortages, **workforce fatigue has reached a tipping point.** As a means of mitigating the associated risks that comes with continuous fatigue, consider implementing the following scheduling strategies:

- ◇ Policies that correspond with overtime, swaps and time-off
- ◇ Keeping schedules as predictable as possible
- ◇ Reexamining shift start and end times
- ◇ Keeping consecutive night shifts to a minimum
- ◇ Rotating overtime assignments
- ◇ Considering alternative shift lengths

### **It's critical to address the mental state of your fatigued personnel.**

Fire and rescue departments should proactively address the effects of shift-work on their workforce by **offering access to mental health services and tailoring employee schedules to decrease overtime and increase rest periods.** It's equally important to **establish restorative programs and develop peer support systems.**

While fatigue management is essential today, consider it a smart investment in your personnel and the public you serve 24/7.





## WHAT ABOUT OVERTIME?

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*Fire Departments have relied on overtime for years to meet staffing levels. Overtime was often more cost effective than hiring new personnel. That's quickly changing.*

### **Overtime budgets are skyrocketing.**

Today, firefighters are racking up millions in overtime. Austin Fire Department, for example, recently reported that they are expected to exceed \$20 million in OT expenses. **Overtime comes with costs that aren't just financial.** Fatigue and burnout becomes inevitable when working too many hours and can lead to impaired performance or short-term retention.

### **Scheduling and staffing policies are essential.**

Agency policies should **include an analysis of consecutive work hours, overtime, and fatigue policy enforcement.** While giving your workforce a voice regarding their **shift preferences, vacation dates, or shift swaps supports retention** -- it is imperative to **analyze how these procedures impact fatigue and budget.**

### **Technology is an effective means to automate your staffing policies.**

Whether using **conflict alerting, push notifications, or data-driven analytics,** technology is a **proven means that mitigates fatigue risks and ballooning overtime cost.** For example, technology automation can be used to:

- ◆ **Backfill overtime assignments** based on least earned, qualified employee
- ◆ **Send push notifications to qualified personnel** for quick vacancy backfills
- ◆ **Manage cross-staffing of personnel** to cover multiple stations
- ◆ **Flag fatigue alerts as part of requests** for overtime or shift swaps
- ◆ **Control OT & fatigue by limiting hours worked** between on-duty assignments
- ◆ **Minimize fatigue by limiting the number of swap hours** weekly or in a pay period

# RETHINKING THE FUTURE OF SCHEDULING

*To begin your scheduling assessment, it's essential to determine your minimum staffing level requirements.*

*Staffing models should incorporate call numbers and other factors that reflect employees' use of vacation, sick, disability, compensatory time off, and other approved leave time.*

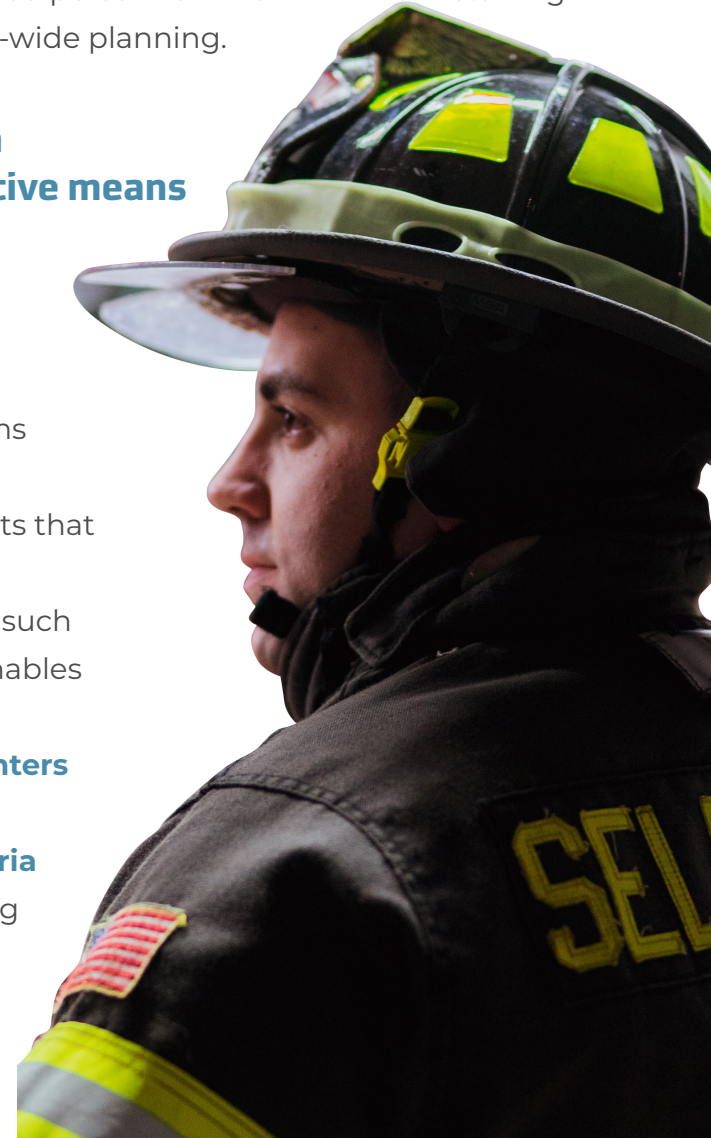
*Once staffing levels are defined, technology can be used to identify where and when you'll need to fill vacancies.*

*Staffing level forecasting, cost effective assignment recommendations and scheduling analytics have become essential tools for the future of scheduling.*

There isn't one perfect solution for any department. But effectively coordinating 24/7/365 operations that require critical equipment and qualified personnel when minimum staffing levels are below requirements calls for robust agency-wide planning.

## **Fortunately, technology and its automation efficiencies provides one of the most effective means of supporting staffing challenges.**

- ◆ **Forecasting vacancy gaps** enables proactive reassignments that can minimize overtime cost.
- ◆ **Using push notifications to mobile devices** informs personnel about scheduling changes, assignment vacancies that must be filled or scheduling requests that must be authorized.
- ◆ **Automating labor-intensive scheduling processes**, such as vacation or schedule bidding, saves time and enables employee self-service capabilities.
- ◆ **Automatically tracking overtime against cost centers** enables real-time funding awareness.
- ◆ **Using auto-leave approval based on agency criteria** saves time for supervisory personnel while ensuring that minimum staffing levels are not affected.
- ◆ **Using automation to cross-staff** personnel and several apparatus pieces for under-staffed stations increases efficiencies and decreases overtime.



## CONCLUSION

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*The current staffing shortage in Fire and Rescue will not correct itself overnight. Fire Departments will continue to do what they must to respond effectively to 911 calls-for-services and prioritize rescue missions.*

*But in light of the current staffing crisis, agencies of all sizes simply must implement new strategies in recruitment, retention and how to best manage their current staffing levels.*

*The firefighting profession as a whole will continue to struggle if recruiting, retention, and scheduling methods remain the same as they were at the turn of the century. Things are much different today. Staffing strategies simply must change. We trust that this eBook has provided you with new ideas to help your agency adapt to these changing times.*



**To learn how Orion can help increase your staffing efficiencies contact us at 866-779-1689 or go to [www.orioncom.com](http://www.orioncom.com).**



## ABOUT ORION

Orion is 100% dedicated to providing operational workforce management solutions for the Federal, State and Local public safety workforce. Our mission is to deliver a best-in-class cloud-based portfolio that supports professionals running public safety organizations and the employees serving your communities.

Unlike other providers, Orion solutions are designed exclusively to support the complexities of managing public safety personnel. From complex scheduling and payroll exports, to personnel, asset and training management, our operational workforce software and industry expertise are what agencies nationwide rely on 24/7.

When we say that we “Serve Those Who Serve” – we mean it. This is our mission and we’ve been doing it for over two decades.





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