

## **Alarming Shortage: the nation is facing a critical shortage of firefighters**

by Mark Hyman & Larry Deal | Thu, March 7th 2024 at 5:56 AM

The number of calls to fire departments increases every year. Meanwhile, the number of firefighters is falling. The shortage has placed some communities at serious risk. Sinclair national investigative correspondent Mark Hyman has the details on just what's going on.

On a somber morning in east Alabama, a community gathers as a firefighter plays 'taps' on a bugle.



*Firefighter playing taps to honor the fallen (Credit: The National Desk)*

Each year, firefighters and community members come together to pay respects to their department's only fallen firefighter. That 1977 day Roger Brookshire died is a moment fellow firefighter Steve Tucker will never forget.

"Instinctively just pulled him to the side and started doing CPR on Captain Brookshire," Tucker recalled. "72,000 volts of electricity. He didn't make it."

***"Worst day of my life," Retired Chief Steve Tucker.***



*Retired Chief Steve Tucker recalls the moment a fellow fire fighter fell in the line of duty (Credit: The National Desk)*

Mark Hyman asked, "It's a solemn day for you, isn't it?"

"Worst day of my life," Tucker replied.

Firefighters like Steve Tucker and Mara Halley do the job with eyes wide open.

***"There's a risk of death, higher risk of cancer, [and] exposure to bloodborne pathogens," Firefighter Mara Halley.***



*Firefighter Mara Halley (Credit: The National Desk)*

Halley explained several of the risks facing today's firefighters. "There's a risk of death, higher risk of cancer, exposure to bloodborne pathogens and other infectious diseases. It's also very mentally challenging and we've seen a rise in mental health issues in the fire service."

	40 Years Ago	Today	Difference
Population	234,000,000	332,000,000	+42%
Emergency Calls	10,819,000	36,416,000	+336%
Volunteer Firefighters	898,000	676,000	-222,000

Source: National Fire Protection Association

*Statistics in the last 40 years*

Complicating matters for an already dangerous profession, the fire service is facing its greatest personnel shortage in the modern era. In the past four decades, the US population has increased more than 40%. The number of emergency calls has tripled. But volunteer firefighters have fallen by a quarter. About 200,000 fewer today.



*A fire conflagration (Credit: Getty)*

This matters because two-thirds of all firefighters are volunteers. They've been integral to the fire service since Benjamin Franklin founded the nation's first fire station in 1736. In most of rural America, it is only volunteers that will answer the call. Unless there are no volunteers.

***"[The house] burned to the ground. No firefighters ever responded," Mark Hyman.***

Alabama



*Correspondent Mark Hyman on lot where house burned down (Credit: The National Desk)*

“Behind me on this lot stood a house that caught fire one day,” Mark explained as he walked along an empty lot. “It could have been contained, but it wasn’t. It burned to the ground. No firefighters ever responded. And here is the really crazy part. The fire house is across the street.”

In the Maryland suburbs, Trisha Wolford knows full well the challenges faced by rural America. She is an officer with the International Association of Fire Chiefs. She is also the chief in Anne Arundel County Maryland, among the nation’s largest departments. She told *Inside Your World* the firefighter shortage in some communities has reached crisis levels.

***“The doors are shut and the apparatus is shiny and sitting inside and there’s nobody there,” Chief Trisha Wolford.***



*Chief Trisha Wolford of Anne Arundel County, Maryland fire department (Credit: The National Desk)*

Wolford commented, “Gone are the days of us looking at thousands of recruits and saying, ‘Well, you need us. Wait in line and we’ll get to you.’”

There is no longer an army of applicants waiting to join. Some volunteer fire stations have closed for good.



*Closed fire station outside Washington, DC (Credit: The National Desk)*

“And all of a sudden, the doors are shut and the apparatus is shiny and sitting inside and there’s nobody there,” Wolford explained.



*Correspondent Mark Hyman asks a question of Chief Trisha Wolford (Credit: The National Desk)*

“Are we in difficult times?” Mark asked.

“We are. I would say we are. Absolutely,” she replied.



*Reasons why young adults are not joining the fire service*

As older volunteer firefighters retire there is a dwindling number of young adults to take their place. Here are some of the reasons why recruiting is coming up short:

Fewer eligible workers, greater time demands, higher training standards, public disinterest in voluntary community service, increased family reliance on two-incomes, greater awareness of health-related risks, workers commuting outside their communities making volunteering impractical, and Millennials and Gen Z value their work-life balance differently than previous generations.



*Firefighters inside a burning building (Credit: Getty)*

Every firefighter we spoke with told us no one joins the fire service to make money. Not even those with full-time salaries. Chief Wolford told us there are rewards greater than a paycheck. “To save a life, to bring a new life in, to birth a baby with a new mother. Those are experiences that the average person just doesn't get.”

Steve Tucker recalled saving a man who went into full cardiac arrest watching a football game. “And he would call me every year before the Auburn-Alabama game and ask me where I was. And he never forgot who worked on him.”

***“It is like a second family,” Firefighter Mara Halley.***



*Camaraderie in the fire house is important to firefighters (Credit: The National Desk)*

Camaraderie is also important. Firefighters view the fire house as special a combination of workplace, home and social club. “It is like a second family. You build relationships,” Halley observed.

Today’s firefighters do more than just drag hoses and swing axes. Many, like firefighter Halley, are cross-trained as EMTs. Or perform other tasks. “Hazmat mitigation, technical rescue, marine operations, to name a few” she explained.

ALL VOLUNTEER	18,873
MOSTLY VOLUNTEER	5,335
ALL CAREER	2,785
MOSTLY CAREER	2,459
TOTAL	29,452

Source: National Volunteer Fire Council

*Number of career- and volunteer-staffed fire houses.*

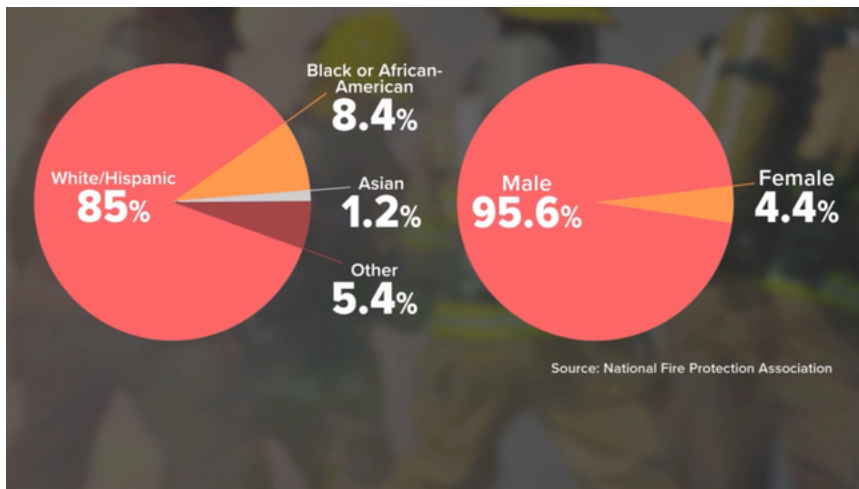
According to the National Volunteer Fire Council, there are more than 29,000 fire departments. About 8 in 10 are all-volunteer or mostly volunteer. The rest are career-staffed.

Tucker, who retired as a chief, was a career firefighter in Auburn, Alabama and a volunteer at a rural station. He noted the hidden cost to communities with limited fire services.



*Battling a house fire (Credit: The National Desk)*

Mark wondered, “So if there are no fire hydrants and fewer firehouses nearby, I can expect to pay greater homeowner’s insurance rates?” “Considerably more,” Tucker replied.



*Firefighter demographics*

Industry data shows 85% of career firefighters are white or Hispanic. 96% are male. It’s believed volunteer numbers are similar. So the fire service is recruiting underrepresented communities to fill vacancies to become the next generation of firefighters.





*Recruiting underrepresented communities to be firefighters (Credit: Getty)*

Chief Wolford shared with us an opening line to encourage a young adult to consider the fire service. It is simple and direct.

***“Have you ever saved a life?” Chief Trisha Wolford.***



*Firefighter rescuing a young girl (Credit: Getty)*

Wolford asked, “Have you ever saved a life? So, come and give it a shot. If you don’t like it you can leave.”

Anyone who might want to learn more about how to join the fire service can ask any firefighter. They are looking for men and women who to join their team.