

Avoid Becoming a Stepping Stone Department

By: Ken Gardner
Captain
Ashland Fire Department
274 Cleveland Ave. Ashland, Ohio 44805

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	2
Certification Statement.....	3
Abstract.....	4-5
Introduction.....	6-7
Statement of the Problem.....	6-7
Purpose of the Study.....	8
Research questions.....	8
Background and Significance.....	9-11
Literature Review.....	12-16
Procedures.....	17-18
Results.....	19-23
Discussion.....	24-28
Recommendations.....	29-31
Appendix A-firefighter turnover survey.....	32-34
Appendix B-former employee survey.....	35
Appendix C-AFD turnover.....	36
Appendix D-decision factors in departure of AFD.....	37
Appendix E-former employee survey results.....	38
References.....	39

CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify that the following statements are true:

1. This paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

2. I have affirmed the use of proper spelling and grammar in this document by using the spell and grammar check functions of a word processing software program and correcting the errors as suggested by the program.

Signed: _____

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ABSTRACT

The Ashland Fire Department is a 35 member full-time department, the only full-time department in Ashland County and handles all traditional and many non traditional services. The department provides mutual aid in all of Ashland County on a regular basis, which creates an issue due to the staffing and fiscal constraints it places on the department.

Over the last several years the department has seen an increase in firefighter/paramedics voluntarily resigning prior to two years of service. There have been eight (8) firefighter/paramedics that have resigned in the last seven years. This put an added burden on the remaining staff and the on duty OIC who now may have to reduce services, including not responding to mutual aid requests. Hiring a new firefighter/paramedic can take approximately six months and places fiscal and time constraints on the department, as does the 12 week orientation process a new recruit is required to complete.

The purpose of this study was to identify key reasons for voluntary resignation from the department.

The baby boomers have made up the majority of the chief officers in the fire service and are now beginning to retire, which leaves departments understaffed. This project utilized two surveys to gather data. The first survey was to investigate the retention issue and how it was addressed within that department. The second survey interviewed firefighter/paramedics who voluntarily resigned and their reasons for resignation.

Anticipated results as well as some preliminary results suggest that the Ashland Fire Department does not differ from state or national trends.

Other results show departments are doing very little to address retention, despite the fiscal burden and time constraints that hiring new personnel places on departments.

Preliminary recommendations suggest the implementation of a retention program such as a mentoring program. Create a clear strategic plan open to all ranks which would empower all generations to have input into the departments future. Train Chief Officers in understanding how to effectively communicate with all staff despite generational differences. With a new mindset and information, changes can be implemented to reduce the voluntary resignation of firefighter/paramedics. Furthermore, many of these changes can be implemented with little to no cost to the department.

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The problem this study will address is the increase in firefighter/paramedics who voluntarily resigned from the Ashland Fire Department prior to two years of service. The City of Ashland Human Resources Department reports that “from 1970 to 1999, only two (2) firefighter/paramedics exited through voluntary resignation. From 2000 to Present, eight (8) firefighter/paramedics have voluntarily resigned to seek other employment” (City of Ashland, Human Resources, 2008).

As suggested in the above statistical information there has been a significant increase in the voluntary resignations of those firefighter/paramedics that have been hired by the Ashland Fire Department and received highly specialized training prior to two years of service with the department (see graph, Appendix C). This issue needs to be addressed in order to prepare the department for the future by improving firefighter/paramedic retention and to ensure the quality of service provided to the City of Ashland is not compromised. The problem of voluntary resignation of firefighter/paramedics is significant because it has an impact on the entire department. Consequences that result from the voluntary resignation of firefighter/paramedics are a decrease in shift manpower, the financial investment involved in hiring, orienting and training a new hire. It has a negative effect on the overall morale of the department. The decrease in shift man power has an impact on the morale of the department by placing additional work load burdens on the remaining firefighter/paramedics who then have to work shorthanded until a new firefighter/paramedic is hired, oriented, and trained. This creates a significant problem when staffing emergency runs which leads to a decrease in the department’s ability to provide quality services. The Ashland Fire Department is well

below the current national standard for firefighters at the scene of working fires. Staffing the department with even fewer firefighter/paramedics is costly to the firefighter/paramedics, the department, and to the community.

In order to improve retention it is imperative that the Ashland Fire Department make this issue a priority by taking the necessary steps to understand and protect the departments most valuable resources, firefighter/paramedics.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify key reasons why firefighter/paramedics are voluntarily resigning from the Ashland Fire Department and seeking positions with other departments prior to two years of service. The goal of this study is to provide the City of Ashland administrators with research based information to aide them in developing strategies which will improve firefighter/paramedic retention.

Research Questions

The research questions this study will investigate are:

1. Are other fire departments experiencing similar retention problems and what strategies have the implemented to reduce overall losses to the department?
2. What are the financial, administrative, departmental, and societal costs associated with recruiting, testing, training, orienting and hiring a new firefighter/paramedics?
3. What are the key factors that influenced the firefighter/paramedics decision to voluntarily resign from service with the department?
4. What strategies have been implemented to improve retention, their success rates, and what new and innovative strategies can be implemented in the future?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Ashland Fire Department is comprised of 37 full time firefighter/paramedics. All staff are cross trained and provide both EMS and fire services to the department. There are three units working 24 hours shifts with the state minimum of six firefighter/paramedics running the station. This department is the only fulltime department in Ashland County. They handle all traditional fire department activities which include fire suppression/prevention and emergency medical services (EMS). EMS functions include 911 emergency calls for the City of Ashland and three contractual townships. The Ashland Fire Department provides non-traditional services of non-emergency transports including, but not limited to, local nursing homes and hospital to hospital transports. The Ashland Fire Department provides mutual aid and paramedic intercepts for all Ashland County Volunteer Fire Departments. The Ashland Fire Department provides EMS and fire services to the City of Ashland which is 10 square miles and has a population of 21,249 according to the 2000 census. The two townships they provide fire and EMS services to are Milton and Montgomery. Milton is 22.7 square miles and has a population of 2,431 while Montgomery is 28.5 square miles and has a population of 2,412(US Census Bureau, 2000). The Ashland Fire Department also provides EMS services to Orange Township which is 38 square miles with a population of 2,276 which means the Ashland Fire Department cover approximately 60 square miles and 28,368 individuals (US Census Bureau). In 2008 there were approximately 600 fire runs, and 3,400 EMS runs. There were approximately 460 times when there were 2 squads out simultaneously, while there were 70 times recorded that there were three or more squads out in the community responding to calls. Lasky (2006) "The Fire Service is tradition and experienced based and generally has not been overly eager to adapt or

accept change” that being said, the Ashland Fire is certainly no exemption to the rule. “Some people say that tradition opposes change, that it’s stubborn and closed to new ideas” Lasky, (2006). “They say that it’s tradition that gets us hurt and doing the same wrong things over and over again.” On average the Ashland Fire Department is approximately ten years behind in the implementation of new fire service trends.

The hiring process of new firefighter/paramedics begins with the fire department advertising for their civil service written exam through internet and newspapers for interested recruits. Once recruits pass the civil service written exam they take the physical agility test to continue through the process. After successful completion of the physical agility test new recruits are given a face to face interview which includes the Chief Officers of the department. Following the interview the possible new recruits undergo background checks, psychological evaluations, credit checks, and a medical evaluation. Once the new recruit passes these requirements they are offered a conditional firefighter/paramedic position with in the department. Once hired, the new firefighter/paramedic will spend approximately eight to twelve weeks going through the orientation process. This process, which has been researched, and was implemented two years ago, has proven to be highly effective. While this process has proved to be highly effective in turning out well prepared and trained staff it creates a financial burden and time constraints that effect the entire department and community. We need to realize this is a wasted effort if departments are unable to implement strategies and practices that can help minimize the voluntary resignation of firefighter/paramedics prior to completing two years of service. Recognizing trends can help combat some of the turnover.

The potential impact this study could have on the Ashland Fire Department would be to increase the number of senior officers and firefighter/paramedics. This would allow the department to utilize their experience and knowledge of the department, the

community, and their history. This study will identify ways to improve the retention of the younger generation firefighter/paramedics, which currently make up the majority of fire and emergency workforce personnel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Corporations that attract and retain the best and brightest employees achieve dominate market shares and profits that go with it” Sommer, SPHR, (2000 p.3-5). The clear message from these studies is that turnover and the loss of human capital is an expensive proposition. Perhaps the biggest single factor in turnover among key employees is the impact of Generation X. Their requirements for a satisfactory workplace environment have spread to other generations. They often demand the following: 1) Minimal bureaucracy plus competent, visible, participatory management; 2) emphasis on accomplishments rather than tenure; 3) open communication both up and down; 4) respect for work and life balance; 5) relevant training and cutting edge technology; and 6) recognition programs both monetary and non monetary. It is the job of the leaders of the Ashland Fire Department to address the unwanted turnover within the department as well as the impact this has on the department as a whole and the community. In general fire departments must begin to understand firefighter/paramedics needs and wants in order to implement strategies to reduce their voluntary resignation. Recently there has been a dramatic change in recruitment and retention trends due to the baby boomers generation reaching the age of retirement. According to IFSTA Seventh Edition, (2007), “The leadership and upper ranks of the fire and emergency services organizations are mostly composed of members of the baby boomer generation.” “Baby boomers will be beginning to retire in the next few years – leaving unprepared companies, industries and professions scrambling to make the best of a tidal wave never before experienced in history” Graceful aging of the US workforce, (2006). The Ashland Fire Department has experienced a decrease in the mean age of firefighter/paramedics taking administrative positions within the department. Recently there have been four new younger officers

who have moved up through the ranks within the last two years to take administrative positions. With this trend of younger firefighters and officers we must break out of our traditional mold by understanding that there is an entire generation of firefighter paramedics reaching the age of retirement and leaving the department. As a department we need to be aware of this and start to retain our highly regarded, specialized and trained staff as well as employ the number one recruit for the open firefighter/paramedic position within the department.

According to *Employee Retention Strategies* (2005 p.20-24), “In the coming decade, organizations that did not begin now to address the coming wave of baby boomer retirees will be unable to sustain their mission.” The generation following the baby boom is a little over half its size; 80 million boomers followed by 46 million Gen-xers. Smart strategies that can be implemented to retain older and younger workers are as follows: 1) Knowledge transfer, don’t wait to establish mentoring programs; 2) plan retention efforts to include senior experienced workers. Organizations that include opportunities to be creative, express initiative and make a difference will succeed in retaining workers longer; 3) get serious about diversity. Organizations that aim to bring diverse people into their ranks will more likely thrive when the baby boomers retire in large numbers; 4) incorporate generational differences. Using research to tailor hiring and employment practices will help retention efforts as the labor market shrinks, and 5) keep an eye on national and global changes and trends.

The healthcare industry has been calling for changes in jobs and emphasizing creative recruiting strategies due to predictions suggesting a shortage in trained health care professionals. These predicted shortages could easily become a crisis for the healthcare field. This shortage could negatively impact the fire departments which require applicants to be certified paramedics prior to being eligible for the entry test.

Fewer certified paramedics working in the private healthcare sector will lead to a decreased pool of applicants eligible for employment in fire service. Therefore improved firefighter/paramedic retention rates will become an important factor in the future strategic planning processes. While research suggests there will be a decrease in qualified healthcare professional a survey conducted by Jems.com (2008 p.41), reports that “a survey of healthcare workers found that 27 percent were seeking employment in other industries. Health officials as well as the Institute of Medicine agree that the current public health workforce is inadequate to meet the needs of the growing US population.

The U S Bureau of Labor Statistics predicted that the situation would only worsen, they projected a shortfall of 10 million workers through 2008 (Arthur 2001). The report went on to urge employers to establish a solid pre- recruitment foundation. One pre-recruitment strategy that could be implemented is utilizing a competency based approach during the interview. This approach emphasizes the importance of hiring the individual who is com compatible with the department. This is a change from only looking at relevant education and experience. Another pre-recruitment strategy that may be considered is hiring firefighter/paramedics that have already have experience working in fire service. According to Inc Magazine (2006 p.71), “workers between the ages of 25 to 34 have a median tenure of only 2.9 years.” Therefore hiring more seasoned firefighter/paramedics can help reduce turnover

Clearly communicating a shared vision of where the department is going and the departments values will allow staff to align their values with the department which in turn will create staff buy in and increase staff retention and commitment to the department (Kouzes &Posner, 2003).

While it is important to focus on increased retention of firefighter/paramedics prior to hire it is just as important to focus on the retention of current firefighter/paramedics serving the department. According to Growth Source.Com, “If a company fails to take an active role in planning the careers of its employees, they are likely to perceive fewer opportunities with the company. When managers and human resource representatives partner with employees in career planning, employees are less likely to leave the organization.” A current example of this is The Baldrige Initiative which the Ashland Fire Department embarked on several years ago and has been successful. This initiative encourages employee empowerment by increasing their involvement in making decisions that will directly affect their jobs. Momprin, director at the Banff Centre’s Leadership Development Department, gives four tips to create a workplace that makes employees want to stay. They are: 1) create and enunciate a clear vision because employees are not going to follow you blindly; 2) encourage training and development because employees value more than a good paycheck; 3) create a positive organizational culture that will encourage feedback and be open to suggestions; and 4) identify employee values because employees want to align themselves with an organization that shares their values.

It is important to look not only at how to retain firefighter/paramedics but to also look at reasons for their voluntary resignation of service. According to Gregory (2006 p. 81-86) “there are a number of tangible reasons people leave one company for another. Generally speaking, employees want to believe their company really cares about them.” He goes on to cite “inadequate or substandard equipment will cause valuable employees to leave.” The exit interview can be utilized as an important tool in recognizing reasons for decreased retention. Gregory (2006) states that, “even if everything is done correctly you will still lose people.” One common answer for voluntary resignation of services is

financial gain despite this Gregory (2006), believes that “if the person doing the exit interview digs a little deeper other factors will emerge. Once you have the answer then ask why that is important to them because if it’s important to them, most likely it’s important to others as well.

A recent study was conducted by the Ohio Region #6 Sub Regional Employer and Community. Region #6 is made up of nine counties in Northwest Ohio. These counties include Huron, Ashland, Richland, Knox, Morrow, Marion, Wyandot, Crawford and Seneca. The study found that even though the enrollments in the health care industry are consistently high, graduates leave rapidly into adjoining counties and labor markets. They found that there is a health care shortage in Region # 6 and they must start prioritizing this shortfall in order to retain firefighter/paramedics already serving in their departments.

PROCEDURES

This study was designed to investigate the reasons, if any, why firefighters/paramedics have voluntarily left the Ashland Fire Department prior to two years of service. This study utilized two different types of research procedures. First, using journals, publications, periodicals and websites this study will investigate whether voluntary resignation prior to two years of service is a problem specific to the Ashland Fire Department, a State, or a National issue. Second, I will utilize a survey method of gathering data.

Sampling:

This study will also utilize data collected from similar fire departments who have investigated a retention issue. A survey will be utilized by sampling similar fire departments with the Region 6 area. This area includes approximately 25 fire departments in the surrounding counties similar to Ashland County. The sampling will be based on fire department size, career/volunteer status, and run volume. I will send the survey via mail and attach a cover letter explaining the reason for the survey and the time line for the survey to be returned. The timeline is ten business days. The best scenario is to have approximately ten to fifteen surveys returned to collect data from.

Survey:

The survey questions were developed to find certain information. First, are other fire departments experiencing a similar problem with the retention of newly hired firefighters? Secondly, is there a strategy or process in place to retain these firefighters? The focus of this survey is to identify the fire departments that have experienced a similar retention problem, what they have done to retain firefighters, has it been effective and are they satisfied with their efforts (see Appendix A).

Data Analysis:

The last part of the survey process will be designed to collect and analyze the data from the fire departments that fit the proposed criteria. The results will be collected, compared and tabulated to identify differences or factors that influenced firefighter/paramedics voluntarily resignation from other departments prior to two full years of service.

Another part of the procedures section will be aimed at identifying reasons why firefighter/paramedics have stayed at the Ashland Fire Department. To do this, small focus group sessions will be used to find any commonalities, character traits or qualities of firefighter/paramedics that have remained with the Ashland Fire Department. Identifying these character traits in firefighter/paramedics during the hiring process will allow us to make better informed hiring decisions and will be useful in identifying reasons for continued commitment to the department.

A survey questionnaire will be directed to those firefighter/paramedics that have voluntarily left the department since the year 2000. The questions on this survey focus on the reason for voluntary resignation of the firefighter/paramedic, focusing especially on work load, financial compensation, comparable or improved position offered with a competing department, and their overall main reason for deciding to voluntarily resign from the department (see Appendix B).

Upon completion, the major goal of this research study is to identify common reasons for the voluntary resignation of firefighter/paramedics and provide strong, reliable data to develop strategies to retain our firefighter/paramedics.

RESULTS

In order to answer the first research question in this study (Are other fire departments experiencing similar retention problems and what strategies have they implemented to reduce overall losses to the department?) I must first discuss the limitations encountered. There was difficulty in finding a population and sample to address this question due to the fact that the Ashland Fire Department employs only career firefighter/paramedics and does not employ part-time firefighter/paramedics, as well as size of the department and run volume. There were 17 surveys that were sent to similar departments and of those 17 surveys 8 were returned for further evaluation. The results from the eight returned were that only one other department surveyed has had one firefighter/paramedic voluntarily resign prior to two years of service with the department. Therefore the survey suggests that the issue of retention is specific to the Ashland Fire Department. However of those surveys returned the mean age was 41+ years old while the mean age of the Ashland Fire Department is 31-40 years of age. Perhaps a question that could have been asked was, when was the last time they needed to hire a new recruit, which would have allowed the research paper to look at the generation differences between departments. With that being said, there was not one survey returned that reported departments similar to Ashland Fire Department were implementing strategies to improve retention. One department however did mention that they have a mentoring program which they feel has helped with overall retention of newly hired firefighter/paramedics. Due to the reduced number of departments experiencing voluntary resignation of firefighter/paramedics the departments are not addressing retention in regards to the investment lost by the department.

For the second research question focus was on what are the financial, administrative, departmental, and societal costs associated with recruiting, testing, training, orienting and hiring a new firefighter/paramedic in the City of Ashland. The Human Resources Center of Ashland reports that in order to advertise and administer the test for 25 candidates the cost is \$4697.00. The Ashland Fire Department went through the hiring process in 2008 and since that time the civil service examination given has become outdated due to it being certified for one year as opposed to the two years it is normally certified for. During the 2008 hiring process the Ashland Fire Department needed to hire three new firefighter/paramedics but due to budget constraints were only able to hire one firefighter/paramedic. Therefore in order to hire any additional firefighter/paramedics the entire process would have to be started over again. Due to recent budget constraints the likelihood of administering the test for new recruits in 2009 or 2010 would create a fiscal hardship for the Ashland Fire Department. The cost per candidate to complete the physical agility test, psychological testing, a background check, credit check, medical evaluation, and to complete the interview process costs the department approximately \$8,000.00. The orientation process lasts approximately 16 weeks and the cost to financially reimburse the new firefighter/paramedic for those 16 weeks is \$6811.20. This covers 45 hours of service at the base rate of pay of 9.46 per hour. The new firefighter/paramedic will be at the station from 6:30am to 3:30pm Monday thru Friday during the orientation process which totals 45 hours. The department has hired a raining supervisor and as you add in his wages, administrative costs, and the cost of time invested by on the clock firefighter/paramedics the cost of hiring a new firefighter/paramedic begins to skyrocket. Despite the cost of orientation being high the orientation process has been researched and has been shown to be highly effective in creating highly trained and specialized firefighter/paramedics. This

demonstrates why it is imperative to the department to retain new firefighter/paramedic recruits.

While the fiscal burden of hiring new firefighter/paramedics is high to the department the community is affected as well. Decreased coverage of the service area means an increase in response time to emergency calls. It means decreased availability for non-traditional emergency transports. Therefore, there is a longer wait time for those individuals to receive needed medical care. There is an increased response time not only for squad calls but also in response to fire calls. With the department only being able to call staff in for working fires you have fewer firefighter/paramedics on the scene of the fire and at the department to respond to squad calls. The safety risk for firefighter/paramedics and consumers is greatly increased and the cost to the community becomes just as imperative as the fiscal cost to the department.

The third question researched was: what are the key factors that influenced the firefighter/paramedics decision to voluntarily resign from service with the department. There were eight firefighter/paramedics that cited location as their number one reason for voluntary resignation. There were five firefighter/paramedics who cited wages and five who cited work load. Three firefighter/paramedics cited promotional opportunities while two cited family/personal reasons for their voluntary resignation (refer to graph in Appendix D). It was not surprising that wages was one of the more highly cited reasons for voluntary resignation. Six of the firefighter/paramedics who took positions within other departments started at a higher wage than they were receiving through the Ashland Fire Department (see Appendix E). It was evident by surveying other departments similar to the Ashland Fire Department that they have lower wages as compared to similar and surrounding departments. Due to the low wages and high workload expectations that work load tied wages as one of the reasons for leaving

(see Appendix F). With only one full time department serving Ashland County they have the burden of covering approximately 427 square miles. With low staff numbers this creates a higher safety risk for the firefighter/paramedics as well. Perhaps the more surprising result was that eight firefighter/paramedics chose location as their number one reason for voluntary resignation from the department. These firefighter/paramedics took positions that were closer to where they reside and to their families. There is a decreased commitment to the City of Ashland with new recruits due to many of them not having familial ties to Ashland or they do not reside in Ashland County. The two other reasons cited were lack of promotion within the department and family/personal reasons. Lack of promotion can be tied to not giving consideration to younger recruits who may have higher education levels and are looking for a department that will value their knowledge base and provide opportunities for advancement. These results suggest that the departments need to focus on location, wages, and workload to improve staff retention. There were 8 surveys that were returned from fire departments. Seven of those surveys reported that their departments had not experienced an increase in voluntary resignation of firefighter/paramedics who have served the department for less than two years. The majority of these departments have not had to recently hire firefighter paramedics for that matter. Not only have they not experienced increased voluntary resignation of firefighter/paramedics they have not experienced the baby boomer generation reaching the age of retirement and leaving service. Of the eight departments there was only one department that identified a program that they had developed for new firefighter/paramedics that they felt helped to reduce the voluntary resignation of firefighter/paramedics prior to two years of service.

That program is a mentoring program that they have set up for new firefighter/paramedics to work with more seasoned firefighter/paramedics. They feel this has assisted the new firefighter/paramedics with getting acclimated to the new environment, builds cohesion between the new and seasoned firefighter/paramedics, and increases morale among the seasoned firefighter/paramedics by allowing them to help teach a new generation of firefighter/paramedics coming up through the ranks.

DISCUSSION

The results to this research project indicate that the Ashland Fire Department does in fact have a higher turn over rate as compared to similar sized departments in Ohio. One aspect that made this research project difficult was an inability to identify departments with similar demographics to Ashland Fire Department because of location and that the Ashland fire department only employees career firefighter/paramedics. Today many fire departments utilize part-time employees to increase man power and if for no other reason to reduce expenditures. This may be a tactic that the Ashland Fire Department may want to consider to increase man power while decreasing department expenditures. It would be less costly to the department to hire call in part time employees than to compensate a full time firefighter/paramedic with overtime wages. In the past the Ashland Fire Department has utilized volunteer firefighters but several years ago in 2004 during a city wide layoff the volunteer program was disbanded. One of the reasons this program is not revisited is that due to increased training requirements by the State of Ohio and an inability to retain long term volunteers it becomes a fiscal and administrative burden to the department.

The fire departments that were similar demographically to Ashland had a distinct advantage in location. Location meaning, that they have the ability to receive mutual aid and automatic aid from other neighboring full time departments within minutes. The Ashland Fire Department is at a disadvantage because it is the only full-time department in the county and often covers the county volunteer departments during day-time calls. The issue with location is that it increases run volume and work load for the firefighter/paramedics. Firefighter/paramedics are expected to have an increased work load without financial compensation, therefore the department demographics and location

of the Ashland Fire Department creates a disadvantage when attempting to locate a population and sample to complete this research.

When reviewing reasons for voluntary resignation from the department one of the most common answers given indicated that the Ashland Fire Department does in fact pay lower salaries than other fire departments. Survey results indicate that all but one firefighter made a higher salary starting with a new department than what they made when they left the Ashland Fire Department. While financial compensation is one factor in employee retention it is not the only factor and in fact according to (Straughn, 2005) “pay alone is not a sufficient incentive to attract, retain and motivate good employees.” While we know that pay alone will not retain and attract firefighter/paramedics, some considerations should be made by the Ashland Fire Department to evaluate the wage and benefit compensation package offered to new firefighter/paramedics. It would benefit the department in the long term strategic planning to ensure that the Ashland Fire Department is offering employment compensation packages that are comparable with other departments. This would reduce the amount of funding that goes towards hiring, training, and orienting a new recruit.

Another common factor identified from firefighter/paramedics that voluntarily resigned was the actual geographic location of the city of Ashland. Many of the newly hired firefighter/paramedics are driving from areas such as Cuyahoga and Summit counties. The former employees who chose location as the number one reason for voluntary resignation had in fact taken another firefighter/paramedic position within their local region. The City of Ashland currently does not have a residency rule and therefore does not require firefighter/paramedics to relocate to the Ashland area. In the Fire Chiefs Handbook, Marinucci (1995) defines retention as, “keeping personnel once they have been hired or enlisted.” He goes on to state that “you need to establish a reasonable goal

with respect to longevity before you can address the issue of retention.” I feel the basis of this quote are to define and match common goals both for the department and the new recruit. While the residency rule is beneficial to the firefighter/paramedic it is not beneficial to the department. It reduces firefighter/paramedic commitment to the community, department, and fellow firefighter paramedics with in the department. Due to the lack of a residency rule many of the new firefighter/paramedics are using the Ashland Fire Department as a stepping stone to gain training and experience until they are able to gain employment with a larger fire department closer to their residence and that has a better wage and benefit compensation package. One thing the Ashland Fire Department may want to consider is revisiting the residency rule for new firefighter/paramedics while grandfathering in current firefighter/paramedics. This will decrease the likelihood that new firefighter/paramedics will use the Ashland Fire Department as a stepping stone and will not affect the morale of current firefighter/paramedics by requiring them to relocate to the Ashland Area.

Another issue that the Ashland Fire Department may want to research further is the impact that exiting firefighter/paramedics have on remaining personnel. An increase in the number of firefighter/paramedics voluntarily resigning can leave the others questioning their own status within the department. Firefighter/paramedics may begin to question things such as their current status in the department as well as opportunities for personal growth and development within the department as well as financial compensation. Many of the firefighter/paramedics were transferring to larger departments with a decrease in work load and an increase in wage and benefit compensation. The manpower shortage of voluntary resignation leaves the remaining firefighter/paramedics with an increase in workload as shifts work short handed. These implications play an important role in not only the non emergency side but have a

significant impact on the emergency duties of the shifts. The department is already well below the national standard for responding to routine fire calls. The slowed economy has impacted the department which is currently functioning at being understaffed by two firefighter/paramedics. The department does not utilize emergency call back which involves calling in the off duty firefighter/paramedics to cover the station when all other units are responding to calls in the community. This was a very effective way of covering personnel and emergency calls while working with fewer firefighters. However, The Ashland Fire Department is on a no overtime budget and is still down two (2) firefighters. This creates an increased safety risk for the firefighter/paramedics on duty because the department is not properly staffed. Not only does it create a safety risk for the individual firefighter/paramedic it creates a safety risk for the community by increasing response time of the department and safety issues at fire scenes.. Another issue this creates is a decrease in morale of the firefighter/paramedics. It reduces morale by decreasing financial compensation for increased workload and increased safety risks. Firefighter/paramedics begin to feel over worked and underappreciated which creates a negative undercurrent within the department. This is another reason why it is crucial to retain the firefighter/paramedics currently serving the department.

Another aspect of retention, the Ashland Fire Department is doing a better job today than they did several years ago in creating a shared vision and clearly defining department goals and values. This will allow a new firefighter/paramedic recruit to not come in blindly to the department. They will have a clear understanding of what is expected of them from the start. Having a clear vision of the future and identifying our values will help retain people. This is one reason that the Ashland Fire Department needs to revisit their hiring practice. More weight during the interview process needs to be given to possible recruits who have a commitment to the City of Ashland, who have goals

and values that are similar to the departments, and can understand and share the department's vision of the future. While having experience as a firefighter/paramedic is beneficial to the department, research is showing that it is not the most important factor in staff retention and is not cost effective if they do not have commitment to the community, and share the values and goals of the department hiring them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. One recommendation I would make is that the City of Ashland, Division of Fire invest in an external salary and benefit comparison study to identify a competitive but affordable wage for both the city and firefighter/paramedics.

My research has shown that in fact the Ashland Fire Department has a higher than usual turnover rate as compared to other similar departments. Only 1 out of 8 departments have implemented a retention strategy to help combat any potential retention issues. The Ashland Fire Department like other fire departments has done little to retain firefighters. The statistics show a steady increase over the last several years in the voluntary resignation of firefighter/paramedics prior to two years of service.

There were many common responses in the former employee survey. Salary ranked high among many of the respondents. Most exiting firefighter/paramedics started at a higher salary than they were paid by the City of Ashland. Although salary is a key factor, it does not have to be a financial burden on the department to consider wage increases for firefighter/paramedics. According to Smith (2002) “the most effective way to attract employees without over spending is to offer a competitive salary based on the local market. Well designed salary survey systems are a great tool to help achieve this.

2. My second recommendation is for the Ashland Fire Department to incorporate a mentoring program with senior firefighters/paramedics pairing up with younger new hires.

According to Straughn (2005) “Pay alone is not sufficient incentive to attract, retain and motivate good employees.” Surveys and interviews conducted with the Ashland Fire Department former employees for this research showed that salary was not the only factor in motivating them to leave”. Straughn feels, “A solution to retention

problems is to build a new work force loyalty focused on a reciprocal understanding and meeting of needs”. The Ashland Fire Department is similar with other departments in its make up of new firefighter/paramedics working alongside more seasoned firefighter/paramedics. There is much debate on how to deal with these generational differences, however research suggest that pairing a new firefighter/paramedic with a more seasoned firefighter/paramedic is beneficial. The idea is that the new firefighter/paramedic will benefit from the knowledge and experience of the more seasoned firefighter/paramedic while the more seasoned firefighter/paramedic will also benefit from the interaction. The more seasoned firefighter/paramedic will benefit by looking at things in a new perspective and may benefit from the new firefighter/paramedics increased knowledge base with more colleges and universities offering degrees in Fire Science. Both the new and more seasoned firefighter/paramedic will benefit from the increased comradery and the improvement in team cohesion. The proposed recommendation is to institute a mentoring program to utilize our experienced firefighter/paramedics while working to improve interpersonal relationships within the department. Understanding that every firefighter/paramedic can contribute to the department’s growth, vision, mission and values can benefit the department.

3. Another recommendation is for the Ashland Fire Department to continue the Peer Interview prior to hiring.

The Peer Interview is designed to be a more informal and personal interview conducted by a combination of firefighter/paramedics and officers. The peer interview process is designed to explore a less technical side of an applicant’s personality to match the department’s vision, mission and values.

All of the situations described are a win –win for both the City of Ashland and its very qualified firefighter/paramedics. Retaining employees will improve the efficiency of

firefighter/paramedics at emergency scenes and improve their training by understanding not only the departmental needs but the needs of each other. Retaining employees can help keep morale high in a time of an economic downturn where they are asked to do more for less. All of these recommendations will lead to more efficient operations of the Ashland Fire Department and pay dividends to the citizens of the City of Ashland.

Marinucci (1995) “While all these programs and benefits can be considered incentives, probably the greatest incentive for people is to be treated fairly and with respect.”

APPENDIX A

Firefighter Turnover Survey

This survey is intended to gather information on the causes of frequent turnover and programs that have been effective in reducing turnover among newly hired firefighters.

Please take a few minutes to respond to the following question. I appreciate your time and assistance with this research effort.

1. What is your department's current number of full-time firefighters?

10-20 ____ 20-30 ____ 30-40 ____ 41 + ____

2. What is the average age of your "Career" firefighters?

20-25 ____ 26-30 ____ 31-40 ____ 41+ ____

3. What are the average years of tenure of your Career firefighters?

5-10 ____ 11-15 ____ 16-20 ____ 21-25 ____ 26 + ____

4. In the past five years, has your department experienced an increase in turnover among firefighters who have been with the department one to two years?

Yes ____ . No ____ .

5. How many full-time firefighters have voluntarily left for other fire departments in the past?

1-2 years ____ 3-5 years ____ 6-7 years ____ 7 + years ____

6. Has your department developed any strategies or programs to reduce turnover or retain newly hired firefighters? Yes ____ No ____

7. If yes, what strategies or programs have you used? (Check all that apply)

Exit interviews ____ Retention programs ____

Incentive programs ____ Mentoring programs ____

Others (please describe) _____

8. Of all retention strategies or programs your department has used, which two have been the most success in your department?

1. _____

2. _____

9. Have you identified any factors that may contribute to newly hired firefighters leaving after 1 or 2 years? Yes ____ No ____

If yes, please explain _____

10. Would you be willing to share additional information about strategies or programs that you have implemented to retain firefighters. Yes ____ No ____

May I contact you to discuss your experiences and answers to this survey?

Yes ____ No ____ If yes, list a telephone number. _____

Would you like a copy of the final report of this research? Yes ____ No ____

If yes, please provide an email address _____

Thank you for your time and information.

APPENDIX B**Former Employee Survey**

1. Did you accept another job in the fire service? Yes__ No__

2. What was the biggest factor in determining your decision to leave the Ashland

Fire Department?

3. Did run volume and lack of manning have an impact on your decision to leave

the Ashland Fire Department?

4. Was the starting base salary higher entering your new job than that of the Ashland

Fire Department? Yes___ No_____

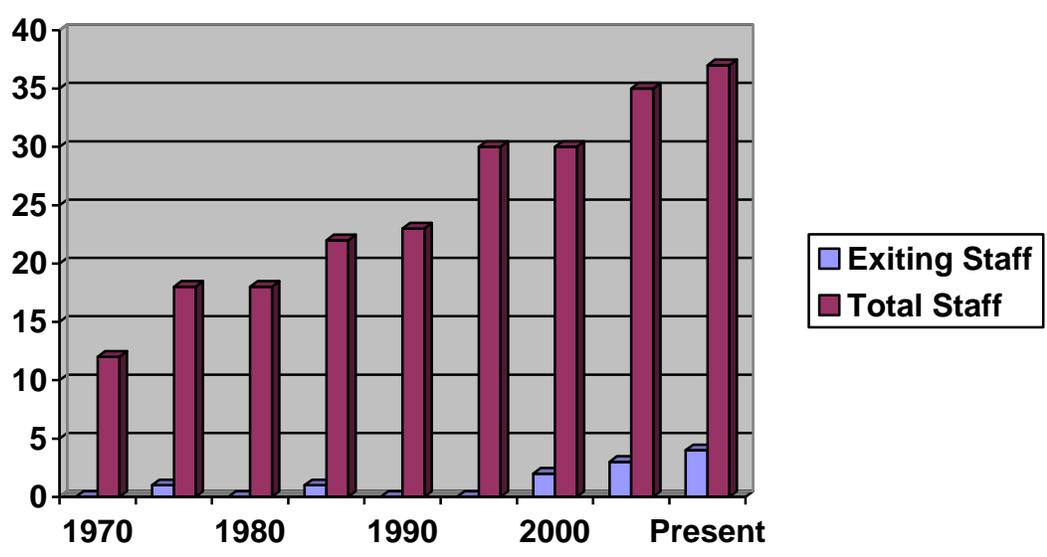
5. What suggestions if any would you recommend to the Ashland Fire Department

to retain quality firefighters?

APPENDIX C

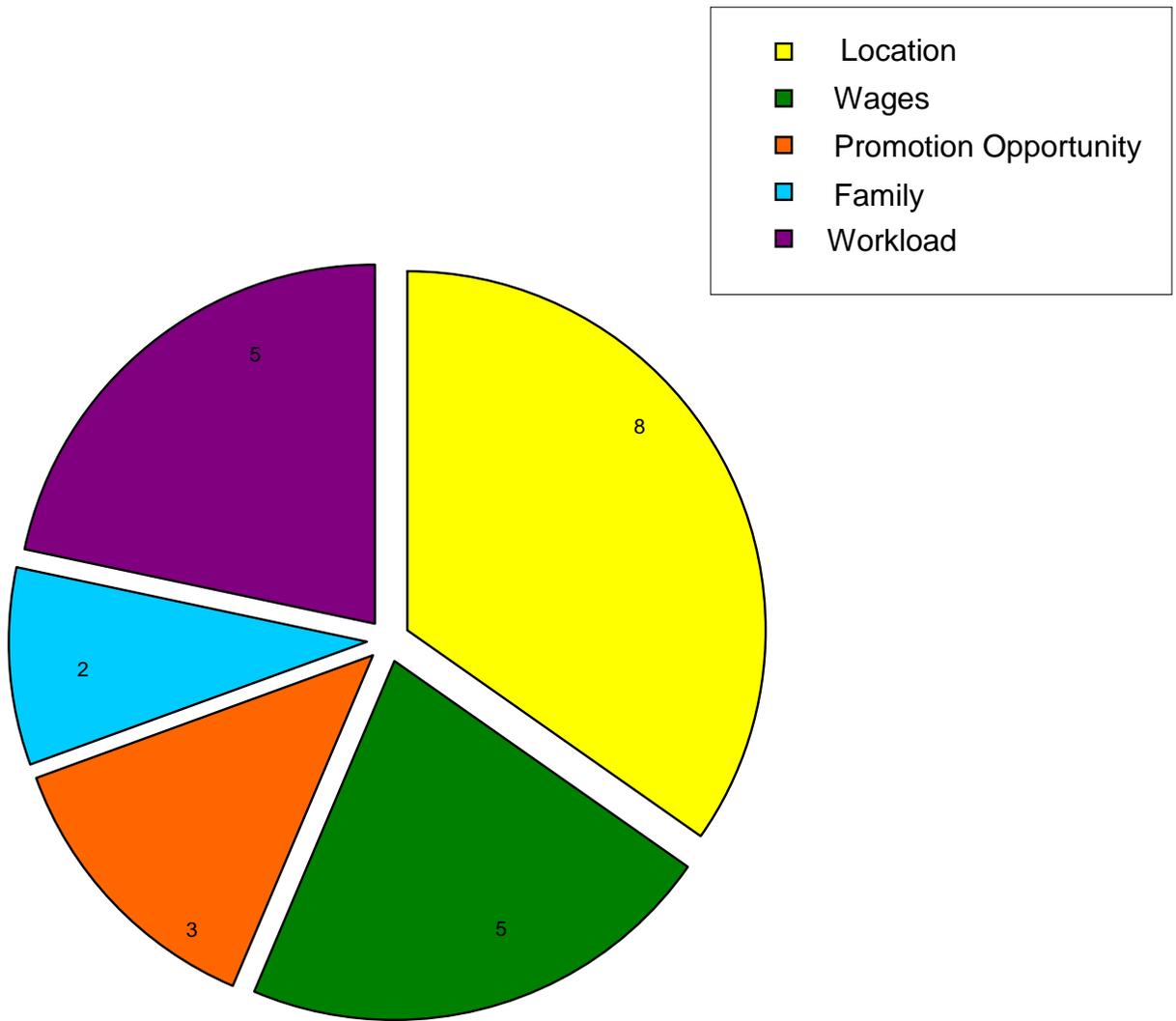
Ashland Fire Department Firefighter/Paramedic Turnover

1970 to Present



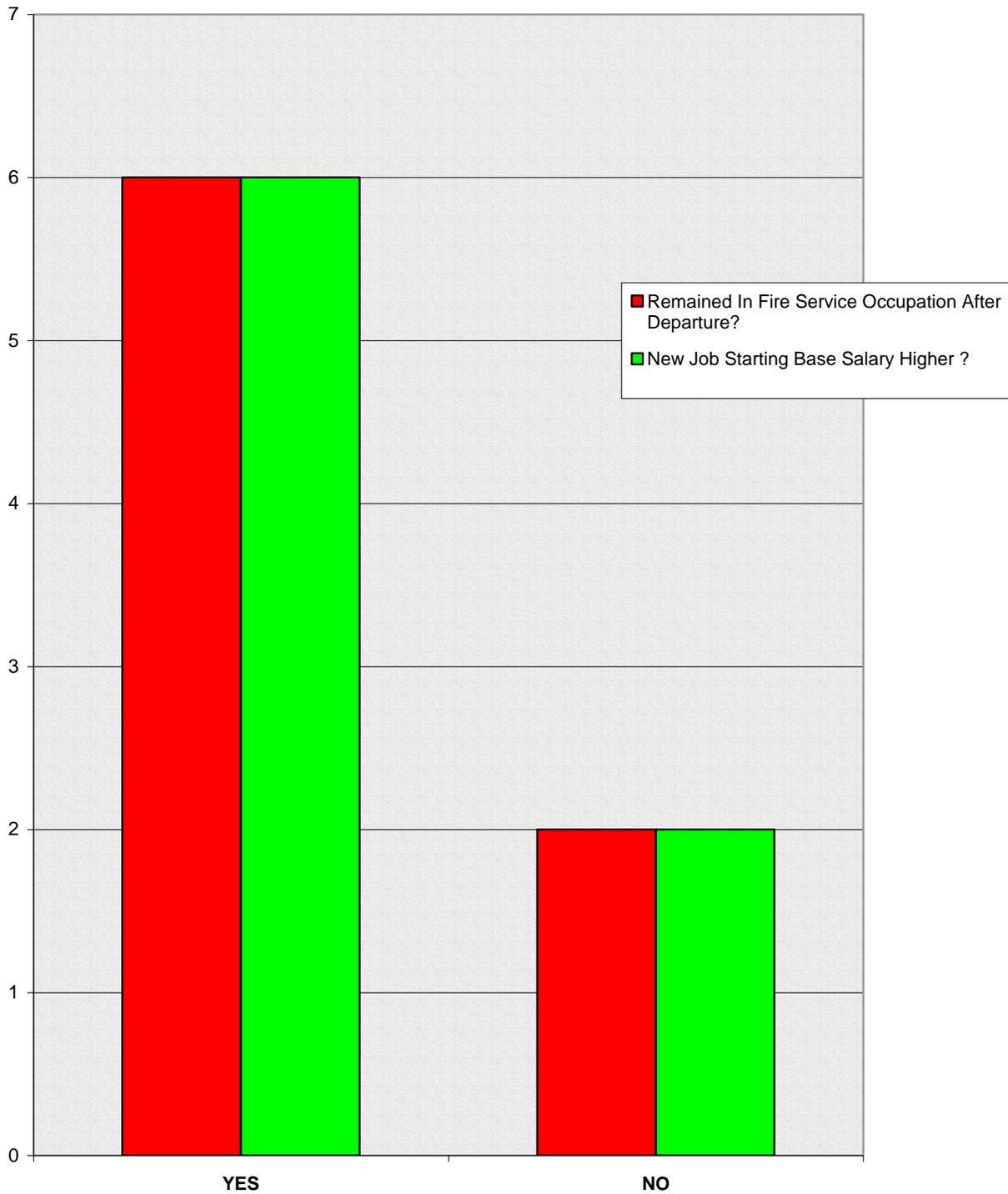
Appendix D

Decision Factors For Departure from AFD



APPENDIX E

Former Employee Survey Results



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