

RIVERBROOK

VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT

Sample Study on Volunteer Firefighter Status

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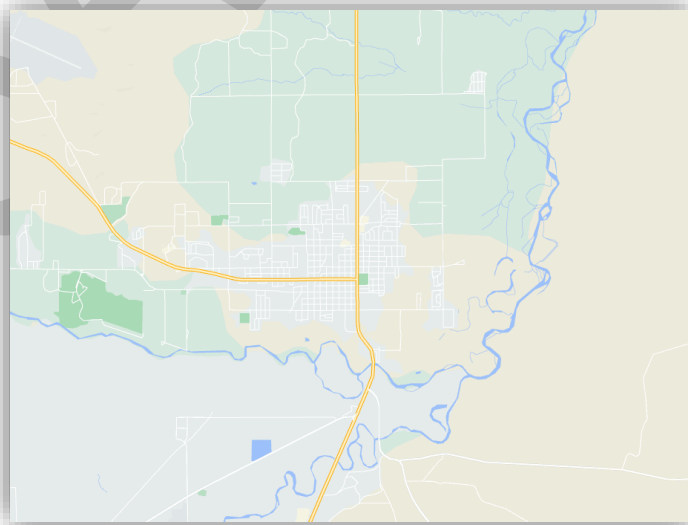
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INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW OF THE FIRE DEPARTMENT

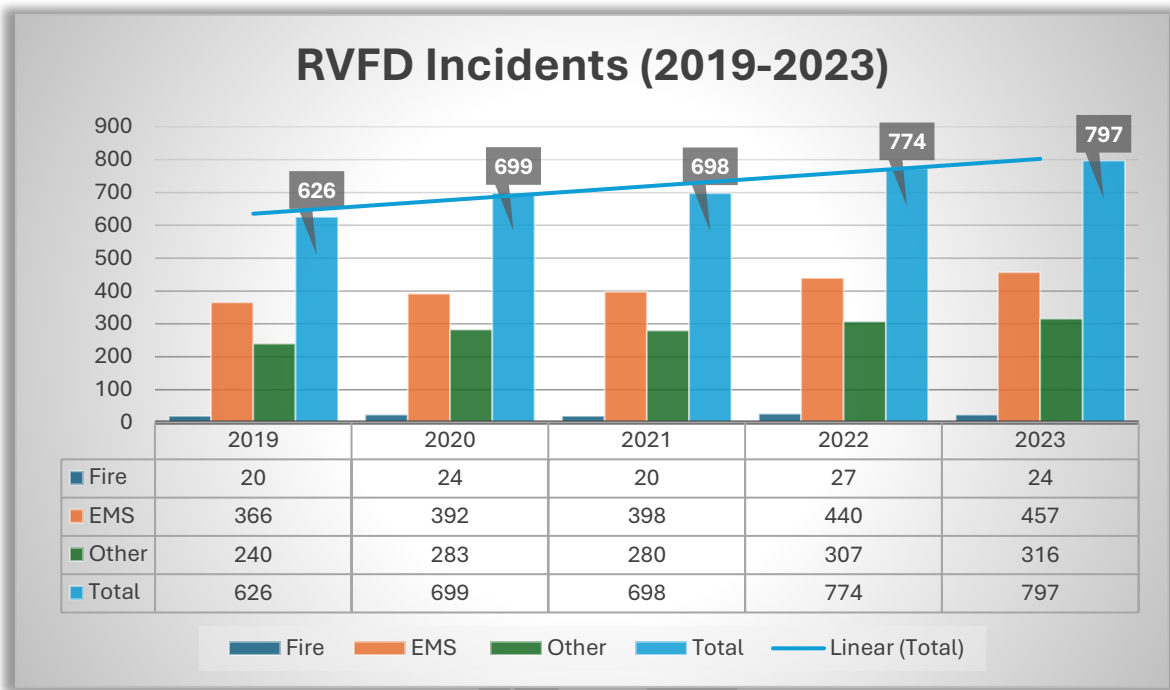
The Riverbrook Volunteer Fire Department (RVFD) is a private organization established in 1940 to protect the community of Riverbrook and its surrounding areas. The organization responds to emergencies in an area of 75 square miles bounded by roughly Lakeshore and Lilly Pad Roads on the north, Forest View Road on the west, the Precious River on the east and Meadow Farm Road and Hwy 1 on the south. The following graphic shows the RVFD boundaries.

Figure 1



The following graphic shows the number of calls RVFD responded to from 2019-2023.

Figure 2



COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHIC

Nestled in the heart of the countryside, the town of Riverbrook boasts a close-knit community of approximately 5,000 residents. The population is diverse, with a rich tapestry of cultures and backgrounds. Families of various sizes make up the majority of the populace, with a healthy mix of young couples, retirees, and single professionals creating a balanced age distribution. Riverbrook’s population has generally been in a slow decline for the past twenty years.

The local economy is primarily supported by a variety of small businesses located along an eight block length of Main St, that include is lined with family-owned shops, cafes, restaurants, and, artisanal craft studios. Riverbrook’s economy is further bolstered by a growing number of tech startups, drawn by the town’s supportive business environment and access to a skilled workforce. The local government actively promotes entrepreneurship through grants and incentives, fostering a dynamic and resilient economic landscape.

Surrounding Riverbrook is an expansive unincorporated ranching community where raising cattle is the backbone of the economy. The ranches produce a diverse array of products managed by long-established families with the past few years having to address enhanced wildfire conditions due to the dry weather.

Both the town of Riverbrook and its surrounding area contribute to the support of the Riverbrook Volunteer Fire Department.

IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS

The RVFD plays a crucial role in ensuring the safety and well-being of the Riverbrook area community. The department is the first line of defense in emergencies, providing essential fire protection, rescue services, medical assistance and often non-emergency events such as helping a stuck horse. RVFD firefighters dedicate their time and skills to serve their neighbors, often balancing these responsibilities with their regular jobs and personal lives. Their commitment not only helps to save lives and property but also fosters a strong sense of community and mutual support. Without RVFD, the community would struggle to maintain adequate emergency response services, and likely need to contract to the more distant town of Elm Square for emergency services,

CURRENT SITUATION

STATISTICS ON CURRENT VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER NUMBERS

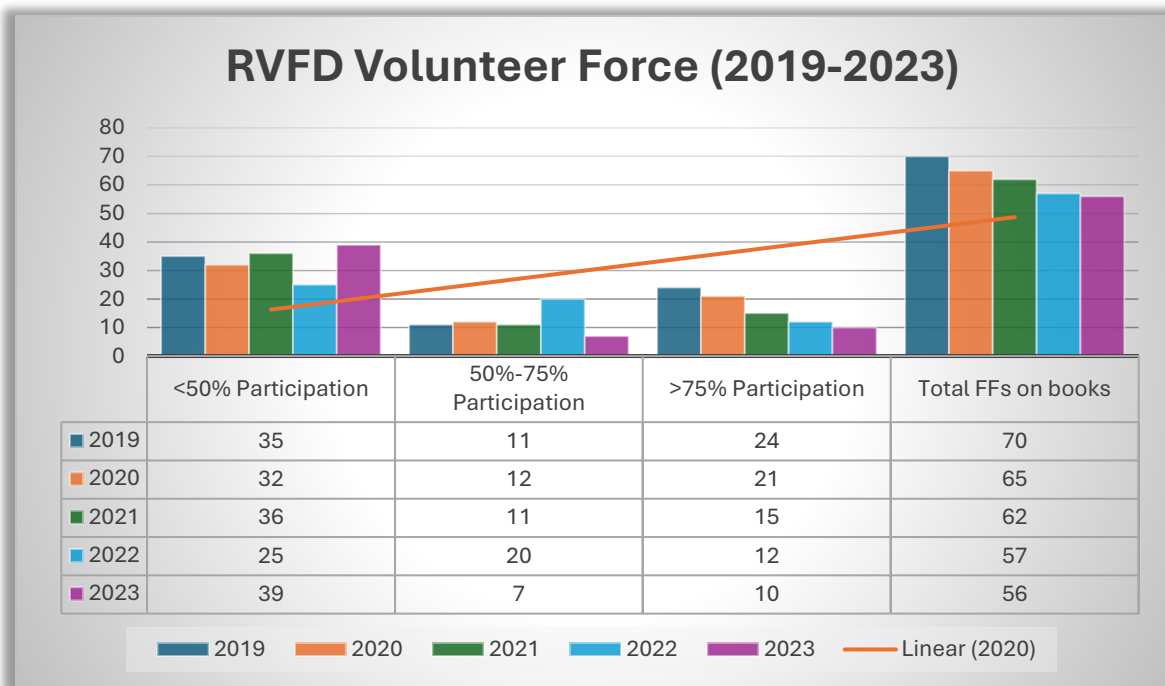
The RVFD has long been a cornerstone of the community, providing essential emergency services and fostering a sense of community among residents. However, in recent years, the department has faced significant challenges in maintaining a healthy roster of volunteer firefighters. The shortage of volunteer firefighters has had a noticeable impact on the department's ability to respond effectively to emergencies. With fewer volunteers available, response times have increased, and the remaining firefighters are often stretched thin, juggling their firefighting duties with their regular jobs and personal lives. The strain on the department is further exacerbated by the increasing demands of modern firefighting, which require increased and extensive training and certifications. Despite their unwavering commitment, the volunteers are finding it challenging to keep up with the evolving requirements and the growing number of emergency calls.

In an effort to address these challenges, RVFD and the town have launched several initiatives aimed at bolstering the volunteer fire department. Community outreach programs have been implemented to raise awareness about the importance of volunteer firefighting and to encourage residents to get involved. Incentive programs, such as tax breaks and stipends, are now being considered to attract new volunteers and retain existing ones. Additionally, the department is exploring partnerships with neighboring departments to share resources and support each other in times of need. While these efforts are a step in the right direction, the town recognizes that sustaining a healthy volunteer fire department will require ongoing commitment and collaboration from the entire community.

COMPARISON WITH PREVIOUS YEARS

Below is a graphic that shows the change in RVFD's force in the past five years.

Figure 3



IMPACT ON FIRE DEPARTMENT OPERATIONS

RVFD has seen a significant decline in its membership, which has had a profound impact on its operations. The decline in membership has also resulted in a heavier workload for the remaining volunteers, who often take extra responsibilities to maintain the department's operational readiness. The shortage of personnel has led to the following issues:

- Increased response times to emergencies – In 2019, the 90th percentile¹ response time (time of dispatch until time on scene) for RVFD was 12 minutes 14 seconds. In 2023, the time was 15 minutes eight seconds.
- Fewer volunteers responding to calls – In 2019, the 90th percentile response rate was 13. In 2023, the rate was 9. In addition in 2023, RVFD had to call for mutual aid to handle without a RVFD response 14 times. In 2022, when this data point started being tracked, it was 5.
- The department's training is strained – With fewer members, the department struggles to conduct comprehensive training sessions, which are crucial for ensuring the safety and efficiency of the team. The lack of adequate training could potentially compromise the department's effectiveness in handling complex fire scenarios.

¹ 90th Percentile times mean the time it takes to get to 90% of the calls. It is a more accurate indicator than average response times.

- The reduced workforce has limited the department's community outreach efforts – Fire prevention education and the marketing for new volunteer firefighting has been reduced due to increased time demands on remaining personnel.
- Department finances are strained. – The costs associated with recruiting and training new volunteers, along with the need for additional equipment to accommodate a smaller team, have put a strain on the department's finances. This additional training expense then takes away from expenses that would normally go towards maintaining equipment.

POTENTIAL RISKS TO COMMUNITY SAFETY

A poorly staffed volunteer fire department poses significant risks to community safety, primarily due to delayed response times during emergencies. When there are not enough volunteers available to respond to calls, the department may struggle to dispatch firefighters promptly, leading to longer wait times for critical assistance. This delay can be particularly dangerous in situations such as house fires, medical emergencies, or accidents, where every second counts. The inability to respond quickly can result in greater property damage, more severe injuries, and even loss of life, undermining the community's overall safety and well-being.

Additionally, a shortage of volunteer firefighters can lead to increased stress and burnout among the existing volunteers, further compromising the department's effectiveness. Overworked firefighters may experience fatigue, reduced morale, and diminished performance, which can affect their ability to handle emergencies efficiently. The lack of adequate staffing also means that the department may not have enough personnel to cover multiple incidents simultaneously, leaving some emergencies unattended or inadequately addressed. This situation not only endangers the lives of residents but also places an undue burden on the dedicated volunteers who are trying to serve their community to the best of their abilities.

CAUSES OF THE SHORTAGE

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

Modern demographic changes pose significant challenges to RVFD's membership. The Riverbrook area has had a slow decline in population with mostly younger families, those most fit for being firefighter, move to more urbanized areas. Additionally, the modern workforce often requires individuals to work longer hours or multiple jobs, leaving less time for volunteer activities as volunteerism across the county has declined. The effects of COVID, and the subsequent work-at-home trend have yet to show any impact on the likelihood of an individual volunteering as a local firefighter.

ECONOMIC FACTORS

Economic shifts have led to a slow decline of the town's population with many younger people moving to larger cities in search of better job opportunities. This demographic change has resulted in a shrinking pool of potential volunteers. In addition, the cost of living has risen to a level where

one's available energy is needed just to pay the monthly bills consequently leaving little extra time for volunteerism, let alone the many hours often required for emergency incidents.

INCREASED TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

Increased training requirements have become a substantial hurdle for RVFD membership as new national and state standards have required RVFD to plan for additional training. As RVFD faces more complex and varied emergencies, the need for specialized training has grown. This means RVFD's volunteers must dedicate significant time to ongoing education and practice, which can be challenging for those who have other job commitments or personal responsibilities. However rigorous the new training standards are, they ensure the safety and effectiveness of all firefighters. This becomes a trade-off then when volunteers cannot offer the amount of time required to be properly trained.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE CHALLENGES

Work-life balance issues present a significant challenge to the attracting of volunteer firefighters. In today's fast-paced world, individuals are often juggling multiple responsibilities, including full-time jobs, family commitments, and personal pursuits. The time and energy required to serve as a RVFD firefighter can be substantial, leading to potential conflicts with personal and professional obligations. This can make it difficult for individuals to commit to an occasional demanding RVFD schedule/response.

EFFORTS TO ADDRESS THE SHORTAGE

RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGNS

Recruiting campaigns for volunteer firefighters are essential for maintaining a robust and responsive fire service, particularly in regions that rely heavily on volunteer efforts. Strategies for recruiting campaigns include:

- Disseminating a fact sheet for potential recruits
- Developing a recruitment flyer
- Leveraging social media platforms for advertising.
- Using the department's website to demonstrate the benefits of volunteering

INCENTIVE PROGRAMS

Incentive programs for volunteer firefighters can be multifaceted, addressing various aspects of the volunteer experience

Financial and Resource Support: Consider some type of local tax or services discount incentive for firefighters who volunteer. Riverbrook could offer discounted water or sewer service or other utilities. Stipends could be used either per call (paid-on-call model) or on standby. Local merchants could offer discount and local healthcare providers may perform complementary service. Develop a program asking local businesses to provide reduced prices to volunteers.

Recognition and Communication: Lastly, enhancing communication and recognition of volunteer firefighters can serve as an incentive. For example, producing annual reports, developing quarterly

newsletters, and utilizing social networking avenues can help promote the positive attributes of fire and rescue services. This not only raises morale among current volunteers but also attracts new ones by highlighting the community's appreciation and support for their contributions. The 2015 Fire & EMS Study emphasizes the importance of strengthening fire and life-safety communication activities with residents to increase volunteer attraction and retention.

Grants – Modern equipment can be an attraction for volunteers with the recognition that there is a drive for the organization to provide the best service it can to the community with new equipment being a representation of that. Funding can not only come from government programs but local businesses often can offer funding assistance.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

Strong community outreach can be a significant benefit by fostering a sense of connection and support between the department and the residents it serves. Through outreach efforts such as public education programs, open houses, and community events, the fire department can raise awareness about its vital role within the community. These initiatives help to build trust and rapport with the community, making residents more likely to support the department through donations, participation in fundraising activities, and volunteering their time and skills. By engaging with the community, the fire department can also educate residents on fire safety and prevention, ultimately reducing the number of emergencies and enhancing overall public safety.

Outreach efforts can also highlight the personal and professional development opportunities that come with being a volunteer firefighter, such as gaining valuable skills, building camaraderie, and making a meaningful impact on the community.

INCIDENT SPECIALIZATION

One of the response models that is frequently used in volunteer departments is a broad announcement to the entire department that a response is needed with the hope that sufficient personnel will respond. Changing response requirements so that only certain scheduled personnel respond on low acuity calls and saving the department-wide response for larger events could yield less reliance on all personnel at any given time saving the large-scale responses only for those incidents with the largest harm potential. Individuals can be scheduled (and trade on-call duties) for 24 hrs at a time yielding a more reliable response that does not require everyone to be available all of the time.

COMBINATION DEPARTMENT

Transitioning from a completely volunteer fire department to a combination fire department, which includes both volunteer and career firefighters, can offer several advantages for a community. This hybrid model allows for a more reliable and consistent emergency response, as career firefighters can provide coverage during times when volunteer availability is limited, such as during weekdays or holidays. The presence of career firefighters ensures that there is always a trained and ready team available to respond to emergencies, reducing response times and enhancing overall public safety. Additionally, career firefighters can take on administrative and training responsibilities, allowing

volunteers to focus more on their operational roles and reducing the burden on volunteer leadership.

The transition to a combination fire department also requires careful planning and community engagement to ensure a smooth and successful implementation. It is essential to communicate the benefits of the new model to the community and to address any concerns or misconceptions. This can be achieved through public meetings, informational campaigns, and collaboration with local government and stakeholders. Funding is another critical aspect, as the introduction of career firefighters will require a sustainable financial plan to cover salaries, benefits, and additional resources.

When to move to the consideration of a combination department should come when performance objectives are not regularly being met nor are anticipated to be met in the future. For example, if the department has a performance objective of having a unit arrive on a scene within 12 minutes of a dispatch 90% of the time and it can only meet that objective 50% of the time and historical patterns show a continuous performance decline, then a discussion with the community about a combination department transition would be suggested.

INTERCOMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Collaborative Agreements and Support: One approach to incentivize volunteer firefighters is through the development of collaborative agreements with neighboring departments. Such agreements can ensure adequate coverage and support, compensating for the limitations of volunteer-based systems. For instance, the St. Cloud Area Fire Study suggests that Waite Park develops an agreement for first responding resources to guarantee a 24/7 response force, thereby improving emergency response capabilities and standards. This type of collaboration can also help fill resource gaps and enhance overall emergency response capabilities, making the volunteer role more appealing and sustainable 123.

DISTRICT FINANCES

Fundraising efforts have become more critical than ever, but with fewer volunteers to organize and participate in these events, the department faces an uphill battle in securing the necessary funds to maintain its operations and equipment. This financial pressure adds another layer of difficulty to the already challenging task of providing essential fire services to the community of Rivertown.

Figure 4

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Revenues	321,520	330,400	329,781	342,804	351,887
Expenses	318,420	310,719	342,319	366,992	402,565
Operating Fund Balance	82,157	85,257	72,719	48,531	0
Reserves Balance	29,421	29,421	29,421	29,421	27,274

The organization's funding is clearly struggling with a zero Operating fund balance as of the end of 2023. Should the organization fail to either curtail its expenditures or increase its revenue, it will be forced to significantly curtail its expenses likely affecting the operation of the department.

RECOMMENDATIONS

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

- 1) Community Engagement: RVFD should continue engaging with the community through events, open houses, and educational programs to raise awareness about the importance of having a strong volunteer firefighting force.
- 2) Incentive Programs: RVFD should offer incentives such as stipends or work with local businesses on discounted services or products. Recognizing and rewarding volunteers for their contributions can boost morale and encourage long-term commitment.
- 3) Flexible Scheduling: RVFD should review its response model to accommodate the diverse availability and skillsets of volunteers. This can include offering different on-call shifts, or part-time roles.
- 4) Public Recognition: RVFD should annually recognize and celebrate the achievements and contributions of volunteer firefighters through awards, ceremonies, and public acknowledgments. Social media is a strong outreach tool for doing this regularly.

COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL BUSINESSES AND ORGANIZATIONS

- 1) RVFD should work with local businesses and organizations to allow their employees or members to respond to emergencies at no cost to the employee.
- 2) RVFD should have a regular attendance at the local Chamber of Commerce mtg encouraging local businesses to provide discounted services and products to local firefighters.

POLICY CHANGES TO SUPPORT VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS

- 1) Training and Development: RVFD should invest in reasonable training and development programs to equip volunteers with the necessary skills and knowledge. Be realistic about level of training that can be provided to match the service provision offered. If RVFD cannot train adequately, for safety's sake, do not offer the service but look at other options to help the community mitigate the problem.
- 2) Engage with other communities about the potential for providing services at a regional level. Have agreements with neighboring departments that can respond as backups to the RVFD and offer that RVFD would reciprocate services to them.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Financial practices where expenses regularly exceed revenues are not sustainable. If revenues cannot be increased to support department objectives then objectives must be reduced despite the difficulty in doing so. (From a community perspective, an insolvent department is worse than a department with reduced objectives.)

If objectives need to be reduced, it should be done through a prioritization of services offered and what is financially required to sustain those services. Through this prioritization, consensus can be reached on any changes needed to keep the organization solvent.

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

The Riverbrook Volunteer Fire Department is facing challenges in maintaining a robust volunteer force due to demographic changes, economic factors, increased training requirements, and work-life balance challenges. Despite these obstacles, the RVFD remains a vital part of the community, providing essential emergency services. Efforts to address the shortage of volunteers can include:

- recruitment campaigns
- incentive programs
- community engagement initiatives
- collaborative agreements with neighboring departments and community support are crucial for the sustainability of the RVFD.
- If necessary, consideration of a combination department transition

The organization's financial struggles highlight the need for continued community engagement and support to ensure the department's operations can be maintained effectively

The RVFD's transition to a combination department, which includes both volunteer and career firefighters, offers a more reliable and consistent emergency response.