

WHO WILL HELP YOU?

As volunteer fire departments struggle to fill their ranks ...

By Nate Jenkins And Kelley Gillenwater The Associated Press

BIG SPRINGS, Neb. — Simple numbers were working against the fire and rescue department in this town of 400 along Interstate 80. Unbeknownst to six people in a Suburban that had just wrecked on the busy interstate, the math didn't favor them either.

"We only had enough people to run one ambulance," said Adam Hayward, an emergency medical technician with Big Springs Fire & Rescue. "We have two, but a lot of times we don't have enough people to run them."

The fire chief called for help from a volunteer department in nearby Julesburg, Colo., and there were no life-threatening injuries. But the 13-mile drive, which normally adds 20-30 minutes to the response time, highlighted a growing problem that may be compromising public safety, especially in rural areas: Volunteer fire and rescue departments nationwide are struggling with declining membership, increased costs and changing attitudes.

State and federal lawmakers are taking action to help reverse the trend because volunteers are often the first responders to events ranging from floods to fires, and some say the shortage presents a looming crisis.

"In some communities out there, it's the volunteer fire department or nothing," said U.S. Fire Administrator Gregory Cade. "There's not the economic base to support a career department. So if they can't keep the volunteer fire department viable, then the potential exists that they're not going to have any protection at all."

Volunteer fire and rescue personnel represent 72 percent of the nation's 1.1 million firefighters. More than 50 percent of volunteers are associated with departments that cover areas with populations of less than 2,500, according to the U.S. Fire Administration.

Between 1984 and 2006, the number of volunteers nationwide fell by 8 percent, or nearly 74,000, according to information from the National Fire Protection Association.

During the same period, the number of emergency calls to paid and volunteer departments doubled. The statistics don't break down the increase based on department, but volunteer chiefs say they're busier than ever.

Fire officials blame the staffing decline on several factors, including increased family demands, employers who are less sympathetic toward community concerns, and regulations that require volunteers to take up to 200 hours worth of training before they can start fighting fires.

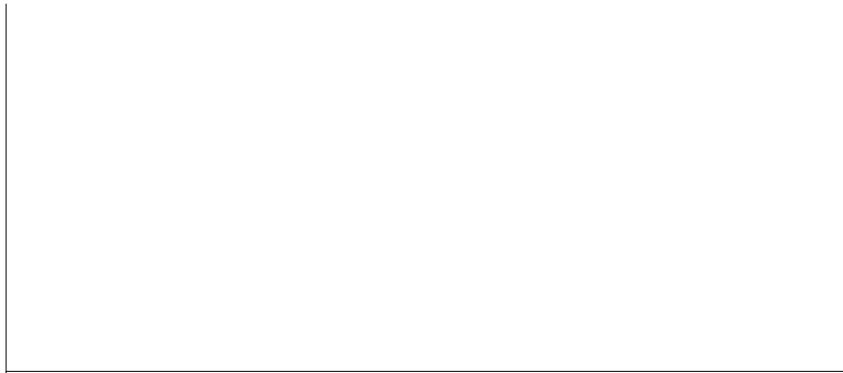
Also, with so many other activities available, the local fire hall is becoming less of a social hub for small communities.

"There's more recreation, there's Internet, there's cable TV," said Sam Love, a former volunteer fire chief who now lobbies for the West Virginia Firemen's Association.

Those distractions also may be contributing to reports of volunteers not responding to their pagers. Others may be reluctant to be rustled out of bed at night, their employers won't let them leave work or they are more selective on which calls to respond to.

"Every time I hear the pager go off, you know, you wonder who's gonna be there and who's not," said Duane Halsema, chief of the McCutchanville Fire Department in Indiana.





Ben Van Pelt, right, and Wes Schmer are volunteer firefighters for the Ogallala Fire Department in Nebraska.



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS Volunteer fire departments are having increased trouble filling their ranks.

