

# **CAN VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANIES IMPROVE RECRUITING?**

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## The Downward Spiral of Volunteerism in Firefighting

In 2020, the ranks of professional firefighters increased by 2%. At the same time, volunteer firefighters declined by 6% from the previous year, signaling “the lowest number of volunteer firefighters reported over the years.”<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Fire Administration (2023) has identified recruitment challenges as a key issue that future leaders “will have to be able to overcome” if communities hope to reverse this trend.<sup>2</sup> Yet, if departmental leadership truly believes that recruiting from the latest cohort is an exercise in futility, it is not likely to set the things in place (i.e. a compelling message, financial resources, trained recruiters, etc.) that produce results. The critical importance of recruiting notwithstanding, there seems to be a disconnect between this sector’s strategy for attracting prospects and the target audience it is trying to reach.

The decline in volunteerism cuts across all types of communities. A considerable amount of research has been conducted in an attempt to determine how to retain the current corps of volunteers.<sup>3</sup> While retention is important, an increasing reliance on veteran firefighters does nothing to replenish the storehouse of social capital that can only be accomplished by prompting the next generation of volunteers to step up. According to Robert Putnam, social capital is the byproduct of civic virtue that is “embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relationships.”<sup>4</sup> Putnam believes that there is a distinct connection between volunteerism and civic engagement: A decline in one correlates closely with a decline in the other. Rising generations do not exhibit civic mindedness to the degree that previous generations did.<sup>5</sup>

While Putnam holds a considerable amount of cachet in the social science community, a deeper dive into the data suggests that while there appears to be a realignment in volunteerism from one generation to another, the rising generations are just as civic minded as previous ones. Musick & Wallace provide a compelling argument that, while there have been adjustments in how volunteerism is carried out and with what organizations from one generation to the next, tradeoffs occur which result “in an overall rate of volunteering that has been quite stable.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, by assessing an individual’s willingness, capability and availability to volunteer (or one’s volunteerability), a recruiter’s message can be better “tailored to target” prospects whose motives better align with the opportunity that fire service provides.<sup>7</sup> Thus, we must look for alternate explanations for why volunteer fire department leadership frequently throw up their hands in frustration when asked why enlistments are declining.

Snyder, Clary & Stukas use a functional approach to identify the challenge that confronts one of America’s largest and most enduring volunteer activities. They identify six different reasons

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<sup>1</sup> Rita Fahy, Ben Evarts and Gary P. Stein, “US Fire Department Profile 2020,” NFPA (September, 2022): 1. [www.nfpa.org/education-and-research/research/nfpa-research/fire-statistical-reports/us-fire-department-profile?l=0](http://www.nfpa.org/education-and-research/research/nfpa-research/fire-statistical-reports/us-fire-department-profile?l=0).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Fire Administration, “Retention and Recruitment for the Volunteer Emergency Services FA-361,” FEMA, (May, 2023): 26. [www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/publications/retention-and-recruitment-for-volunteer-emergency-services.pdf](http://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/publications/retention-and-recruitment-for-volunteer-emergency-services.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Alexander C. Henderson and Jessica E. Sowa, “Retaining critical human capital: Volunteer firefighters in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania,” *Voluntas* 29, 1 (2018): 44.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>6</sup> Marc A. Musick and John Wilson, *Volunteers: A Social Profile*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 378.

<sup>7</sup> Leonie Lockstone-Binney, Kirsten Holmes, Lucas C. P. M. Meijs, Melanie Oppenheimer, Debbie Haski-Leventhal and Ross Taplin, “Growing the Volunteer Pool: Identifying Non-Volunteers Most Likely to Volunteer,” *Voluntas* 33, 4 (2022): 787.

why people volunteer. The most important part of their research, though, is an almost parenthetical statement: “Since the opportunities to satisfy such motivations through volunteerism may not be salient to some individuals, it follows that persuasive messages can be used to encourage people to volunteer.”<sup>8</sup> Volunteer fire departments – like other volunteer organizations – are competing for a few good men and women. Department leaders must understand the competitive nature of the labor supply and adopt methods that make them successful in the free labor market. That requires adopting the most effective tools. The U.S. Fire Administration acknowledges both a multiplicity of volunteer motivations and the need for better techniques in recruiting. “Fire and emergency services departments should look at the messaging and recruitment and retention campaigns used by other local and national organizations that have maintained high volunteer numbers in today’s environment.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The Adverse Impact on Communities**

Volunteerism has made a significant contribution to the commonweal in America since its founding, effecting inexpensive solutions and creating a conduit for constituents to become impact players in their communities. Volunteerism in support of public benefit organizations is widespread, but it is often underappreciated because it is difficult to account for both the material and social benefits it provides.<sup>10</sup> In many ways, fire companies provide the model for this private-public activity. The earliest fire companies in America arose at the local level, came into existence without the direct prompting or funding by taxpayers, and relied on volunteers. They were created by local merchants and holders of capital assets to protect their gains. As home ownership expanded in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to include working class individuals and the middle class grew in size and wealth, the local companies became fraternal organizations that attracted the up-and-coming class of industrious, self-employed bootstrappers. In turn, “The firehouse became the social centerpiece of many city neighborhoods, and firemen wielded a growing political influence.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the locally organized company is about as American as apple pie and flag waving. But while it is evident that there is an eleemosynary element to the organic development of fire departments, its members had many other motivations that drove and sustained their creation. Volunteers play an important role in American life, such as serving on boards and agencies, coaching in municipally-sponsored athletic activities, leading tours for public museum, and providing front-desk support at libraries. In addition to saving taxpayer dollars, such engagement helps maintain/boost social capital. James Gruber provides a concise definition of social capital as “shared social norms, trust, and networks that impact how individuals and groups get along,” producing “A form of positive social glue.”<sup>12</sup> Coercing people to give time (as in the days when conscripts were called upon to do labor for the king) was never that cost efficient. However, given voluntarily, a constituent’s time can be very valuable and can lead to many additional benefits.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Snyder, Gil E. Clary and Arthur A. Stukas, “The functional approach to volunteerism,” in *Why we evaluate: Functions of attitudes*, eds. Gregory R. Maio and James M. Olson, (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000), 14.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Fire Administration, “Recruitment and Retention,” 7.

<sup>10</sup> Femida Handy and Laurie Mook, “Volunteering and volunteers: Benefit-cost analyses,” *Research on Social Work Practice* 21, 4 (2011): 412-420.

<sup>11</sup> Craig Collins, “The Heritage and Evolution Of America’s Volunteer Fire Service,” *National Volunteer Fire Council* (Tampa: National Volunteer Fire Council, 2012), 12.

<sup>12</sup> James S. Gruber, *Building Community: Twelve Principles for a Healthy Future*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2020), 14.

While fire departments stand in a unique relationship to their host communities, they exert a significant amount of influence on them and, when well organized, can mobilize political support for their various interests. They have modeled for other groups (athletic organizations, libraries, etc.) how best to organize their efforts to secure financial and political support of their host governments. In turn, these volunteer organizations have become force multipliers, using the tax dollars received and the volunteers they recruit to do what would be almost prohibitive if local taxpayers bore all of the costs.

Ortega & Park conducted a social return investment analysis (SRIA) of volunteers in a U.S. Coast Guard-run program. A SRIA is like a cost-benefit analysis but focuses on the benefit to the community rather than the pecuniary interests of an individual or a business as the beneficiary. In this case, this study showed an additional return of \$3.42 to \$3.89 for every dollar the government spent on the program. When communities invest in promoting volunteer activities to carry out civic functions, the return on investment is considerable. This is consistent with several other studies in a variety of fields that show returns of approximately \$4 for every \$1 invested when volunteers are engaged in public sector work. Thus, the economic benefit of a volunteer program is significant and applicable in most all specific sectors.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, building volunteer engagement has a qualitative benefit to the community, increasing social capital.

In one state alone, it is estimated that there are 92,000 to 96,000 volunteer firefighters statewide, compared with approximately 18,000 paid career firefighters.<sup>14</sup> However, that number is down from a peak of 120,000 in the not-too-distant past, and it is privately conceded by insiders that the decline in volunteerism is steadily accelerating. An inability to manage this problem effectively will require costly solutions. According to a survey of the 1640 fire companies in the State of New York in 2020, 94.5% are all-volunteer or mostly volunteer.<sup>15</sup> Should membership fall to a point where departments can no longer fulfill their mission through volunteers, the cost of replacing volunteers with paid staff will have a significant and negative impact on the tax base. FASNY estimates that pay, benefits, operating, maintenance and capital costs would add an additional \$4.7 Billion in taxes annually to New York State property owners. Capital costs associated with this conversion would layer on additional, significant costs.<sup>16</sup> Multiplying that out across fifty states shows the enormity of the problem.

Ivonchik analyzed the impact that volunteers have on public sector organizations and concluded that – once sufficiently trained – volunteers provide benefits commensurate with paid staff members. As volunteer programs ramp up, administrative costs associated with the development phase can oftentimes exceed benefits. In time, though, volunteers in the public service sector deliver the same level of services with fewer paid employees, yielding significant

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<sup>13</sup> Jason A. Ortega and Chul Hyun Park, “The benefit and cost of voluntary work in government: The case of the United States coast guard auxiliary boat crew program,” *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 94, (2022): 6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2022.102121>

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Dinapoli, “Fire Protection in New York State: How Is It Provided in Your Community.” *NYS Office of the State Comptroller* (May 2017), 10. [www.osc.ny.gov/files/local-government/publications/pdf/fireprotection0317.pdf#:~:text=New%20York's%20system%20for%20providing%20fire%20protection%20is,fire%20protection%20districts%2C%20or%20a%20combination%20of%20both.](http://www.osc.ny.gov/files/local-government/publications/pdf/fireprotection0317.pdf#:~:text=New%20York's%20system%20for%20providing%20fire%20protection%20is,fire%20protection%20districts%2C%20or%20a%20combination%20of%20both.)

<sup>15</sup> Firefighters' Association of the State of New York (FASNY), *Tax Savings Generated by New York's Volunteer Fire Service* ((2023, March): 9. [fasny.com/resources/tax-savings-generated-by-new-yorks-volunteer-fire-service/](https://fasny.com/resources/tax-savings-generated-by-new-yorks-volunteer-fire-service/)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

savings.<sup>17</sup> Conversely, when a community is forced to transition from a volunteer force to a paid company, there is little gradualism in the transition from volunteer to paid. Sticker shock to taxpayers becomes an immediate reality. Without a doubt, getting volunteers to carry on the functions that government would (otherwise) pay to have done still makes considerable sense.

But the decline in volunteerism can be measured in more ways than financial ones. According to Robert Putnam, volunteering is connected to a whole constellation of positive civic activities, including voting, charity, serving on juries, attendance at school board meetings, and cooperation with fellow citizens in support of various civic activities.<sup>18</sup> While not necessarily the cause of all of these activities, a decline in one is liable to lead to the decline of the others. The unraveling of these various markers creates a social condition not conducive to positive community outcomes. “A community is not a set of atomistic members who happen to be located within some boundary line but a web of relationships. Emotional attachments and networks of relationships may create benevolent sympathy for persons in the community and for the community as a whole, and this sympathy can be tapped for the voluntary provision of nonexcludable civic goods.”<sup>19</sup> Needless to say, the cost to the community – in both above and below-the-line expenses – is significant. Finding strategies that successfully attract more members is of critical importance.

### **Acknowledging a Problem Is Just the First Step**

Ask almost any leader in a volunteer fire department to identify its most pressing challenge, and it is not money. It is not an unappreciative community. It is not the state of its equipment. Almost to a person, the biggest problem is a decline in the number of new recruits and the stress it places on those who do turn out. Yet, despite the decline in recruits, the question persists: Do recruiters know how to market their organization in a way that makes volunteering a compelling option for people with scant time on their hands? Do departments support recruitment through sufficient budgetary resources? Identifying and deploying better marketing methods has the potential to boost volunteer participation and minimize the existential threat to the way that most communities have managed emergencies for hundreds of years.

Hager & Renfro highlight the shortcomings in marketing volunteerism. They point to an under-investment in volunteer administration, poorly-focused management, and – oftentimes – no management at all.<sup>20</sup> The default approach often involves posting an announcement up on social media or putting a message out on an electronic sign and waiting for prospect to find his/her way to an application on the organization’s website with little thought to how the message or the assignment resonate with an outsider.<sup>21</sup> Such messages and assignments seldom do connect with prospects, and the frustrations over an ineffective recruiting strategy increase.

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<sup>17</sup> Mikhail Ivonchik, “The costs and benefits of volunteering programs in the public sector: A longitudinal study of municipal governments,” *American Review of Public Administration* 49, 6 (2019): 701. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074019849125>

<sup>18</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Fred E. Foldvary, “Proprietary communities and community associations,” in *The voluntary city: Choice, community, and civil society*, eds. David T. Beito, Peter Gordon & Alexander Tabarrok, (The University of Michigan Press, 2005): 285.

<sup>20</sup> Mark A. Hager and Kathy T. Renfro, (2020). “Volunteer management and the psychological contract,” in *The Routledge companion to nonprofit management* (1st ed.), eds. H.K. Anheier H. K. and S. Toepler, (New York: Routledge, 2020): 282. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315181011>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

The National Volunteer Fire Council indicates that a culture shift in the leadership ranks is essential to the success of a recruitment campaign, necessitating programs to retrain/re-educate veteran volunteers tasked with bringing in the next generation of volunteers.<sup>22</sup> This has not been an easy task. The NVFC suggests that getting older firefighters to speak the same language as younger prospects has been challenging, given the older generation's tendency to "discount or disregard the input, value, or ideas of the younger generations."<sup>23</sup> But Arnon, Almog-Bar & Cnaan indicate that best volunteer management practices largely remain a "black box."<sup>24</sup> To properly engage prospects, an organization must draw on a cluster of activities/practices to boost desired outcomes. They include paid volunteer management with clear objectives and requisite training, a quiver full of tools that can target a diverse range of prospects, effective mediation between the paid side of the organization and the volunteers themselves, and flexible volunteer opportunities.<sup>25</sup> The bottom line? The right tools in the right hands produce positive results.

### Is Recruiting a Hopeless Cause?

Many students of social capital have speculated about the decline of volunteerism in recent years and have come up with a variety of reasons why organizations such as fire departments are struggling to recruit members from the next generational cohort. However, apart from one key factor (messaging), there are as many detractors as there are supporters for the various reasons given. Stacy Grau agrees that the problem has more to do with marketing disconnects as it does differences in the mental frameworks of successive generations. Messages that are not framed in a way that resonate with a prospect's deeply held beliefs are likely to be ignored.<sup>26</sup>

Some authors attribute the decline in volunteerism to environmental factors that militate against pro-social behaviors. While Robert Putnam is the most notable, there are many who have embraced his theories. Andrea Dua et.al. at McKinsey suggest that a whole constellation of personal challenges has left members of Generation Z bereft of the emotional and psychological security that contribute to social capital. Beginning with the Covid pandemic, the challenge of getting a good education, and the problem of securing jobs commensurate with their expectations leaves members of this generation uncertain about their future. Widespread pessimism about a future considerably less rewarding than their parents' generation contributes to a higher incidence of mental health concerns. "One of the most notable findings of the survey is that 55 percent of 18-to -24-year-olds report having received a diagnosis and/or treatment for a mental illness."<sup>27</sup> Scholars writing for a general audience

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<sup>22</sup> National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), *Volunteer Fire Service Culture: Essential Strategies for Success*. (2018): 121. [www.nvfc.org/volunteer-fire-service-culture-essential-strategies-for-success/](http://www.nvfc.org/volunteer-fire-service-culture-essential-strategies-for-success/)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>24</sup> Liora Arnon, Michal Almog-Bar and Ram A. Cnaan (2022), "Volunteer engageability: A conceptual framework," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* (2022): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640221132499>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>26</sup> Stacy L. Grau, *Marketing for nonprofit organizations : insights and innovations* (Second). (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 87. <http://public.eblib.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=6437621>

<sup>27</sup> Andrea Dua, Kweilin Ellingrud, Michael Lazar, Ryan Luby and Sarah Pemberton, "How does Gen Z see its place," (*McKinsey*, October 2022): 6. [mckinsey.com/featured-insights/sustainable-inclusive-growth/future-of-america/how-does-gen-z-see-its-place-in-the-working-world](https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/sustainable-inclusive-growth/future-of-america/how-does-gen-z-see-its-place-in-the-working-world)

(such as Jean Twenge,<sup>28</sup> Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt<sup>29</sup>) have propagated concerns about the mental and emotional stability of the rising generation. Until they can achieve a degree of stability in their lives, it is doubtful that they will have the focus necessary to build social capital and volunteer.

### **Wait! There is Hope**

All of the aforementioned challenges are factors over which volunteer recruiters have little control. They must build their companies in spite of all of these factors. Crafting a strategy that matches the various jobs to be done with the motivations of prospective volunteers can help recruiters overcome some of the strong headwinds they face.<sup>30</sup> Fortunately, there is a considerable amount of literature that informs successful recruiting strategies. Ask people why they volunteer and one is likely to hear a number of different answers as there is not one motivating factor thing that prompts a new recruit to enlist. Clary and Snyder have assessed non-volunteers for their receptivity to volunteering and have concluded that there are six core drivers and a volunteer functions inventory (VFI) can be conducted that identifies the reason why one is likely to give of their time to building social capital. They include humanitarianism, a way of enhancing one's understanding of a larger world, the development of psychological skills, the gaining of career-related experience, strengthening social relationships, and as a counter to negative feelings. Approximately two-thirds of the subjects act on more than one of these factors. The first three (labeled as *values*, *understanding*, and *enhancement*) usually surface as motivating factors more frequently than the last three (labeled *career*, *social*, and *protective*).<sup>31</sup> Knowing what attracts people to volunteer service should be incorporated in marketing strategies, and recruiters should be sensitive to what factors resonate with which audiences.

Motivational research is very quickly coming to accept the fact that volunteering serves a particular function in the life of those who enlist. And while there is debate over how many functions there are and how significant each is in the decision-making process, there is a general uniformity and consensus about how these various functions should be prioritized. Research suggests that the operative functions in a potential recruit's life and organizational messages can be matched in a way that makes marketing strategies more effective. A functional approach, therefore, provides a motivational link between attitudes and behavior, suggesting that behavior will be enacted when individuals feel, not only that a particular activity is valuable, but also that it will serve particularly important psychological and social functions for them.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jean Twenge, (2017). *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious more tolerant less happy - and completely unprepared for adulthood (and what this means for the rest of us)*. (New York: Atria Books, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, (2018). *The Coddling of The American Mind*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

<sup>30</sup> Kersten Alfes, Bethania Antunes and Amanda Shantz, (2017). "The management of volunteers - what can human resources do? A review and research agenda," *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 28, 1, 62-97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2016.1242508>

<sup>31</sup> Gil Clary and Mark Snyder, (1999). "The motivations to volunteer: Theoretical and practical considerations," *Current Directions in Psychological Science: A Journal of the American Psychological Society* 8, 5 (1999): 156-159. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.00037>

<sup>32</sup> Snyder, Clary and Stukas, "The functional approach to volunteerism," 26.

## Crafting an Attractive Value Proposition

While today's recruiters might have – as potential recruits themselves – fallen into line when a parent or a significant other in their lives barked an order, it is less and less likely that people in the current pool will respond in the same fashion. Doing so ignores the importance that Deci & Flaste ascribe to autonomous behavior when considering the motives of potential recruits. Members of the most recent generations are less responsive and less productive when "having to" rather than "choosing to."<sup>33</sup> By providing opportunities for people to realize their goals or aspirations, a recruitment officer is much more likely to gain the attention of his/her target audience than if s/he resorts to shaming it into compliance. Understanding a prospect as autonomous, capable of making his/her own decisions, is the beginning of a productive exchange.<sup>34</sup>

Susan Chambre observes that while a constellation of factors contributes to a person's willingness to volunteer and there has been little change in that set of factors over several generations, there may be a subtle shift in the emphases placed on the various elements by the most recent recruitment pool. "What has changed is the more explicit understanding of giving back. Under the newer conception, one gives back to organizations that benefit both oneself and one's network, and this is accompanied by a sense of generalized reciprocity."<sup>35</sup> Andre Thibault concurs. Until a recruitment strategy clearly explains how a potential recruit's needs will be met, an organization cannot expect that its initiatives will produce results.<sup>36</sup>

Firefighters who are well-entrenched in the department often forget why they enlisted in the first place, preferring to cast their decision in purely altruistic terms or as a celebration of camaraderie that unites like-minded people in common cause against an external threat. In many ways, people rewrite their own history. The past is often "reconstructed based on *current* beliefs, goals, and self-knowledge."<sup>37</sup> And one's revised self-image – almost always considered as a better state than the original – is used to make comparisons with those who have not yet reached one's perceived level of maturity. It often creates the impression that the next generation is not quite ready to adult, even though an older generation which looks dismissively at the successive ones was once in the exact same state.<sup>38</sup> Musick & Wallace concur. "[s] simply asking people who are currently volunteering why they volunteer may simply yield justifications for the activity that have been generated on a post hoc basis."<sup>39</sup> Recruiters may look on successive generations of potential recruits, shake their heads, and opine (to their colleagues) that the pool of candidates lacks the drive and commitment that they exhibited when they first entered into service. In this respect, enlisting in the fire service is little different from signing up for a tour with the Peace Corps or enlisting in the U.S. Army. When one joins any of the aforementioned organizations, that person weighs the value proposition of one against the others. The opportunity that most closely aligns

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<sup>33</sup> Edward L. Deci and Richard Flaste, *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation*. (New York: Penguins Books, 1996): 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Chambre, "Has Volunteering Changed in the United States? Trends, Styles, and Motivations in Historical Perspective," *Social Service Review* (June 2020): 405.

<sup>36</sup> Andre Thibault, "Volunteer recruitment: New perspectives," *Loisir Et Société*, 43, 3 (2020): 408. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07053436.2020.1849161>

<sup>37</sup> Ann Wilson and Michael Ross, "Illusions of change or stability," in *Cognitive illusions: intriguing phenomena in judgement thinking and memory* (3rd ed.), ed. Rudiger F. Pohl, (New York: Routledge, 2022): 388.

<sup>38</sup> Wilson and Ross, "Illusions of change," 389.

<sup>39</sup> Mark A. Musick and John Wilson, *Volunteers: A social profile* (1st ed.). (Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2008): 64.



with the candidate's needs and expectations is the one most likely to elicit a positive response from a prospect. Helmus et.al. have studied why young people enlist in the U.S. Army and conclude that most people do not enlist for exclusively altruistic reasons. "Salary, benefits, job training, and choice of occupation were common reasons soldiers gave us for why they joined. These findings are consistent with research showing that military personnel are 'pragmatic professionals' who value both institutional and occupational values when deciding to serve."<sup>40</sup> These results have been further confirmed by Friesen & Eddy, who have documented that only 4.4% of enlistees have done so for purely patriotic or altruistic reasons.<sup>41</sup> A department's value propositions must take a prospect's expectations into consideration.

Identifying and articulating a customer value proposition (CVP) is a growing field of interest to those in the field of marketing. However, in a widely cited study on the growing importance of CVPs, Payne, Frow, & Eggert note the presence of "substantial gaps" related to the concept in the literature.<sup>42</sup> This, despite its identification by the Marketing Science Institute as a "research priority."<sup>43</sup> One gap that is quickly closing is our understanding of the concept as producer-developed and delivered. A mutually determined CVP perspective is now challenging this traditional and unidirectional delivery mechanism. There are a growing number of conditions in which CVP is cocreated.<sup>44</sup>

Research also confirms that there "appears to be a disconnect between what job seekers value in an employer and what employers perceive as important."<sup>45</sup> While management extols the attractiveness of working for an organization with a strong and vibrant reputation, employees prefer more direct benefits (such as a positive work environment, good/just compensation and other financial incentives/rewards. With reference to Wilson & Ross, volunteer recruiters may try to upsell a value proposition that may seem attractive to them (or other, long-serving members), but not necessarily to someone who is weighing his/her options from the outside.<sup>46</sup> This presents another gap which has yet to be closed,...Is CVP of importance in the not-for-profit sector, of which volunteer fire units are a part? Given the growing understanding of the various motivations that prompt or discourage engagement, the answer is "Yes." Marketing volunteerism does not exempt a recruiter from paying close attention to those features that make their organization attractive to a prospect.

Volunteer motivations have changed little through the years. What has changed is our understanding of what makes membership in a department so attractive. People are going to join the fire service when the department recognizes the prospect's needs/interests and tries to match him/her up with a position that satisfies all expectations.

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<sup>40</sup> Todd Helmus, Rebecca Zimmerman, Marek Posard, Jasmine Wheeler, Cordaye Ogletree, Quinton Stroud and Margaret Harrell, *Life as a private: A study of the motivations and experiences of junior enlisted personnel in the U.S. Army*. (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2018): 131.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew Friesen and Matthew Eddy, (2019). "Selling the service: Veterans' reflections on their past experience of the military recruitment process," *Critical Military Studies*, 5, 3 (2019): 224-226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2018.1537648>

<sup>42</sup> Adrian Payne, Penny Frow and Andreas Eggert, "The customer value proposition: Evolution, development, and application in marketing," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 45, 4 (2017): 474. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-017-0523-z>

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 467.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 472.

<sup>45</sup> Michelle Wallace, Ian Lings, Roslyn Cameron and Neroli Sheldon. "Attracting and Retaining Staff: The Role of Branding and Industry Image" In *Workforce Development*, Roger Harris and Thomas Short, (eds). (Kindle Edition, 2014): Kindle Locs. 1164-1166.

<sup>46</sup> Wilson and Ross, "Illusions of change."

## Conclusion

Confusion and misperceptions among volunteer firefighters abound about why young people have been unresponsive to the call in recent years to join the fire service so that there can be a seamless transition between those new recruits who are being onboarded and those veterans who are aging out. Departments are becoming much more intentional in their recruitment efforts. Oftentimes, though, they undermine their own efforts by publicly replaying all of the reasons why young people don't join, rather than crafting a value proposition that speaks specifically to the needs of their prospects. Value proposition is multi-faceted, reflecting the functional nature of volunteerism that has been described by Snyder, Clary & Stukas and a whole school of students that have embraced the functionalist (instrumental) approach.<sup>47</sup> All volunteer associations must assess the degree to which the problem exists and determine if minor adjustments in strategy will suffice or if the whole recruiting strategy needs to be reconfigured.

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<sup>47</sup> Snyder, Clary and Stukas, "The functional approach to volunteerism."

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