

Barriers and Proven Practices for Selecting and Recruiting Underrepresented Groups in the Fire Service

Fire Service DEI
Conference
Report Series:
Part Two



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About Advancing DEI in Fire and Emergency Services

The Fire Service DEI Conference was hosted by the Johnson Foundation and convened on Wednesday May 10, 2023, at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. Twenty-nine fire service leaders from across North America met over two-and-a-half days to discuss how to enhance diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging within fire departments across the country, leading to greater cultural competence among service members and improved partnerships with the communities served.

Participants were randomly assigned workgroups with facilitators, with the make-up of each workgroup changing for each of the five sessions. The five sessions included the value of creating a diverse and inclusive fire service; barriers to progression of diversity in the current fire service; proven practices to overcome barriers in the current fire service; entry barriers of minority groups for recruitment and selection; and proven practices for recruitment and selection. The goal was to catalog proven practices, identify roadblocks, create actionable steps, develop research ideas, and solidify the fire service's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.



The Value of a Diverse and Inclusive Fire Service

Intentionally selected as the first session of the convening, participants were tasked with defining and articulating the value of creating a diverse and inclusive fire service. While research in other fields have identified numerous benefits of a diverse workforce including stronger organizational strategies and decision-making processes, wider skill set ranges, increased creativity and productivity, and greater cultural awareness, diversity and inclusion in the fire service has informally been viewed as an HR issue due to the association of bullying and harassment. Participants identified numerous benefits to a diverse fire service which could be categorized into three categories: benefits for fire department personnel, benefits external to the fire department, and tactical advantages.

Three Key Takeaways:

- DEI is not an HR issue, it is a health and wellness issue as an inclusive workplace can positively impact mental health, physical health, and job satisfaction.
- A diverse work force allows for higher quality service to the community and stronger relationship building.
- An inclusive fire service is essential to the future of the field through recruitment opportunities.

Benefits for Fire Department Personnel

Among the first benefits of a diverse and inclusive fire service was the general broadening of perspectives that occurs from a diverse group. As one participant succinctly explained, "I'll put a coffee cup on the table. They'll be sitting across from me and I'll say, "You're seeing it from one perspective. I'm seeing it from a different perspective."" Additionally, it was pointed out that "implicit biases are broken up when you have a diverse workforce." A diverse workforce was thought to possess the capabilities of learning and understanding and essential to normalizing differences and providing opportunities not previously offered, as normalization "can't happen unless the thing is there." "The value of it [diversity, equity, and inclusion] is we're never gonna get people to stop fearing something that they don't really have experience with."

Perhaps noted as the most pervasive value of a diverse fire service, the psychological safety and mental wellbeing of fire department personnel was consistently repeated across workgroups. "It's just fundamentally about how we treat each other" as "almost all of our members struggle at some point in their career with people treating them poorly." Seen as a way to open the door for a successful career, psychological safety and mental wellbeing was connected to buy in at the individual level because with it, people "want to give their very best to the organization because they know they're part of it, and they know they're gonna make a difference." More broadly, the benefit of a diverse and inclusive fire service "trickles down, and it seeps down into everything that we do with our families and our friends and our society... It's not just creating the diverse and inclusive environment within our own workspace, but it does branch out further than just what's in our space at work."

In addition to fostering a sense of humanity in and around the fire department, the concept of belonging and inclusion within the overall department culture and the individual crews had tangible outcomes. For example, working as a team is deeply imbedded in the fire service and it was noted that trusting each other is a cornerstone of team success. Inclusiveness and belonging were directly tied to trust because "if you don't trust each other, if you don't feel like you belong, if you don't feel like you've had every opportunity to succeed, if you don't feel valued, you don't feel supported, you're unlikely to function well as a team."

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The ability of an individual to function was also mentioned in both physical and mental capacities. For example, while uniform policies may seem simple, dissection highlighted their impact on the bigger picture because "...if my uniform is uncomfortable...that impacts my ability to function at my highest performance at work." Meanwhile, inclusion "help prevents isolation for our members," which directly affects work function because "you're not working to your potential, 'cause you're thinking people are just always looking at you."

The discussion of policies also brought up concerns of physical safety, another benefit of a diverse and inclusive fire service. Similar to uniform policies, while grooming policies may seem one-dimensional upon first glance, dated and exclusionary policies directly impacted physical safety and health. For example, until recently, women were directed to wear buns while on duty, the height of which can impair the function of the facemask webbing and adverse impact how the fire helmet sits on the head. Additionally, the tension of the hair chronically being pulled back may lead to migraine headaches, which could result in the increased use of sick days.


Maternity and paternity policies were another example of physical safety being adversely impacted from an exclusionary fire service. Many fire departments do not have clear pregnancy, lactation, or return to work policies which can substantially impact the health of the mother and child. While a full discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this report, the safety concerns of firefighting while pregnant due to a lack of guidance or support were mentioned in the workgroups.

The discussions of policies including the grooming and pregnancy policies highlighted an unintended benefit of inclusivity, which was the positive impact felt by the majority group of the fire service. For example, men have taken advantage of reformed grooming policies in the name of self-expression and have also benefited from gender-less parental leave associated with the birth or adoption of a child, policies formally focused on maternity leave. In general, the broader reach of an inclusive fire service is "...important to frame it for equal access and opportunity for everyone. That looks like not only underrepresented groups, but something like...paternity leave. You're both parents." These examples emphasize how a diverse and inclusive fire service benefit everyone, not just underrepresented groups, a benefit that was also discussed at length by workgroups in terms of the community around the fire department.

Benefits External to the Fire Department

Service to community was repeatedly noted as a benefit of a diverse and inclusive fire service, a benefit that took many forms. To begin with and related to the overall wellbeing of firefighters, the quality of service offered to the community was noted as a byproduct. For example, "if we have firefighters that are not in a healthy state, they're gonna treat their patients badly." This suggests a positive relationship between the health of the firefighters and the quality of customer service, although it may be bidirectional. One participant noted diverse fire crews experienced lower rates of tension, and aggression than homogenous crews as the diversity brings a wider variety of knowledge to each call. A crew with varied perspectives allows for the community to better communicate their needs and for the crew to provide more culturally competent service.





More broadly, however, was the dedication and responsibility the fire department has to its surrounding community. Simply put, “our highest responsibility is to come and not judge, is to come and help solve the problem, is to come and be compassionate. It’s why it’s so important for us to be diverse and inclusive and equal amongst who we are.” The ever-changing demographics of communities require a dynamic mindset and fire service work force, leveraged to bridge gaps of understanding and knowledge because “if our diversity is present within our department, then you may have someone that understands what not to do and can educate the rest of us.”

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The workgroups noted several ways community service was impacted by a diverse and inclusive fire service. First, diversity builds rapport “because they looked like them or they sounded like them or they acted like them, it changed the dynamic of the call.” Which led to the second benefit, improving dynamics of the call. While the safety of the crew was previously noted, a diverse fire crew “made calls move in what would have been a different way or a different time, smoother and normal... where it wasn’t a struggle.” A third benefit was improving relationships with the community as diversity and inclusion can build “trust within the communities, whether that’s the churches and faith leaders, different cultural groups, affinity groups.” A key component to the third benefit was the noted fourth benefit, language. While the obvious benefit of language included being multilingual, within group communication was also noted. Representation was important “because they’re speaking the same language where I can’t. I’ve been trained, but it’s still not the same as a woman talking to a woman or an African American talking to an African American.”

A second benefit external to the fire department was a wider pool of recruitment candidates. Becoming a more inclusive fire service means **broadening recruitment opportunities**, a crucial component at this time in the fire service. Both career and volunteer departments are struggling to get “enough people to apply for jobs anymore.” This is especially hard in volunteer departments where “the number of volunteers in the country has declined the last 30 years now and continues to decline.” Being an inclusive and diverse department opens the door for new recruits as well as existing firefighters to move to better work environments. As one department noted, despite not fighting a lot of fire in the region “they came to us because we had people who looked like them. They came to us because we offered work-life balance. They came to us because we offered a place where they weren’t going to have to be the one to pioneer in that station, in that division, in that district.” Simply put diversifying the recruit pool is critical because “we have to evolve or we’re going to die.”

Tactical Advantages

A tertiary benefit to a diverse and inclusive fire service were several tactical advantages the fire service could experience as a profession, such as **economic value**. To begin with, younger firefighters may select departments based on the health of the work environment, “they are going to make decisions on where to work based on how I’m treated.” These individuals seem to require a different level of respect from their superiors than previous generations as Officers simply cannot “be an asshole to them.” Therefore, increasing retention of existing firefighters can save a department money in constant recruitment, hiring, and training practices.

Additionally, for departments whose budgets are impacted by EMS services, increased diversity could impact the ability to transport medical calls successfully. Improved community relations previously discussed could play an essential role when fire districts ask for bonds or tax increases, providing a long-term benefit of diversity.



A diverse workforce also means a diverse skill set among employees that has many benefits. Pertaining to a broader variety of perspectives, one participant noted “It has been proven through research that it is a competitive advantage when you have different perspectives that can look at a problem.” Problem solving innovation and increased cultural competence not only save a department money, it allows a fire department to be at the forefront of field trends and community needs. Departments can leverage the skillsets of firefighters including those with previous careers such as teachers, mechanics, accountants, and writers. This is seen as a double benefit since “the amount of money it saves in addition to the level of service it allows us to provide is remarkable. That’s another strength of diversity.”

Summary of the Value of a Diverse and Inclusive Fire Service

- Psychological safety and wellbeing can create stronger teams and improve both individual and crew function.
- Increased physical health and safety with better policies and healthier firefighters
- Broader positive impacts beyond minority and underrepresented groups.
- Increased quality of service to the community by building rapport, improving call dynamics and relationships with community, and increased language and communication skills.
- Broadens recruitment opportunities for new recruits and existing firefighters.
- Added economic value by departments saving money through retention and increasing budgets through community relationships.
- Broadens skill sets of employees to be leveraged by department.

Recruitment and Selection: What are the Entry Barriers for Minority Groups?

Diversifying the recruitment of potential firefighters is essential in moving the field forward in an inclusive manner. Despite this identification, departments still struggle with drawing in a more diverse pool of candidates during testing processes. In order to understand how to progress, participants discussed entry barriers for underrepresented groups. These barriers are organized into three major groups: the current fire service culture, public relations issues, and other.

Three Key Takeaways:

- The current fire service culture is a barrier for entry due to negative experiences and hiring practices that inhibit recruitment of unrepresented groups.
- A lack of widely dispersed and accurate marketing materials about the job of a firefighter limit the pool of candidates.
- Life-work balance and priorities differ based on the generation which may lead to decreased interest in the fire service.

Current Fire Service Culture

A prominent potential barrier for underrepresented groups entering the fire service was the current fire service culture. While that was discussed at length in the previous report, it is still important to touch on the impact of the current culture on recruitment efforts. To begin with, the acceptance of inappropriate behavior was a noted barrier of entry, along with a lack of allyship. These barriers are both evident in one participant's story of a noose in the station near their stuff. While there may have only been one person engaging in that inappropriate behavior, other participants quickly noted the intended recipient was not "the only person that saw that. Why did it get to the point for you to see it if four other people had seen it first?" The notion of others witnessing inappropriate behavior but not speaking up for any reason, including because "we think what happens in the day room is okay" leads to an exclusive environment for firefighters.

Additionally, the strength of tradition and the lack of accountability were noted. Traditions associated with culture are seen in the academy since "so many instructors want to do what they've always done," as well as integrating new firefighters into crews as "part of the onboarding...or seeing what you're made of." Behaviors associated with tradition and the current culture are repeatedly afforded a lack of accountability. Participants spoke of creating change and new expectations of behavior, although some expressed frustration about a lack of accountability.

Finally, hiring practices were named as a barrier of entry, including the recruitment concern of likeness recruiting likeness. Succinctly put, "a lot of recruitment's done informally. Basically, it's by word of mouth, which tends to make everybody look alike, because you tend to look like your friends." This informal method of recruitment is especially troubling when people from underrepresented groups do not have positive experiences inside the fire station. Sharing "that's not such a great place to work, or if you have to work with this group, it's just awful—that can make an impact on whether or not they're interested," leading to a difficulty of recruiting from underrepresented groups. Likeness recruiting likeness not only impacts who is being recruited, it also "leads to a mindset, too...that conveys the sense that only people who look like us are going to be welcome."

Current hiring practices posed several challenges for entry including financial barriers, physical fitness barriers, and other resource barriers. Financial barriers range depending on the department and municipality. Some departments require pre-certification, meaning individuals must invest to put themselves through fire academies and EMS licensure, some programs costing several thousand dollars. Other departments "actually charge to come take the test". Charges associated with testing may include the written test, the CPAT, medical testing, and polygraphs. These costs accumulate quickly for an individual without guarantee of employment.

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The CPAT has long been discussed as a **physical fitness barrier** to the field. While the test was developed to ensure a level of physical ability to complete fire related tasks, the validating methods have inadvertently created barriers for specific groups. Additionally, the specificity of the skills associated with the test favor individuals who have a background working with tools or previous firefighting experience. A physical test may be necessary, but as one participant explained, the test favored groups who had access or experience. "I didn't have the opportunity, and many others that look like me didn't have the opportunity to sit in a class to learn about agility tests, and how to do it properly so we did come out on top." On the other side, a few participants noted candidates "are showing up wildly out of shape," as "they are just physically not ready for this." This highlights the "delicate line" of a developing a physical fitness test "that does not unduly exclude people, yet provides us with the candidates that are capable of performance."

Other resource barriers faced by potential candidates include time, transportation, and citizenship. The hiring process at many departments require "your ability to be there for such a long drawn-out multistep process."

This time commitment requires a flexibility in scheduling to ensure attendance at all components, which may require taking time off of work (resulting in loss of pay), securing childcare (resulting in an additional cost), and/or finding reliable transportation. Tedious testing requirements really hinder an individual's ability to apply, especially "if you've got somebody's who's working two jobs to stay afloat, or having the time to enter the process and just make the aptitude test, typically when we do it during the week, is a challenge as well."

One participant noted the lack of transparency made it difficult for non-citizens to understand if they are eligible to apply. "I get asked a lot by refugees, "Oh, I'd love to apply. Do I have to be a citizen?" I haven't even got a clear-cut answer for that question." This led to the discussion around the requirement to read and write English well enough to pass the written test and submit all necessary paperwork. Requiring the answer to the question "do they feel competent in speaking English enough to navigate this process?" is an inherent barrier for some applicants.

Tedious testing requirements really hinder an individual's ability to apply

Public Relations Issues

Broader than the current culture of the fire service were barriers that could be considered public relations issues. These barriers spoke to the bigger picture of the role of firefighters in communities and the messages sent and received between the fire service and the public. The broadest barrier are the social messages people from underrepresented groups receive regarding employment opportunities. Women often receive messages surrounding their ability to be a firefighter: "you are a girl, why would you do that?... Why are you gonna go do those things?... There's no way. Like, you can't do it." Recognizing the messages women and young girls receive is important, although "you can't change all of society's opinions on whether a woman should do this type of work." Additionally, firefighting may not be viewed as a professional status, not aligning with the desire for education. Some parents "don't see their daughters, and even their sons...immersed in that kind of community, especially volunteerism...They want them to go to college."

Along a similar vein is the misrepresentation of the job. While those within the fire service understand what the modern firefighter is tasked with accomplishing, much of the public still believes fire suppression is the sole focus. Due to the fact that "our job descriptions don't accurately match what we're doing today", many young candidates are not adequately prepared. The misrepresentation also negatively impacts those who feel they need to look a specific way (e.g big and muscular) to do the job. Specifically, recent TV shows or popular social media accounts may be doing a disservice since "they all think we're like Chicago Fire, and we don't help ourself [sic], because when we put together that Facebook ad, or something out there...they're in turnout gear, and there's pallets burning behind them...fighting fires." "We sell the sizzle, not the steak. People cutting up cars and jumping off the side of buildings on rappel teams. Then people come in. It's like, 'This isn't what the flyer said.'"

Poor marketing of the job was another barrier. Often times, communities may not even know fire departments are hiring, forcing the field to ask “Do they even know that we’re hiring? How are we communicating that we’re hiring? Is it just on social media?” Additionally, “a lot of people don’t know what it takes to be a firefighter,” with one participant going as far as to say “general world doesn’t have a clue. They don’t know what we do.” The lack of general understanding may limit the candidate pool to those who know a firefighter who can provide an accurate picture of the job. Likewise, the process of how to apply may be unknown, especially for an age group ripe with recruitment possibilities. “If you go to a high school, and you ask the career counselor, how do I get on the fire department? Chances are they’re going to say they don’t know, unless they happen to know somebody.”

Other Barriers

Several other barriers to the fire service were noted by participants. The shift structure of the fire service, for example, can be a barrier for single parents. Finding childcare for long shifts (up to 48 hours) presents an extreme challenge, especially if they do not have family locally. This may steer people away from the field or force them to leave prematurely. One participant shared of a department that was hiring women, but not retaining them, “They were hiring ‘em. They were getting through the academy. They were functional firefighters and doing a great job, and they were losing them because the shift schedule was a disaster.” Another participant shared her experience of leaving the field early due to scheduling issues, “As a single mom—that’s why I don’t fight fire anymore...I just couldn’t fight fire anymore ‘cause it was logistically impossible.” Simply put, “our shift schedule does not support having a family.”

Varying values based on generational differences was another barrier discussed. Participants noted younger generations are more cognizant of a life-work balance as one asked their oldest “You ever consider the fire department?” He was like, “No.” We’re like, “Why?” “You guys are always on the phone. You’re always working.” The traditional dedication to the job both in the career and volunteer service may steer young people away from firefighting due to the “perception of, I don’t want to work all the time. I want my off time.”

Additionally, younger individuals place a higher premium on mental health and a healthy work environment. This new standard result in attrition, beginning at the academy level. “...If I hired them, and we use the ...28-week academy that we send our folks to before they actually come to us, would leave because of how they’re treated.” “The generations right now don’t want a drill instructor,” which means departments must find “a way to build a firefighter that doesn’t involve tearing them down first.” These young firefighters may push back on the traditional role of the young firefighter, challenging the notion of “I had to go through this, you do too.” This generation understands there are job options, so “if you’re gonna treat me poorly and not explain and give me a good, valid reason why you’re going to treat me this way, just because you did it, doesn’t mean I have to do it.”

“... our shift schedule does not support having a family.”

Summary of Fire Service Entry Barriers

- Acceptance of inappropriate behavior is an entry barrier as individuals share stories of their negative experience.
- Informal recruitment of friends and family leads to likeness recruiting likeness.
- Negative experiences of underrepresented populations may dissuade others from joining the fire service.
- Underrepresented groups are often not featured in images associated with the stereotypical firefighter.
- Media and social media misrepresent the job of the modern firefighter which features more EMS calls than fire.
- Poor marketing keeps the community in the dark about when and how to apply for the fire service.
- 24-48 hour shifts schedules limit the ability of a single parent to become a firefighter due to challenges associated with childcare.
- Younger generations place a higher priority on life-work balance, not wanting to work or be on-call all the time.
- Awareness around mental health and the work environment is causing young people to reconsider the fire service due to toxic work environments.

Recruitment and Selection: What has Worked to Overcome Barriers?

"... several states offer tax incentives for volunteer firefighters..."

The final session was centered on solutions to the identified barriers regarding recruitment and selection. Participants representing several departments across the nation had suggestions for strengthening and diversifying their recruitment efforts that ranged in cost and effort. These suggestions can be grouped into creative measures, collaborations with outside organizations, and raising the fire department profile.

Three Key Takeaways:

- Thinking outside the box is key for recruitment and selection. Get creative in tactics to make the application process more desirable and accessible.
- Working with organizations in the community is essential to create relationships that lead to better recruitment and stronger bonds for service.
- Social media and active recruitment can increase the visibility of the fire department, raising its profile in the community.

Creative Measures

Creative solutions for recruitment challenges were non-traditional approaches to recruitment. For example, several departments discussed lateral transfers or hires, which allow departments to recruit existing firefighters. This is being seen "across the country in a lot of areas...that we've never seen before." These veteran firefighters not only bring job experience and save the department money during the onboarding process, they offer "the stability piece, they usually got a little more life lived under them and they're ready to settle into a benefit structure."

Additionally, some departments are leveraging non-payroll benefits or incentives, such as signing bonuses, payments for passing physical exams, or incentives for banking sick time. Long term retention efforts include offering healthcare insurance for all retirees and paid paternity leave. Finally, several states offer tax incentives for volunteer firefighters. For example, "Virginia has a mortgage relief program.... Gettysburg, if you're a volunteer firefighter, you meet a certain threshold, you don't have to pay property tax. Maryland is even more generous...if you meet a certain threshold you can take \$7000 tax credit off of your state income tax... Baltimore provides \$2,500 property tax credit every year if you work for the fire department and live in the city."

Many departments spoke of experimenting with single role positions, specifically to fill EMS positions. Departments have experienced many benefits of the single role position as "it opens up a larger audience for people that don't want anything to do with firefighting but wanna be an EMS. Also, that addresses some of the shift issues, where they put 'em, maybe, on a peak activity unit for eight hours a day." Additionally, one participant noted "really, it's kind of like a recruitment tool because when they test for fire, we already know their work ethic." Volunteer departments have also utilized single role positions, leveraging skill sets of individuals to fill specialized roles. By "recruiting non-operational members of community... People who just don't want that type of work, people with disabilities, all sorts of people we're not reaching now in the community who are certainly interested in performing some community service...We offer them opportunities to do any variety of things, from running the canteen, to fire scenes, to helping us with Pub Ed, and helping us with smoke detector campaigns." In this context, the concept breeds inclusivity as "it really broadens the reach of the Fire service to those that are not interested or not physically able perform an operational role."

"Volunteer departments have also utilized single role positions, leveraging skill sets of individuals to fill specialized roles."

Finally, accessible hiring practices were discussed at length. One example of an accessible hiring practice was hiring civilians without any certification, alleviating the financial burden on the candidate. Another department discussed removing educational requirements: "You have to have 60 post high school credits in order to apply. I took that out because it's a barrier. Because I don't need you to go to school. We can teach report writing or technical report writing once you get on the job."

In addition to removing pre-requisites, many departments tried to make the application process more inclusive and accessible. This included moving the application online to alleviate unnecessary travel and schedule disruptions. Going online had benefits: "To kind of go online it did increase the number of people and the variety of people that were coming in." Another department's HR became proactive in following up with people who started the application process which circumvented a technical barrier because "sometimes it [email communication] winds up in junk mail. We've lost good candidates because when the system sends it out depending on what your email provider is, it might drop that email to the junk file." Other accessible solutions included having open houses at fire stations and "give 'em help filling out applications. Give 'em access to technology to fill out applications because they don't all have computers at home." While in New Hampshire, "they have certain days of the month at the academy where they just have people just come and try it [the CPAT] out. This is the test, we'll have people there to explained it to you, you can try all the different skills and we'll tell you what to do to get ready for it. There's no secret, this is what it is." Many departments had open acceptance of applications, simply rolling applicants into the next pool regardless of when they submitted. More extreme versions of accessibility include modifying the written test, removing the CPAT requirement, and randomizing the ranking list.

Finally, creative active recruitment techniques were shared across participants. For example, firefighters at one department have a "personalized a card for the Fire Department with our badge, our emblem on there, and on the backside it takes them directly to the civil service website where they have to take the test." This allows all members to be actively involved in recruitment when they're out in public. Additionally, a volunteer department created at Fire Court, which allows them to recruit non-operational members of the community for auxiliary support roles or public education projects.

Collaboration with Outside Organizations

Working with other organizations in the community was discussed by the majority of participants as they recognized the value of collaboration in many forms. Some departments are "at every event we can be at, even if it's a block party and it's always a recruiting event. That's what we try to do, turn it into a recruiting event." Additionally, "developing relationships in various groups in the community...and engage them to help you recruit is some of the experience I've had." The upside to the high level of visibility is that "even if the numbers aren't changing as fast, these relationships in the community are building." Finally, there was an acknowledgement of the value of allowing "people to get into the firehouse and see what's going on. As part of your recruitment process, open the doors and let them ask questions, and let them interact with the firefighters in their neighborhood." The notion really highlighted one participant's observation that "you don't need to recruit outside your own community. You have all the diversity you need. You just got to get out and build those relationships, and have those connections with all the groups that have the connections to the kind of people you want to bring in to your organization."

"More extreme versions of accessibility include modifying the written test, removing the CPAT requirement, and randomizing the ranking list."



Creating partnerships with affinity or religious organizations is key to not only learning more about other cultures, but to spark interest in working in the fire service. This can be done in a proactive manner by attending events since “all of these groups, and especially some of the more advocacy groups, have fundraisers, they have dinners, they have gala celebrations.” “Sometimes you really have to sit down and look at your community calendar to find out when the HRC Dinner is taking place, when the NAACP Freedom Fund Dinner.” Becoming involved provides essential insight as one participant noted “I didn't know until very recently many minority groups—they have their own radio channels and TV channels that they communicate to each other with, and it's usually on the internet or something...Reaching out to that and having that understanding that they have media that isn't the traditional media that we are used to, and the community knows that.” One participant noted their department works “closely with the African American churches...with the pastors to go into those churches and actually do recruiting in the churches as well.” It may be key, however, “to take that a step further, develop a relationship with the group outside of your recruitment time. Truly have a relationship with them. Your community youth organizations, the boys' and girls' clubs and the scouts.”

Additional value can come from working with fire service affinity groups. Many groups have members across the nation that can assist with making connections, creating relationships, and address barriers. The National Fire Academy regularly reaches out “directly to all the affinity groups, so Black Chief Officers, Black Professional Firefighters, Native American Fire Chiefs, Asian American Firefighters, and now we've added — there's Fire EMS Pride Alliance.” Although seemingly counterintuitive, working with other fire departments was also mentioned. Working on national recruiting campaigns can highlight work done by departments in different regions and “sometimes it's easier to get your message across in numbers.” Partnering with local departments may drive down costs associated with recruiting while pooling resources since tests can be proctored at a regional level.

Departments who have recruited a diverse pool of applicants work with additional outside resources. One resource might be the city or county's HR team, especially if the application process is traditionally automated. “As applicants come in, they vet 'em initially, but then they free 'em up so we can look at 'em too. It's one of the things that I've always insisted on, is that we have the opportunity to review 'em as well to catch those little glitches that occur for whatever reason.” Another opportunity is “working with a high school and doing a fire EMT academy through that. That way they're coming out kinda prepared.”

Other educational oriented partnerships may be with local community colleges or collegiate athletic teams to recruit applicants who may be primed to join a team driven, physical work environment.



This specifically can be rolled into a creative suggestion used by another department that hosts a “a national signing day. When the guys came in, we had their families... We called 'em up, "Ladies and gentlemen, come to the stage—"They see that, they were so excited, took their pictures with their family and their signing their letter of intent.”

Finally, **the development of youth camps or programs** was highlighted as a way to recruit, a concept becoming more popular. While these camps may not be used to recruit applicants right away, they are a great way to introduce the public safety professions as a viable career to young adults. These include “fire service sponsored youth programs, junior cadet firefighter explorers, fire department specific youth programs...youth camps, girls camps; high school programs for recruitment...citizens academies, apprenticeship programs”. Some camps are designed for girls and young women specifically, as a way to provide access to

non-traditional careers. It also allows the fire department to educate the public about their role in the community. One participant shared the second year of their program has brought growth: “Last year we had 16, this year we had 32. Anyhow, there's so many pieces of it, but the most important pieces of it, is give them a well-rounded understanding of what the fire department does, which is not only fighting fires.”



Raising the Profile of the Fire Department

In general, participants spoke of raising the profile of the fire department by increasing visibility. “One of the biggest things that we did that changed the faces of our department was create our fire station as a community destination, not just a community fixture. Not just a place that people drive by, but our fire station is a place where people meet, where people gather. We have really nice picnic benches and that kind of stuff outside where people can come and have lunch together or study together or have conversations. Right beside them is the crews working on the firetruck, raising the ladder, doing training on the front ramp. There's an opportunity for interaction.” The return on investment was better relationships with the community, greater dedication from the firefighters, and opportunities for recruitment. It was noted, however, raising the profile took effort and proactiveness. “It was because we were intentional about when we go, because they may not come into the stations. You can open the stations up, but people may not come, but I know where they're gonna be. They're gonna be at the basketball court, they're gonna be able to after practice. We go out there and we play and catch with them, again, not all up in uniform, but just take your stuff off, get out there and play with 'em.”

Obviously, utilizing social media was a common way to increase visibility. Understanding the time requirement necessary to create a strong presence, one department noted “I have someone assigned just to social media to make sure that we're constantly showing what we do in our city, in our department. We're attractive to people and they wanna be a part of our team.” Social media can also go hand-in-hand with accessibility as one department has a “recruiting account and they'll post updates...just a reminder that CPAT practice is blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. They'll tell them, if you applied, here's this QR code, follow our social media and it's another way to stay in the loop about things.” Social media can also educate the public about the full extent of the fire departments services and resources as non-fire calls can be highlighted and public education incentives related to EMS can be launched. “I think social media is such a powerful tool with those younger generations, and they're just constantly on their phone looking at things, and so show them not just fires.”

Similarly tied to highlighting the job on social media was the challenge of projecting realistic job expectations. “It's making sure that people are clear of what the expectations of their everyday duties are 'cause it is not Chicago Fire,” is not only important for recruitment but also for retention and buy in of recent hires “so that when they come in, they don't feel duped, they don't feel like they've been lied to.” Moving against the media projections of the job can be difficult as departments are telling recruits “you're not gonna carry a baby out of a burning house once a week. Next month, you're not gonna be driving a million-dollar ladder truck... You're gonna expect to help clean the station.” Meanwhile, another participant pointed out “you look at Firehouse or any of the other — and I'm not picking on Firehouse, but it's all of them. What's the image that they're putting out for the fire service? Fire porn.” It may be worthy of career departments to take a page out of the volunteer service as it was noted that the National Volunteer Fire Council has a great resource, “a 32-page booklet, and it talks about here's what we're gonna expect from you, here's what your family can expect. You're gonna have to deal with some of the things that you're—the odd hours you're gonna have, calls made, and some of the traumatic things you may face, how your family is going to deal with some of those things.”

A final suggestion for raising the profile of the fire department was leveraging new recruits and existing firefighters. “Have a recruit that graduated go back to where they came from and be recruiters for us, as a part of their rookie requirements, so to speak...they are going to have the best ability to connect, communicate and share their experience.” Additionally, talking to the newest hires can provide insight, “what brought you here, why are you staying, what's working and what are we doing to meet your needs?” Veteran firefighters can be the best brand ambassadors for the department because “there's no better advertisement for your department than people that are happy, that feel that they're appreciated, and will then bring in others to join the organization.”

Summary of Overcoming Barriers:

- Lateral transfers or hires allow departments to actively recruit veteran firefighters for vacancies.
- Single EMS positions allow for a more diverse hiring pool as well as a provide an on-ramp hiring process for fire positions.
- Reducing hiring pre-requisites make the process more accessible.
- Moving to online applications, being proactive in following up with applicants, and having CPAT training sessions also increase the accessibility of applying for the fire service.
- Develop relationships with community organizations to not only learn about new cultures but to provide opportunities for recruitment.
- Partner with other city departments or resources to ensure accessibility of the application process.
- Working with regional fire departments may lead to lower costs and better resources.
- Youth camps can expose young teens and adults to the fire service as a career option.
- Increasing visibility can raise the profile of the fire department not only as a community resource, but also as a career option.
- Social media can be used to actively recruit people as well as provide clarity about the role and job of a firefighter.
- Projecting realistic job expectations an ensure an honest and genuine recruitment process.
- New hires and veterans are the best ambassadors for the fire department for recruiting applicants.

Concluding Remarks

This is part two of a two-part report series. This report highlights findings from a series of workgroups dedicated to discussing the value of a diverse and inclusive fire service; identifying the barriers for recruitment and selection; and proven practices for recruitment and selection. The first report also included the discussion of the value of a diverse and inclusive fire service, as well as identifying barriers to DEI related progression; and proven practices to address barriers and challenges. Each report may be read individually based on the department's current need and focus: current internal culture or recruitment and selection. Taken together they provide a current view of the fire service in regards to its relationship with DEI and a push for a more diverse and inclusive fire service.



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The Johnson Foundation at Wingspread convenes the right people on timely and compelling topics and empowers them to find innovative solutions with sustained impact. Our meetings among leaders and experts are small and intimate: the issues they address are big and important. Our neutrality creates a unique oasis of trust so the diversity of perspectives around the table are heard and respected. World-class facilitation inspires provocative, yet collaborative, dialogue. Interesting things begin to happen. A common vision emerges.



A new path is discovered. Alliances are built. Transformational change takes root.

The Foundation has been a catalyst for lasting change in a variety of areas for more than 50 years. We played an instrumental role in conceiving the National Endowment for the Arts, National Public Radio, and the International Criminal Court. Today, the Foundation is directing its energy and expertise on catalyzing greater coordination and collaboration among leaders and stakeholders to enhance our quality of life, drive economic vitality and ensure a stronger, better future for all of our communities within the Greater Racine region and beyond. We know problems can only be solved when diverse partners share their ideas, concerns and commitments in a way that leads to real understanding and positive change. We strive to be the catalyst for that change.

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