



ABINGTON TOWNSHIP FIRE DEPARTMENT

A Guide for New Members and Their Families: What to Expect



Introduction

The decision to be a volunteer firefighter is something that will touch the volunteer and his or her entire family, in some ways you may expect and in other ways you may not. Volunteer firefighting goes beyond the average volunteer work. It becomes a lifestyle.

Being a volunteer firefighter means:

- Serving at a moment's notice, not when it's scheduled and convenient
- Spending extra hours training
- Putting oneself in dangerous situations to help those in need
- Making a contribution to the community

"When someone volunteers, his or her entire family makes a big commitment to the community," said Edge Hill Firefighter Dave Corrigan. "Emergencies don't happen on a schedule, and having a family that shares in and supports a volunteer's commitment allows that volunteer to focus fully on the job at hand."

Families must also sacrifice time together so the volunteer can attend drills and training sessions, Corrigan added. "Volunteers need to learn new skills and practice emergency responses to both help others and keep themselves safe," he said.

The Basics of the Volunteer Firefighter Life

Volunteer firefighters fill a much-needed role in their communities, protecting the lives and property of many people. A volunteer can expect to:

- Attend weekly and/or monthly meetings and training sessions
- Perform physically demanding work
- Spend extended periods of time outside in inclement weather
- Be called out at any time of the day or night

Pager

Volunteers may carry a pager or radio or receive phone text alerts that tell them when there is an emergency. This alert can go off at any hour of any day, on any day of the week, in any weather condition.

Gear

You cannot fight fire in street clothes. Special fire-fighting gear will be issued to protect the volunteer.

Time Commitment

Your calendar will now contain periodic meetings and training events that the volunteer has to attend with the fire department. Volunteers may even stop by the department at times when they are not specifically needed just to visit with their fellow firefighters. Eventually volunteers may take on additional roles, such as becoming an officer with the department, which require even more responsibilities and meetings.

Physical Demands

Returning from a fire, accident scene, or even department training is not like returning from a trip to volunteer at the library. Fighting fires and responding to emergencies are physically exhausting activities. Wearing heavy gear and dragging water lines while working in an emergency mode requires great physical exertion.

Benefits

One of the most amazing benefits of the volunteer fire service is gaining an extended family. Being around a group of people who understand the call of the fire and emergency services can be helpful, rewarding, and in many cases, has created a foundation for lifelong friendships.



The “New Normal” of a Volunteer Fire Family

It is exciting to know that you or your family member is willing to serve and care for your community in times of need. A great deal of pride comes with that privilege. Like any other group, club, or hobby, volunteer firefighting requires time in order to participate. However, spontaneously running out the door to a structure fire is different than planning to leave the house on a Tuesday evening for a meeting. In many cases, the time required is unplanned and immediate. Just when you sit down to dinner... there goes that pager or alarm. Due to the nature of the work, it can also generate worry and concern, both for the volunteer and his or her family.

Interruptions by the Pager

When you have a family member who volunteers with a fire department, you also inherit a new tagalong in your family—a pager. This is often the primary means by which a volunteer first responder is notified of a call. Learn to associate the pager with the fact that someone is in immediate need.

When volunteer firefighters get a call, they must move quickly. There is really only time for a brief exchange before they jump into their vehicle and are on the way to the firehouse. It is important not to take this personally.

When Family Doesn't Know the Volunteer Received a Call

There may be occasions when your volunteer first responder receives a call when he or she is not with you. Perhaps he or she is at work or on his or her way home or out at the store and the pager goes off. Today with text messaging being so quick and convenient, some volunteers will send a short text message to let their family know they are going to respond.

Managing Your Worry and Fear

There is no doubt family members of volunteer firefighters are entitled to a little worry. Your loved one has volunteered to do some of the most dangerous tasks in your community.

It is normal to experience worry and fear, but these concerns should not paralyze you or disrupt your lifestyle. Here are some simple techniques to help you manage your anxieties:

- Talk to your volunteer about your concerns.

- Trust in the training he or she has received AND in his or her ability.
- Focus on the facts.
- Have a network of friends or family members whom you can call if you get anxious when your volunteer is at a scene.

Agreeing on Schedules and Planning

Firefighting and emergency response can become a serious passion for some people. Passions tend to weave into every aspect of one's life. Being able to talk openly about schedules and plans and to balance volunteer time with family needs can minimize the impact.

Balance your family schedule with the fire department activities, planned and unplanned.

Understanding the Importance of Training

It can almost be easier to accept that a call for someone in need can come in at any time, any hour, any day, than to give up another weekend of family time because your volunteer firefighter has a training to attend. However, training is exactly what you want volunteers to do so that they know how to keep themselves, fellow first responders, and the community safe during an emergency.

Easing the Impact on Children

Firefighting can be such an exciting event for kids. On the other hand, sometimes it seems that Murphy's Law comes into play for the volunteer first responder. On the night of the big game or that dance recital, the pager sounds and mom, dad, grandma, or grandpa responds, missing the event.

It helps to involve children in the volunteer life. Here are some ideas:

- Take them on a tour of the station and trucks.
- Show them the pagers and explain what happens when someone calls 911 in an emergency.
- Assure them that their parent is safe while serving, thanks to the training they have received and the equipment they use.
- Have a routine “goodbye” for when a call comes in and the volunteer must respond.





Being a Part of Your New Fire Department Family

While not every spouse or child of a firefighter chooses to get involved, there are plenty of activities and events for families that can bring everyone together at the firehouse. There are also plenty of volunteer opportunities for those who want to help without literally fighting fires, from helping around the station to organizing community activities.

While there are many challenges in the volunteer firefighting world, there can also be many rewards for both volunteers and their families. One of them is being a part of a new community that can also feel like family.



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