

2018

# Improving Recruitment and Retention of Volunteer Firefighters

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Jason Decremer

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Walden University  
2018

Abstract

Improving Recruitment and Retention of Volunteer Firefighters

by

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MA, University of Phoenix, 2006

BA, State University of New York, 1998

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

May 2018

## Abstract

The number of active volunteer firefighters has been steadily dropping in the state of Connecticut for several years. At the same time, the number of public service calls for fire departments has been on the rise. This problem impacts fire protection and municipalities that rely on volunteer fire departments. The purpose of this narrative study was to explore why volunteer firefighter numbers have been declining, the extent to which recruitment and retention programs are used in volunteer fire departments, and how these programs contribute to a fire department's ability to recruit members. Perry's public service motivation model provided the theoretical framework for the study. Research questions focused on improving recruitment and retention programs. Data were collected from interviews with 5 current chief officers and 5 former firefighters in Connecticut and from organizational documents in local fire departments. Open, axial, and selective coding were used to identify 5 themes: lack of awareness of state policy on recruitment and retention, lack of recruitment, public service motivation, retention, and time. A key theme emerging from this study were that participating fire departments have limited effective recruitment and retention programs. The positive social change implications stemming from this study include recommendations to fire department leadership to consider a unified recruitment and retention strategy. This determination provides a foundation for volunteer fire departments to make informed decisions on how to increase recruitment and retention in their respective communities.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Volunteer firefighters are the backbone of the fire service in the United States. These individuals dedicate a tremendous amount of time to serve and protect the community they live in without compensation. Volunteers are needed now more than ever before; however their numbers have been declining (Vinton, 2012). Fire calls occur during all hours of the day and night. Alert tones for assistance initiate responses during holidays and family functions. Volunteers jump into action by driving to the local fire station, putting on their firefighter gear, climbing aboard a fire apparatus, and responding swiftly and safely to the emergency scene. In many instances, they also work full-time jobs and tend to their families. The fire service is one of the most physically demanding jobs in the world (National Volunteer Fire Council, 2007). The commitment requires dedication and sacrifice from not only the firefighters, but also the families they leave at a moment's notice. In 2004, the United States Fire Administration (USFA) working with the NVFC revised the 1998 Retention and Recruitment in the Volunteer Fire Service report. This report provided a key source of data for this study.

The fire service has evolved to include calls for service that range from structure fires, vehicle fires and accidents, hazardous materials incidents, medical services, and technical rescue incidents such as high-angle or confined space rescues. In Minnesota, for example, service calls other than fire alarms increased 45.9% between 2002 and 2012, while during that same period the number of structure fire calls decreased (Cote, Hasskemp, Chevuru, & Verma, 2014). In Pennsylvania, Brazunas (2015) noted that service calls that are non-fire related increased each year between 2008 and 2013. This increased activity puts a strain on volunteer firefighters that has led to a decrease in their

ranks throughout the United States. Recruitment and retention in the volunteer fire service has been an ongoing concern for many years (Smith, 2014). Rural communities have gone through a tremendous change because of main streets being turned into corporate areas (Cote et al., 2014).

People who choose to volunteer in the fire service have the basic need for recognition, belonging, and satisfaction that comes from helping people and serving the community. Reaching out to departments across Litchfield County in Connecticut was the main data source used for this study. This qualitative study involved finding individuals who could provide access to the data. This study addressed the reasons why individuals that leave the volunteer fire service in Litchfield County, Connecticut. Findings may be used to develop a long-range plan to increase the number of volunteer firefighters, which will ensure swifter responses with adequate personnel to mitigate emergencies. Individuals who have left the volunteer fire service, for reasons other than retirement, were the most logical participants for this study. In addition to interviewing those participants I also gathered organizational data from local fire chiefs. The leaders of the volunteer fire departments in Connecticut have a responsibility to ensure their communities are protected by the proper number of members trained to provide a high level of service.

Chapter 1 includes a background of the volunteer fire service and the decline in participation. I also provided the problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions and theoretical framework. In addition, I will define key terms, and present the assumptions, scope, delimitations, and significance of the study.

## Background

Volunteer fire departments have a long and distinct tradition in the United States that in many cases passes on from generation to generation (NVFC, 2007). Vinton (2012) broadly defines *volunteering* as an activity in which individual gives up his or her time for the benefit of another individual, group, or community. The first volunteer fire station in North America opened in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1736 and was famously founded by Benjamin Franklin after a couple of devastating fires that tore through parts of the city. Mutual Fire Societies became social as well as protective associations, setting a pattern for organized volunteer firefighting groups, which would one day be the backbone of firefighting in the United States and would dominate it for a century and a half (Smith, 1978). Franklin urged the city to get better organized to fight fires. Shortly thereafter the city bought 400 fire buckets, 20 ladders and hooks and two additional engines (Long, 2007). Franklin was familiar with Boston's Mutual Fire Societies that were also known as Fire Clubs; however, they existed for the protection of their members, not the community at large (Collins, 1982). Franklin wrote about the dangers that out of control fires could cause to commercial and residential areas. Franklin observed a fire in London that occurred in 1666 and was concerned that Philadelphia could experience the same devastation (Long, 2007). In 1736, Franklin created a fire brigade called The Union Fire company with 30 volunteers (Collins, 1982). Many other communities and larger towns soon began to form their own volunteer fire brigades. The first volunteer firefighter in the United States was a man named Isaac Paschall (Collins, 1982). Volunteer fire departments in the colonies spread quickly. Before 1850, no city in the United States had fully paid, full-time firefighters, volunteer firefighters played and

continue to play an invaluable role in protecting lives and property (Long, 2007). Collins (1982) noted some of the famous early U.S. citizens who became volunteer firefighters: Sam Adams, James Buchanan, Aaron Burr, Alexander Hamilton, John Hancock, John Jay, Paul Revere, and George Washington. Cincinnati instituted the first paid department in 1853. New York followed in 1865 and Philadelphia in 1871 (Long, 2007). In 1818, the first female firefighter joined a New York volunteer company; her name was Molly Williams (Collins, 1982). Female firefighters have been serving in both volunteer and career fire departments steadily since Ms. Williams bravely joined nearly 200 years ago.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, volunteer fire departments in the United States had reached their highest level of membership. They were well organized and, for the most part, effective firefighting forces (Long, 2007). However, they were also excessively large, racked by dissension, and unwilling to adopt the new technology of the steam engine (Long, 2007). This resistance to change, well-publicized fights, and pressure from insurance companies and influential citizens led to the end of the volunteer system in large cities (Long, 2007). Politics, ethnic tension, greater fire risks, increasing population, and a decline in the quality of membership were also factors in the change from volunteer to professional firefighters (Collins, 1982). As larger cities and populations around these cities increased, the need for career fire departments became much more apparent. Fire departments needed to be staffed around the clock with personnel who could be on the road within a couple of minutes of receiving a call for service. The traditional volunteer firefighter was no longer an option for populated rural areas which gave rise to the career fire service. In rural and suburban areas, the volunteer fire service continues to provide an



invaluable service in protecting property and lives throughout the United States (Long, 2007).

The mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century are noted for being tough on the volunteer fire service. Dwindling numbers and more calls for assistance outside the scope of firefighting have proved challenging to maintain consistent participants (NVFC, 2014). The NVFC is a membership association representing the interests of the volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services. The NVFC serves as the voice of the volunteer in the national arena and provides tools, resources, programs, and advocacy for first responders across the United States (Ward, 2012). In 2007 the USFA noted that nearly 75% of the firefighters in the United States were volunteer (Smith, 2014). A challenge that faces volunteer fire departments is the constant process of recruiting and retaining firefighters (Stittleburg, 2013). The crisis of today is too few people joining the volunteer fire service (Carter, 2013). The most recent study conducted by the National Volunteer Fire Council showed that since 1984 the number of volunteer firefighters nationwide has dropped 15%; from 905,650 to 786,150 in 2013 (NVFC, 2014). Research indicated that although the number of volunteer firefighters is decreasing, fire department calls are increasing dramatically. That statement is confirmed by a statistical analysis of data collected by the NVFC. In 2000 the total number of fire calls for U.S. fire departments was 20,520,000 and in 2013 that number increased to 31,644,500 (NVFC, 2014). The increasing number of responses and the decreasing number of volunteer firefighters are alarming.

A study on the state of recruitment and retention in the volunteer fire service was released by the NVFC in 2007. This constituted the second edition of a study first completed in 1998. In the second study researchers could not determine for certain the

root cause for the decline in volunteer firefighters (NVFC, 2007). The main areas of concern continued to be recruitment and retention in the volunteer fire service, which formed the basis for the current study. Fire departments throughout the United States have recruitment and retention programs in place. As the NVFC (2007) reported, recruitment and retention continue to be a problem nationwide. Smith (2014) noted that volunteer fire departments that are able to retain their members have faster response times, have more firefighters responding to a call for assistance, and report fewer injuries. The goal for the volunteer fire service is to maintain a level of service that best serves the community being protected. It is important that citizens feel protected by their local fire department.

### **Problem Statement**

The State of Connecticut (2014) reported 22,225 volunteer firefighters in 2014, a 12% drop from the 24,892-total reported in 2009. There was gap in the literature regarding why volunteer numbers have decreased in Connecticut. This study addressed that gap to provide a better understanding of why individuals leave the volunteer fire service in Connecticut. This problem impacts fire protection and municipalities that rely on volunteer fire departments that provide fire and medical services. The proper number of qualified individuals to mitigate an emergency is critical in the volunteer fire service (Markley, 2014). The continued downward spiral in volunteer firefighter numbers could force municipalities to hire more career firefighters, creating an increased burden on Connecticut tax-payers. The budget shortfall for Connecticut is expected to be over \$500 million by the end of the 2016 fiscal year and over \$900 million by the end of the 2017 fiscal year (State of Connecticut, 2016). Fire departments can no longer count on a

reliable flow of community members to give their time and energy for long periods of service (NFVC, 2007). Volunteer firefighters are an essential component of the nation's fire service (Stittleburg, 2013). The decline in volunteer firefighter numbers constitutes a crisis that must be addressed (Hawkins, 2015).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of why people leave the volunteer fire service in Connecticut. Much of the research conducted for the review of literature indicated the declining numbers; however researchers could not identify the root cause(s) of these shrinking numbers. The current study examined the State of Connecticut's policy on recruitment and retention to determine whether volunteer fire departments follow this policy. I interviewed former volunteer firefighters and current chief officers in five Litchfield County, Connecticut fire departments using narrative inquiry, specifically oral histories to collect data. These reflections by interview participants were coded using a method of qualitative data analysis described by Corbin and Strauss (2014). One of the primary goals of this study was to determine why volunteer firefighter numbers are declining, which may create solutions for recruitment and retention programs helping to reverse this alarming downward trend. Laying the foundation for future research that can help solve this problem, may have a positive social change impact across the state of Connecticut.

The current policy on recruitment and retention in the Connecticut notes that all volunteer fire departments should have recruitment campaigns and procedures in place to ensure member retention (State of Connecticut, 2000). This policy also states that pools

of personnel should be identified and recruited for membership such as municipal employees and local private employers (State of Connecticut, 2000). The policy also indicates that volunteer fire departments need to establish incentive programs to retain members. The primary research question addressed whether the selected volunteer fire departments are following the Connecticut policy on recruitment and retention.

### **Research Questions**

In alignment with the research problem and purpose of the study, the following research question was posed: How can current volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention policies be improved in Connecticut to increase participation? Below are the interview questions used to collect data from participants.

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Former Firefighters**

1. Why did you become a member of the volunteer fire department in your community?
2. How many years did you serve in the volunteer fire department?
3. Was compassion to help others a factor that motivated you to join the fire department?
4. Any family legacy in the fire service?
5. Highest level of education?
6. What is your occupation?
7. During your time in the fire service what was your marital status?
8. Did you have children during your time in the fire service?
9. Were you recruited to join the fire department?
10. Did you know of any recruitment programs in your fire department for getting new members?

11. What were the contributing factors that caused you to leave the fire department?
12. Would you consider coming back to the fire department?
13. Were there any retention efforts in your former fire department?
14. Do you think your former fire department recruits and retains members sufficiently?

### **Chief Officers**

1. Why did you become a member of the volunteer fire department in your community?
2. Do you have a family legacy in the fire service?
3. How many years have you been in the fire service?
4. How long have you served as an officer?
5. How many of those years as a chief officer?
6. What is your occupation?
7. What is your marital status?
8. Do you have children?
9. Are you aware that the State of Connecticut has a policy for recruitment and retention for volunteer fire departments?
10. Where there any specific motivational factors that led you to join the fire service?
11. Are there any recruitment programs in place in your department?
12. Does your department have any formal or specific methods that are utilized to retain members?
13. Are your departments recruitment and retention efforts sufficient and how can they be improved?
14. How many current members do you have who are active?
15. Over the past decade, how has that number moved, increased, or decreased?

16. Does your town support the recruitment and retention efforts in your department?
17. Would you recruit a specific demographic from your community?
18. How would like to leave your position as a chief officer in terms of recruitment and retention?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Selecting the proper theoretical framework for a research study is an extremely important process. The framework and methodology selected will determine the exact course of the study and how data will be collected and evaluated. *Theoretical framework* is defined as an empirical theory of social and psychological processes that can be applied to understanding a phenomenon (Anafara, 2008). The framework selected for this research project was based on a study completed by Perry (1997) on public service motivation (PSM). Perry developed a model for studying PSM using the theoretical framework that motivation of individuals to serve stems from four main areas: policy making and politics, public interest or civic duty, compassion, and self-sacrifice (Perry, 1997). PSM originates from the beliefs and motives that are found within individuals who serve in the public domain (Perry, Hondeghem, & Wise, 2010). Perry concluded that an individual's PSM develops over time and incorporates a wide variety of experiences.

Since the original Perry model was introduced, researchers have contributed by changes in the model for more simplification using only one or two of the dimensions noted in the original model (Vandenabeele, 2008). Development of a shorter version of the Perry model has been undertaken for less elaborate set of items (Bakker, 2015). In revisiting the model two decades later, Perry noted that other factors besides PSM should be studied including situational factors and individual behaviors (Perry et al, 2010).

The current study included the qualitative inquiry method of narrative policy analysis. This method has four key elements: setting, characters, plot, and moral (Sabatier & Weible, 2014). The research problem for this study is the ongoing phenomena of dwindling numbers volunteer firefighter participation. The characters are the volunteer firefighters, the volunteer fire departments, chief officers, and the municipalities they serve. “As in any good story, there may be victims who are harmed, villains who do the harm, and heroes who provide a solution to the problem” (McBeth, Jones, & Shanahan, 2014, p. 96). The plot of the study took shape through the research and data collection process. Finally, the moral was the solution to the problem. The main reason I wanted to conduct this study was to develop a plot line of the story and come up with a solution to increase numbers of volunteer firefighters in Connecticut.

The framework within narrative policy that binds collecting narratives with attempting to determine the decrease of volunteer firefighters in Connecticut was social constructionist. Constructionists can acknowledge their success in changing the style by which research is conducted through a lens of narratives and stories (Sanchez, 2002). Social construction assumes that with engagement researchers are able to use narratives to socially construct meaning to consequences (Dodge, 2015). Constructing stories into detailed accounts provides an inside look of surroundings and happenings (McMahon & McGannon, 2016). Stories hold groups, organizations, and cultures together by creating a sense of history passing on vital information to a new generation.

Kaplan (1986) described how researchers can use a narrative structure because of the numerous possibilities it can generate. Stories are narratives that detail change over a period of time and are a more pervasive factor in daily lives and research (Kaplan, 1986).

Narratives provide descriptions and settings of everyday life that can be used to give advice about the future (Kaplan, 1986). One of the main foundations of Kaplan's paper was the analysis of stories and dilemmas. Policy conclusions and decisions based on the assessments of stories have been shown to provide criteria for addressing policy dilemmas (Kaplan, 1986). Kaplan's also argued that policymakers and stakeholders think and base decisions in terms of narrative stories. The narrative story presents information in a rich texture that policymakers are able to understand because of the vivid descriptions (Kaplan, 1986). The main ingredients for narrative analysis of truth, richness, consistency, congruency, and unity can fill gaps in research (Kaplan, 1986).

### **Nature of the Study**

I used the qualitative method of inquiry. Narrative policy analysis was used with participants providing data through a series of interview questions. The selection of the primary data collection method also correlates well with a qualitative study. Participants were interviewed using interview protocols that I set up using recommendations from a report by Jacob and Furgerson (2012) on protocol establishment. My data population was volunteer fire departments that serve a population of no more than 25,000 citizens and respond to fewer than 1000 calls for service in a calendar year. Those departments came from Litchfield County in Connecticut. This study sample included 10 total participants: five current chief officers and five former volunteer firefighters. Five departments were selected to participate in the data collection process one chief officer and one former member from each of the selected departments were interviewed. According to the Connecticut Department of Homeland Security (CT-DEMHS, 2015) there are 36 volunteer fire departments serving 26 communities in Litchfield County. Only



Torrington has a complement of career firefighters the remaining 25 communities are protected by 100% volunteer fire departments.

Interviews were used as the primary method for data collection and were conducted on an individual basis. A series of interview protocols was used to establish guidelines for how the interviews were conducted, and how the data were analyzed. Using the four key elements setting, characters, plot, and moral previously discussed aided me in coding the data. Through that process the following themes emerged: lack of awareness of state policy on recruitment and retention, lack of recruitment, public service motivation, retention, and time. Corbin and Strauss's (2014) coding method of analysis fit well with interview transcripts because it is not rigid; rather, enabled me to interact with data seamlessly through the three stages (see Orlovic, 2015). The process of analyzing the interview transcripts followed three stages: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, (c) selective coding. Hutchison, Johnston, and Breckon (2010) noted that the NVivo software tool can be used for qualitative studies. After interview transcripts are completed data can be coded, using the NVivo software package (Ryan & McKenna, 2013). The software allows users to classify, sort and arrange information; examine relationships in the data; and combine analysis with linking, shaping, searching, and modeling (Lewis, 2008). The process of coding enables researchers to analyze and compare the selected data and to recognize any patterns that involve further investigation. Coding data using the NVivo program helps sift through vast amounts of data (Lewis, 2008).

## Definition of Terms

The following terms and phrases are common and are defined according to their use in the study.

*Career fire department:* A career fire department employs a staff of 100% salaried firefighters. Career firefighters are members of a collective bargaining unit and work shifts based upon an agreed work schedule between labor and management. Members work at fire stations throughout a city or town with a rotating staff that works 24/7 year-round (Jones & Bartlett, 2014).

*Combination fire department:* A combination fire department employs career firefighters supplemented by either paid on-call or volunteer firefighters. A combination department may be considered mostly career or mostly volunteer depending on the proportion of career firefighters to volunteer firefighters (Jones & Bartlett, 2014).

*Emergency call or response:* The emergency call or emergency response is the act of responding to a request for emergency assistance. Emergency calls encompass medical emergencies, fire or smoke alarms, fires, hazardous materials spills, and numerous other types of emergencies. A volunteer fire department may be notified of an emergency call by a pager, siren, or text message. Volunteer firefighters respond to an incident via their personal vehicle or drive to a fire station and respond in a fire apparatus. The emergency call is complete once all firefighters and equipment are back at the station (Smith, 2014).

*Emergency medical service (EMS):* Members of an EMS unit respond to and assist in the transport of medical and trauma victims to medical facilities. Members often have medications, defibrillators, and paramedics who can stabilize a critical patient. EMS personnel may be cross trained as firefighters (Jones & Bartlett, 2014).

*Emergency medical technician (EMT):* An EMT is a provider who has advanced training in life support care, including automated external defibrillation, simple airway techniques, and controlling external bleeding (Jones & Bartlett, 2014).

*Firefighter:* This individual is a member of either a combination, career, or volunteer fire department who has been trained in fire suppression, hazardous materials identification and decontamination, building construction, and basic first-aid (USFA, 2017).

*Incentives:* An incentive is something that motivates an individual to perform an action. For the purposes of this study an incentive is a recruitment or retention tool used by a volunteer fire department (Jones & Bartlett, 2014).

*National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC):* This organization is the leading 501(c)(3) nonprofit membership association representing the interests of the volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services. The NVFC serves as the voice of the volunteer in the national arena and provides tools, resources, programs, and advocacy for first responders across the United States. The NVFC provides advocacy for first responders on a national level. This includes promoting legislation that benefits the fire and emergency medical services. Representatives from the NVFC also sit on many standards-setting committees as well as national fire service taskforces, workgroups, and committees. In addition, the NVFC produces tools, resources, and programs to address the needs of the volunteer fire and emergency services (NVFC, 2014).

*Paid on-call firefighter:* A paid on-call firefighter receives wages for agreeing to respond to emergency calls while either staying at a fire station or carrying a pager. Paid on-call firefighters are in many cases part-time employees of a municipality or other

government entity and work a regular schedule of shifts. Paid-on call firefighters may be used to supplement career staff in small departments. Paid on-call firefighters are not considered to be volunteers (Smith, 2014).

*Recruitment:* The overall process of attracting, selecting and appointing suitable candidates for jobs (either permanent or temporary) within an organization. Recruitment for the purposes of this study refers to processes involved in choosing individuals for unpaid positions in a fire department. Managers, human resource generalists and recruitment specialists may be tasked with carrying out recruitment, but in some cases public-sector employment agencies, commercial recruitment agencies, or specialist search consultancies are used to undertake parts of the process. Internet-based technologies to support all aspects of recruitment have become widespread (NVFC, 2014).

*Retention:* The ability of an organization to keep the same employees. Employee retention can be represented by a simple statistic (for example, a retention rate of 80% usually indicates that an organization kept 80% of its employees in a given period). However, many consider employee retention as relating to the efforts by which employers attempt to retain employees in their workforce. In this sense, retention becomes the strategies rather than the outcome (NVFC, 2014).

*Turnover rate:* The turnover rate is the number of people who left an organization during a given period of time divided by the total number of people in the organization (Smith, 2014). For purposes of this study the organization is a volunteer fire department.

*United States Fire Administration (USFA):* As an entity of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency, the mission of the USFA

is to provide national leadership to foster a solid foundation for fire and emergency services stakeholders in prevention, preparedness and response. The main administration offices are located in Washington D.C. The National Fire Academy, which is under the jurisdiction of the USFA, is located in Emmitsburg, Maryland (USFA, 2017).

*Volunteer fire department:* A volunteer fire department is an agency which provides fire and/or emergency medical services to a community without providing significant financial compensation to its members. A volunteer fire department may provide basic benefits such as workers' compensation insurance or line-of-duty death or disability insurance. Volunteer fire departments may provide limited reimbursement covering basic expenses incurred while responding to emergency calls (Smith, 2014).

*Volunteer firefighter:* A volunteer firefighter provides services to and for an organization without receiving significant compensation for those services (Smith, 2014). Generally, a volunteer firefighter lives in the same community that they provide service. Volunteer firefighters are on call 24/7, year-round.

### **Assumptions**

One of the primary assumptions of this study was that volunteer firefighters intend to stay in the fire service for an extended period of time when they join a department because of their motivation to provide a public service. Through external or internal factors, they are motivated to sign an application and begin the process of becoming a firefighter protecting their community. Leclerc (2014) when referring to a volunteer firefighter in Massachusetts, noted that the drive to join was the ability to help serve the community. This drive is a positive motivational factor that a volunteer fire department can take advantage of over an extended period of time. Another assumption

was that volunteer firefighters are not motivated by financial gain. Therefore, I assumed that personal finances had no bearing on an individual's desire to join the volunteer fire service. This assumption proved to be incorrect as many of the retention programs offer volunteer firefighters financial incentives to respond on calls for service. It was also assumed that poor recruitment and retention programs are the main factor behind decreasing numbers of volunteer firefighters.

I assumed that participants from Litchfield County in Connecticut represented a small sampling of volunteer firefighters nationwide. Even though the research sample size was small, conclusions were drawn from the study that may help improve recruitment and retention policies. I assumed that participants in this study answered the questions truthfully and provided trustworthy data. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants' identities were kept confidential.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This study included a small sample of volunteer fire departments in the state of Connecticut; however, the study it had a much wider scope. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011) there are approximately 18,130 towns meeting that criteria of volunteer fire department in the United States. The findings from this study stretch to all parts of the country.

The study included a couple of delimitations. First, the study sample only contained fire departments from one county in the state of Connecticut. The USFA noted that nearly 75% of the firefighters in the United States are volunteer (Smith, 2014). For purposes of this study, volunteer departments in Litchfield County, Connecticut were contacted to participate in the data collection process. The reason for the exclusion of

other parts of Connecticut or the country was to maintain a smaller data set that could be more easily interviewed without tremendous expense. It was not feasible to collect huge amounts of data from every volunteer fire department in the country serving a community of 25,000 or less.

A second delimitation was the choice of the problem. The study focused on recruitment and retention issues within the volunteer fire service. There are other obstacles that volunteer fire departments will need to assess. One of these is required training. Training demands in the volunteer fire service have increased in recent years because of the number of service calls departments respond to and the higher national training standards now required (NVFC, 2007). More training requirements mean more time that volunteer firefighters need to commit to the department (Mattson, 2015). Training in the fire service today is more than putting out fires as many different response disciplines need to be learned (Story, 2007). Busy schedules combined with the demands of a fire department make it difficult for prospective individuals to find the time to fully commit (Marello, 2014).

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study was the difficulty in preventing researcher-induced bias. I am familiar with many of the fire departments that participated in the study. One of the ways to combat this limitation was to ask open-ended questions to interview participants. This method allows for participants to provide honest responses to questions without providing them with a series of options that may not provide the data required. Another limitation was the relatively small sample size and small geographic area that was covered. For economic reasons, I decided to concentrate on one specific county in

Connecticut. It was not feasible to conduct an interview dominant study over a wide geographic area. The fire departments that were represented provided a solid cross-section of the Connecticut volunteer fire service. Those volunteer fire departments have an average of 50 active members and respond to an average of 350 calls for service each year. Rural departments throughout Connecticut have similar numbers in terms of members and yearly responses.

### **Social Change Significance**

This study has social change implications that directly affect public safety and municipal budgeting. As volunteer departments continue to see numbers decreasing response times will increase. This may lead to more property damage, which will potentially cause an increase in insurance costs over a period of time. Increased response time also puts the public in greater danger from injury or fatalities as departments take longer to respond. With volunteer numbers decreasing, municipalities may be forced to make decisions to hire firefighters to sustain proper coverage. Towns will be forced to hire career firefighters putting a greater burden on taxpayers (NVFC, 2007). This could cause an increased tax burden on communities that cannot afford paid fire departments. Determining the main factors for the decrease in volunteer firefighters and providing recommendations for improving recruitment and retention may help increase volunteer numbers. The potential for research-based solutions in this area was very good and provided an opportunity to make an important, positive impact. In many small communities, the loss of the volunteer fire department would impact social events of which these departments have been the center of for many years (NVFC, 2007). Using current statistical data along with research conducted via my policy framework, I am



confident the findings will help volunteer fire departments and municipalities with long-term strategic planning. It is vital that the volunteer fire service improve recruitment and retention.

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 included a brief history of the volunteer fire service in the United States dating as far back as 1718. I provided statistics detailing the decline in numbers of volunteer firefighters throughout the United States during the past quarter century. The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to gain an understanding of why people leave the volunteer fire service in Connecticut. Understanding the reasons for the declining numbers was necessary for volunteer fire departments to develop recruitment and retention strategies that will have a positive impact. The theoretical framework selected for this research project was based on a study completed by Perry (1997) on public service motivation. The nature of this study was qualitative.

Interviews provided the primary source of data gathered from volunteer fire departments in Litchfield County, Connecticut. Definitions of the terms common to the fire service that were relevant to this study were also provided. I included assumptions, delimitations, and limitations as well. In Chapter 2, I will review the literature relevant to this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

This chapter contains an exhaustive review of the literature detailing the history of the volunteer fire service, the decreasing numbers of volunteer firefighters, recruitment of volunteer firefighters, public service motivation, employee retention, municipal budgets, and the theoretical framework of the study. The primary organization for the review of literature focused on decreasing numbers of volunteer firefighters, along with strategies for improving recruitment and retention. I conducted a primary search using Boolean search strings of the above five categories. For purposes of this study, I was primarily interested in the following key words: *volunteer fire department recruitment and retention programs, corporate programs that focused on recruitment and retention, employee motivation, and municipal budgets*. The search of these categories yielded with 7,189 articles from various databases. Most of the articles retrieved did not focus on volunteer fire departments. Articles that provided background on corporate employee retention programs and volunteerism in general were plentiful. As a result, I searched for other sources of information on volunteer fire departments using the library at the National Fire Academy, National Fire Protection Association, the National Volunteer Fire Council, the United States Fire Administration, and the State of Connecticut. I also searched trade journals and textbooks specific to the fire service and volunteer firefighting.

The decline in volunteer firefighters is clear; however there is no clear documented reason for these losses in numbers (NVFC, 2007). Most communities throughout the United States are protected by volunteer fire departments (Carter, 2013).

Stittleburg (2013) detailed five critical issues that face the volunteer fire service, with recruitment and retention issues being at the top of the list. The problem is real and the efforts to increase volunteer firefighter ranks have never been more important (Brown & Urbina, 2014). Volunteer fire departments are losing members, which in turn is hurting communities that depend on them for consistent fire protection services (Fleming, 2011). The latest statistics from the Department of Labor indicated a continued and precipitous drop in participation numbers for volunteer fire departments (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

This chapter is organized into specific sections that combine to form a detailed background for this study. The discussion begins with a detailed review on the theoretical framework chosen for this study. This is followed by an examination of volunteerism in general detailing how it can be an important contributor to a community and an individual. Next, I review the well-documented decline in volunteer firefighters throughout the United States. I also review several studies addressing public service motivation; along with corporate employee retention and recruitment programs. Recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters are issues that should be separated (Carter, 2013). The chapter concludes with a review of literature detailing budget implications for municipalities if volunteer firefighter numbers continue to decline.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Theoretical frameworks cannot be defined consistently, and it can be difficult to understand the best process for conducting research (Abraham, 2008). Anfera (2008) defined a theoretical framework as a study of social or psychological processes that can be used to better understand a phenomenon. Understanding and appreciating history as it

was shaped along with important contributions is necessary when shaping ideas for research (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2016). Frameworks help researchers process the vast amount of data that can be gathered for a study (Abraham, 2008). The chosen framework provides the foundation that the study was based upon.

Many factors make up the motivation for individuals to serve the public. One of the first to study this was Perry (1997) who concluded that public service motivation (PSM) stems from family, further employment, and life consequences. The Perry (1997) motivation study were the theoretical framework used in the study. Managers and leaders should promote a new member's socialization with the values of public service (Andrews, 2016). There are strong indications that PSM is connected directly with job satisfaction (Wright & Grant, 2010). Individuals seeking public service tend to have a strong sense of calling that can keep them engaged (Bakker, 2015). A driving force behind PSM is the altruistic motivator to help a community (Carpenter, Doverspike & Miguel, 2011). Motivational factors are also affected by cultural factors and political institutions (Perry & Vandenabeele, 2015). It is possible to recruit based on PSM found in career civil service employees (Mann, 2006). The affective domain of individuals is also a factor in PSM (Bright, 2005). Engaging employees helps drive performance and stimulate motivation (Lavigna, 2015). Additional PSM factors are reward and organizational attitudes (Bozeman & Su, 2014).

### **Narrative Policy Analysis**

Narrative policy analysis begins with stating that policy narratives are worthwhile and can expand our understanding of a societal problem (McBeth et al, 2014). Examining policy narratives helps determine future policy outcomes (Crow, 2013). Narratives in the

field of qualitative research are important and by studying problems in a systematic manner, theories and debates over public policy can be initiated (Jones & McBeth, 2010). Through the use of the micro-component of a framework, empirical and verifiable data can be collected (Crow, 2013). In today's qualitative research world narrative studies are increasingly important (Jones & McBeth, 2010). Participants in this study provided in-depth narrative responses to several of the questions asked during the interview process. McBeth et al, (2014) noted that policy narratives need to relate to a specific policy problem.

Narratives are legitimate sources of information in policy change analysis (McBeth, Shanahan, Arnell, & Hathaway, 2007). The use of narratives in qualitative studies provides an opportunity for more detailed descriptions and inductive forms of inquiry (Gray & Jones, 2016). Policy and decision-making occur because the past can have a great impact on the present, and through narratives that impact can be analyzed (Schubert, 2015). Narratives provide researchers with the potential to capture a range of experiences and weave details into stories (McMahon, & McGannon, 2016). Coupling narrative analysis with interviews help researchers better understand an individual's life experiences (Carr, 2014).

### **Volunteerism**

United States culture has been steeped in volunteerism from the very early stages of the republic. Volunteers helped stem the tide of the American Revolution in favor of the colonists and continue to voluntarily serve in the armed forces. Volunteering relates directly to good mental health, strength, and positive life satisfaction for those that choose to donate their time (Bidee, Vantiborgh, & Peperman, 2013). Kohn and Wohl

(2010) detailed some of the positive outcomes of volunteering as empowerment, building trust, and reciprocity among people. Gilster (2012) detailed the positive effects of volunteering on the psychological well-being of those who contribute.

A review of the literature in this area detailed a general decline in volunteerism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1980s, a call went out for volunteers to join service organizations throughout the United States (Bloom & Kilgore, 2003). Studies have indicated that today's volunteers have a more complex system for involvement that affects length of service (Marta & Pozzi, 2008). Family responsibilities along with working adults in the home have reduced numbers of volunteers in many formal organizations (Gilster, 2012). In 2005, over 65 million American's volunteered, which help supply nearly \$75 billion to the gross national product (Lindenmeiser, 2008). Department of Labor statistics from 2016 noted that in 2015, the number of people volunteering was 62.6 million (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Households include both parents and/or guardians working full-time hours and facilitating children schedule of activities. The latest figures from the Department of Labor present a drop of 2.4 million volunteer firefighters in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

A positive factor for volunteering in general is many people who do volunteer are committed for a long period of time (Penner, 2004). Family also plays a strong role in people choosing to volunteer. The influence of the previous generation is strong with the younger generation, especially in those families that have a history of volunteerism in communities (Marta et al, 2010). This obligation to volunteer has been shown to come from friendships and past family members serving (Penner, 2004). Family members

passing on volunteerism is a vital function for ensuring volunteer fire departments survive.

Volunteer work helps to ensure both external and internal motivations are met by placing people in groups where they can help people (Beehr et al, 2010). A study completed in the 1950s noted that there were three primary motivational factors for volunteering: achievement, affiliation, and power-oriented. (McCurley & Lynch, 1989). Motivational factors are known as being a crucial factor in determining whether or not to volunteer, to stay for the long term, or stop altogether (Marta & Pozzi, 2008). Motivational factors include personal attributes as strong predictors for people to volunteer and remain in that role for a long period of time (Penner, 2004). Motivating factors for volunteerism are identity and commitment (Kohn & Wohl, 2010). Individuals are attracted to organizations or groups where a possibility for internal growth is present (Bidee et al, 2013).

### **Public Service Motivation**

Leaders need to recognize that motivating employees to further goals, make contributions, and identify with the organizational mission can equate to retention (Bozeman & Su, 2015). Inclusion and sharing of knowledge play a pivotal role for leaders encouraging motivated individuals to stay within an organization (Chen & Hsieh, 2015). It is incumbent on fire service leaders to recognize the importance that PSM plays in retaining members. A primary PSM in the United States is on the community (Alexandru, 2004). A study completed on millennials and how they relate to PSM found that the current generation can be both highly involved, yet narcissistic and materialistic (Ertas, 2016). Key factors that influence PSM can be studied to determine factors that are

the motivational basis of public service (Perry, 1997). The millennial generation will be the primary group focused upon for public service. Their recruitment and retention are vital for volunteer fire departments to continue to provide service in the United States.

Different approaches and methods for studying PSM have been used successful over the years as practitioner research and experimental research continue (Perry, & Hondeghem, & Wise, 2010). The first measurement scale contained 24 items, which has been revised with different variations that shorten the scales (Vandenabeele, 2008). The main theory of PSM still holds true, which is determining the factors that link pursuit of the public interest (Moynihan & Pandey, 2007).

### **Decline of Volunteer Firefighters**

Volunteer firefighters have long-standing service in the United States, dating back before the American Revolution (NFPA, 2014). A significant problem facing the volunteer fire service is younger members are unable to stay in suburban areas because of the cost of housing (Thompson, 2005). Throughout the past several years, a documented decline in volunteer firefighters throughout the United States has been occurring. Hajishengallis (2013) described a study by the NFPA which indicated a decline in volunteer firefighters by 8.6% from 2008 to 2011.

Scanlon (2002) discussed problems with adequate responses by the Lower Merion Township Fire Department in Pennsylvania. Several fires which occurred during daylight hours of the business week were analyzed in which a shortage of firefighters caused response delays and inadequate numbers of personnel responding (Scanlon, 2002). The NVFC released a study detailing a consistent drop in volunteer firefighters nationwide (NVFC, 2007). This study described core issues in the volunteer fire service and provides



suggestions for how to maintain current levels of membership (NVFC, 2007). The state of Minnesota published a report which described a decrease in volunteer firefighter numbers along with an increase in the number of calls for service (Cote, Hasskamp, Chevuru, & Verma, 2014). Fire departments nationwide are finding it increasingly more difficult to recruit and retain new members (Chapman, 2011). Volunteer organizations should focus on additional techniques in their recruitment and retention programs to help with the decreasing number of members. Hawkins (2015) reported that in New Hampshire, volunteer fire departments are increasingly unable to respond to all calls for service. A crisis within the state of New York is taking shape as sufficient numbers of volunteer firefighters are harder and harder for communities to assemble (Winner, 2008). Brazunas (2015) research concluded that there is much work to be done to address the critical issue that faces volunteer fire companies. The problem in Pennsylvania concluded the number of volunteer firefighters from 1985 to 2004 has dropped by more than 50% (Switala, 2006). Volunteers are working too many calls, especially EMS runs, and have reached a critical breaking point (Thompson, 2005). The increased demands placed on volunteer firefighters create additional complications with recruitment and retention.

Nationwide the trend of decreasing volunteer firefighters spreads like an epidemic across the United States. When insufficient staffing to respond to alarms becomes a weekly trend, community expectations will not be met and more lives could be put at risk (Switala, 2006). At one time volunteer firefighting was a way of life but those times no longer exist (Brown, 2014). Fire departments in Minnesota will need to take drastic measures if more volunteer firefighters cannot be brought to the table (Fleming, 2011). Sloan (2014) concluded Missouri 60% of needed personnel. Indiana also faces a decline

in responding firefighters. The volunteer force has been shrinking for many years (Marello, 2014). Marello (2014) also noted that having fewer volunteers respond negatively affects a fire department's ability to properly respond when called. In Sioux Falls, South Dakota the decreased volunteer firefighters have forced departments to change how they operate. Ellis (2015) described how South Dakota fire departments are relying more on each other to cover calls as numbers of firefighters go down. There are 337 total fire departments in South Dakota, with 326 being all volunteer (Ellis, 2015). In Sonoma, California, the town has changed its volunteer firefighter force due to the tremendous turnover of younger members that leave for college or the military and do not return (McCutcheon, 2010). Crawford (2015) concluded that a structure fire in rural Maine required four fire departments to respond because not enough volunteers at any one department responded calls. This adds additional response times which may lead to greater property losses or losses of life. In Maine, over 90% of the fire departments statewide are either all volunteer or are a combination of volunteer and career firefighters (Crawford, 2015). Minnesota volunteer firefighters are burned out at a rapid rate due to the same 15 to 20 people responding to all the calls for service (Hage, 2014). A volunteer fire department in the state of Washington reported several calls where the fire chief was the only firefighter on scene for several minutes and in some instances the only one to respond (Leclerc, 2014). Ryburn (2013) detailed rural Arkansas fire departments have reported a decrease in available firefighters. Wisconsin reported lower participation numbers are hurting organizations with older members, especially those that do not have good recruitment and retention programs (Heim, 2011).

Connecticut is also facing a shortage of volunteer firefighters. Schassler (2015) described the primary challenge in Middlefield was the volunteer fire department dealing with the shortage of personnel. Southington Fire Department leaders spoke before the town board and stated that staffing levels are dangerously low due in part because of the unreliable response for the volunteer fire department (Buchanan, 2016). The town of Waterford, CT separated into five fire districts is also struggling to maintain volunteer firefighters. Townsend (2014) noted that fire department officials were asking for more full-time personnel to cover the gaps that volunteers were unable to fill during the day. Greenwich looks to increase its full-time manpower because of decreasing volunteer firefighter responses (Pottle, 2014). Caton (2015) detailed Windsor Fire Department's budget was in a shortfall because not enough volunteers were responding to service calls. In volunteer fire department municipalities ensuring the safety of the public begins with appropriate numbers of volunteer firefighters responding to calls for service.

### **Fire Department Response to Decreasing Numbers**

An issue of the decreased volunteer numbers in the fire service is the ability to efficiently provide an essential public service (Schroeder, 2015). Staffing changes will be required if these numbers do not get better, public service is the primary concern (Townsend, 2014). To assist with filling personnel shortfalls town governments may need to hire career firefighters due to volunteer response inconsistent (Buchanan, 2016). Buchanan (2016) described that this issue arose in 2013 and town management did not act upon the request due to the increase in budget that would be levied on the community. Stipends are an option on the table to help attract volunteers to not join and remain for a number of years (Schassler, 2015). Winner (2015) noted that volunteer firefighters in

New York State have decreased from 140,000 in the 1990s to 110,000 in 2007. Fire departments that are unable to staff appropriately may deal with a dramatic uptick in expenses hiring paid career firefighters or beginning a blitz for recruitment (Winner, 2015). As the core of New Hampshire's volunteer firefighters are over 50 years old, hiring firefighters becomes a necessity (Hawkins, 2015). It appears that the allure to volunteer has greatly diminished with shifting duties and responsibilities (Brown & Urbina, 2014).

Departments need to come up with creative methods to entice people to volunteer in their communities. There are a number of options fire departments throughout the United States utilize in order to get their volunteer participation number to increase. Firefighters in Eagan, Minnesota receive hourly compensation if they agree to work a set amount of shifts each month (Fleming, 2011). Sloan (2014) noted that community recruitment activities around Branson, Missouri have increased as departments search for members instead of waiting for them to come directly to the fire station. Those types of recruitment drives may not gain a huge number of volunteers, but it only takes one or two to start building numbers back up. As the volunteer firefighting force becomes more white collar, financial stipends covering training and calls for service can bring people into the service (Story, 2007). In Brandon, South Dakota recruitment efforts are in full swing through community events and open tours of the fire stations to the public (Ellis, 2015). Volunteer fire departments in Pennsylvania offer incentives such as life insurance and free memberships to local fitness clubs (Switala, 2006). When people from the community do not show an interest in joining the fire department assistance can be received from surrounding towns. Although this tactic appears to be the exception rather

than the rule it is being used. Sonoma County Fire and Emergency Services utilize a non-residential program to help increase available personnel (McCutcheon, 2010). Household demand and responsibilities have greatly increased requiring some Michigan fire departments to pay per call no matter how much time the call requires personnel to remain on scene (LeBlanc, 2015). The problem this creates is the increased financial burden of the local municipalities. Volunteer fire departments have historically been run without financial compensation for its members (NVFC, 2014). Compensation programs in several Maine volunteer fire departments were initiated because of emergency calls that resulted in only one or two firefighters responding (Crawford, 2015). Elected officials in Iowa proposed legislation that would provide individuals with a tax credit to help maintain staffing levels (Chatfield, 2015). In Hampden, Massachusetts fire officials are recruiting younger members even if they only serve five years or less (Leclerc, 2015). The same type of tax credit is offered in some Arkansas volunteer fire departments. Supporting firefighters with a \$1500.00 tax credit is an incentive important to rural fire departments in Sebastian County (Ryburn, 2013). The review of literature provided evidence of several different methods volunteer fire departments across the United States implemented due to a decrease in personnel. Creative solutions will continue to be developed and analyzed until volunteer fire departments can increase staffing to acceptable levels.

### **Employee Retention Programs**

The private sector has had employee retention programs in place for several years. Based upon the review of literature conducted I can conclude that the volunteer fire service may use some of the strategies that have worked for corporate companies. One of

the primary difficulties with retaining employees is salary and limited chances for advancement (Zontek, DuVernois, & Ogle, 2009). Gaffney (2005) concluded career development and succession planning are both good retention strategies. Carefully reviewing employee satisfaction data can help employers retain personnel for longer periods of time (Haberle & Christmas, 2006). Christmas (2008) noted that work environment coupled with daily work tasks relates to employee retention. Employers can take the time to ask employees what their expectations are during the orientation process (Terra, 2009). Gilmore & Turner (2010) detailed setting job expectations and well written job descriptions are important for retention. Stress and long work hours contribute to employee burnout over a period of time (Greiner & Smith, 2006). Organizations that lose the best workers have a hard time competing and struggle to fill lost positions (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). Davis (2013) stated that employee morale is a major factor for continued retention. In the hospitality industry, a study by Self and DeWald (2009) noted that getting along good with colleagues kept employees in positions for longer periods of time.

Identifying the main issues is only one component of an effective employee retention program. Developing a program that actually works is the key to the entire process. Cardy and Lengnick-Hall (2011) noted that no one program or framework exists, and that each organization needs to find a formula that works best for employees. Promoting a work atmosphere that is healthy to employees must be an undertaking by management (Christmas, 2008). Improving the quality of the work environment may improve the quality of life for employees (Wilson, 2011). The use of nonmonetary rewards such as recognition, flexible work hours, and training supports the argument that

employees remain with organizations for longer periods of time. Organizational leaders need to personally meet with each new employee and lay a foundation for growth and communication that does not get broken (Terra, 2009). A study by Greiner and Smith (2006) concluded employer expectations and continued communication with employees has shown increased retention rates. Volunteer fire departments have an opportunity to create job descriptions and expectations that reflect some of the programs used by private sector companies.

Job descriptions indicate what the organization expects from each employee and what will be needed for employees to be successful (Gilmore & Turner, 2010). Adults want to know what is expected of them in whatever position they are working within an organization. Organizations that place a higher value on employee satisfaction over profits look at employees more like customers (Cardy & Lengnick, 2011). The customer is always right model works well for customer satisfaction applying that same model to employees may have positive results. Retention efforts may focus on creating individual value rather than only on job tasks (Cardy & Lengnick, 2011). Davis (2013) stated that creating work environments that support employees improves morale and job satisfaction, which is a key retention factor.

Another model of success within an employee retention program is an individual career plan. An organization may benefit when they allow employees to plan and shape their own careers (Gaffney, 2005). Ongoing opportunities for employees to control their path have been successful for retention (Self & DeWald, 2011). Volunteer fire departments should take an interest in career development, especially for younger members. Providing them with the tools for success, even if it means losing their service

after a few years, may encourage younger members to serve in the department. Volunteer workers take pride in their work and organizational support is needed to address long term career goals (Wilson, 2011). Continuous improvement for employees by employers should consider career development plans (Haeberle & Christmas, 2006). Continued professional development programs improves employee job satisfaction (Terra, 2009).

The Fire and Emergency Services Higher Education (FESHE) program was created to promote the importance of higher education in the fire service (Ford, 2007). Snodgrass (2012) described FESHE's main importance as a program that creates a path for state training directors to talk directly with colleges throughout the country. Accredited institutions are able to provide a 6-course program for either associates or bachelor degrees (Firehouse, 2012). Graduates of this program will be better prepared and educated to tackle the many challenges of a progressive fire service (Firehouse, 2012). Providing firefighters an opportunity to be educated by accredited institutions that help them not only in their fire service career, it also may provide many other opportunities. As of 2015, nearly eighty organizations nationwide have recognized the FESHE curriculum (Snodgrass, 2015). Education above and beyond high school is necessary as the fire service continues to evolve from fighting fires to many other emergencies (Watters, 2010). The program is an example of employee retention through education and career advancement. The fire service was expanded from an organization of providing aid to communities to a big business requiring trained and educated administrators to lead them (Evans, 2011).

Career plans can be developed by asking employees to develop short and long-term goals. Employers can use that information to help guide employees for future



promotional opportunities and other job advances. An employee that becomes fully committed to an organization understands what the company is looking for and what the he/she hopes to accomplish in the future (Gaffney, 2009).

### **Studies on Employee Recruitment and Retention**

The proper tools are needed when people are brought into an organization and more are needed to keep those already in the organization from leaving (Lewis, 2000). The lessons learned and conclusions from the study can help volunteer fire departments create programs in their own organizations to meet recruitment and retention challenges. Individuals that possess skills to achieve gains across the board are important to recruit and retain (Fabian, 2014). These are the people that volunteer fire departments need to be actively recruiting. Fabian (2014) concluded that those individuals are in short supply. If, in fact, these are the type of people that should be recruited, how does the fire service retain their commitment over a long period of time?

Several of the studies reviewed highlight the importance of leaders and managers acknowledging employees for their work and making them feel included in the day-to-day operations. Good supervision and emphasis on employees being valued lead to retention of employees (Warman & Jackson, 2007). Increasing an employee's commitment to an organization should be the primary focus for organizational leaders (Chan & Kuok, 2011). Work environment and job satisfaction are two primary factors in retaining employees (Toofany, 2007). Myers (2007) noted investing in employees is a good retention tool. Research in the education field concluded employees leave if there is an absence of support from administrators (Billingsley, 2004). Educational research indicated that fostering solid professional development programs lead to improved

retention (O'Keefe, 2002). Leaders that are respectful of employees and make them feel like they are an integral part of a team do better at retention (Hough & Squires, 2012). Leaders need to make a commitment to support employees and implement programs to help them succeed (Grindel, 2004). Employers can improve retention by sharing information with employees and creating transparent processes within an organization (Gilmore & Turner, 2010). Sharing information promotes improved employee satisfaction (Lewis, 2000). Based on the researcher conducted volunteer fire departments that create an environment of inclusion will retain members at a higher rate.

### **Volunteer Fire Department Retention Programs**

Volunteer fire departments have initiated several different models of retention planning. Fire departments in small communities need to do a much better job of retaining firefighters from all walks of life if they are to continue providing service (Stittleburg, 2013). These programs have attempted to primarily meet the demands of monetary rewards. Rewarding volunteer firefighters for their service is a commitment the communities should be willing to make (Schroeder, 2015). New York State established a \$200.00 income tax credit along with property tax exemptions (Winner, 2008). The New Hampshire fire service pays some firefighters per call and also provides a pension plan based on years of service (Hawkins, 2015). Income tax credits, death benefits, and pension plans are programs set in place in a number of different states (Brown & Urbina, 2014). The volunteer fire department in Canton, CT established a pension program after making a proposal to the town Board of Selectmen (Yacovino, 1999). Fire department leadership needs to carefully examine all options for enhanced retention including monetary programs (NVFC, 2014). Rural fire departments face challenges not only in

getting members to respond but also coming up with funding for compensation plans. These programs can be a strain on already stretched budgets. In rural and metro fire departments within Minnesota many volunteers are paid per call (Fleming, 2011). In South Dakota state officials are working to replicate Minnesota programs by proposing a stipend program for the most struggling departments (Ellis, 2015). Taney County in Missouri provides some volunteer departments with stipends for its members, however many of the departments within the county are unable to afford that cost (Sloan, 2014). Switala (2006) concluded volunteer fire departments in Pennsylvania have stipend and benefit programs in place to assist with the ongoing retention problems. Defined-benefit plans are very attractive to volunteer firefighters (Blackistone, 2014).

Volunteer fire departments have also looked at retention programs in an attempt to hold on to existing members. An ongoing concern in volunteer fire departments is the rate of turnover, which may be as high as 50 percent in some parts of the United States (Wodicka, 2012). McCutcheon (2010) detailed Sonoma County was looking at ways to make the fire station a place where members want to hang out during off duty times. This will decrease response time to emergencies as apparatus can get on the road a few minutes after the call for service. Fire departments in Maine have been considering options such as consolidation (Crawford, 2015). College tuition programs have been used successfully in career fire departments and in New York State they have been put in place for volunteer firefighters (Winner, 2008). Hawkins (2015) concluded that the problem for New Hampshire's volunteer fire service was long response times which are leading departments to work together and share calls for service. Research indicated the intent to spread the amount of calls around or even look to privatize some fire departments

(Hawkins, 2015). To keep members active and engaged requires department leaders to create loyalty within the group as those members tend to stay longer in an organization (Wodicka, 2012). New Hampshire has an aging volunteer fire service required creative ways to retain members (Hawkins, 2015). Staffing shortages throughout the Pennsylvania volunteer fire service has strained departments and may lead a push toward consolidation (Mikulan, 2014).

Affordable housing has been a problem in retaining volunteer firefighters, especially younger members that are looking to establish a permanent residency. Members born and raised in communities and begin their volunteer service in hometown departments are forced to leave because affordable housing is not available (Daskal, 2010). Rockland County is located in New York State, just north of New York City. There are over 20 volunteer fire departments that provide protection to nearly 300,000 residents in Rockland County (Morris, 2014). Leaders and fire department officials in New York are looking at ways to provide affordable housing for volunteers near fire stations (Morris, 2014). In Maryland housing is provided at county fire departments for individuals that attend state college in Fire Science or Fire Administration programs (Riffe, 2012). A volunteer fire department in Rockland County bought an apartment building very close to their fire station for members to reside (Morris, 2014).

### **Volunteer Fire Department Recruitment Programs**

Retaining volunteers is an important issue for fire departments. Of equal importance is recruiting new members to join the fire service. Recruiting volunteer firefighters was unheard of in years past as new members came to into fire stations on their own to join (Nedder, 2009). Maltbie (2015) stated that in past decades the list for

joining volunteer fire departments was long which meant that prospective members had to wait until open positions became available. Today, there are no wait lists for new members. Good recruiting programs understand the motivational factor behind people volunteering and the satisfaction they get from being a member of a group (Geis, 2015).

Few join the service and those that do tend not to stay in the fire department very long (Carter, 2013). If recruitment efforts are going to be successful leadership within the fire department must fully embrace the program. A good recruiting program starts with the fire chief and the team of officers' the chief assembles (Markley, 2015). Moore (2015) listed poor leadership, lack of recognition, time requirements, and poor communication as problems with recruitment that need to be resolved. Commitment to service is more likely by having potential volunteers interact with current firefighters or join junior firefighter programs (Moore, 2015). Volunteer fire departments must work on how information is shared throughout the organization showing a strong level of leadership within the officer ranks (Hage, 2014).

Unusual methods need to be undertaken by fire departments struggling to bring in new members (Fleming, 2011). A survey of 455 firefighters by Birch and McLennen (2008) was conducted based on the findings those who volunteer do so because of a mix of community and self-oriented motivations. That study also concluded that younger volunteers are more likely to be motivated by perceived benefits from volunteering compared with older volunteers (Birch & McLennen, 2008). In Minnesota, a fire chief in a rural town goes to garage sales to find out if anyone is home during the day and asks if there is interest in becoming a firefighter (Hage, 2014). Fire service leaders need to

understand that expectations come not only from the public, but also the members within the fire department (Melby, 2013).

Volunteer fire departments in the state of Connecticut are working on programs to recruit new members. An individual who is going to recruit people to join the volunteer fire service needs to have good inter-personal skills (Markley, 2015). Markley (2015) detailed comments made by the Old Mystic, Connecticut fire chief who stated that new members need to be told up front what is expected and set a high standard of excellence. In Southington, CT recruiting volunteers for evening responses is a proposal being considered by town management (Buchanan, 2016). One small-town volunteer fire department in Connecticut has hired a full-time recruitment and retention coordinator to bring in new members and keep those currently in service active (Pottle, 2014). Carter (2013) noted that the position of a recruitment and retention coordinator should be considered by all volunteer fire departments. Aggressive recruitment efforts create additional expenses however; successful programs will stabilize and increase volunteer firefighter participation. Ballman (2001) concluded that incoming volunteer firefighters need to understand what the expectations are of them when the decision is made to become a member. Yacovino (1999) concluded that incentive programs were highly may assist in improving recruitment in Canton, CT. It was also concluded that in the upper-middle class community of Canton such economic incentive programs did not provide the motivation to recruit and retain firefighters (Yacovino, 1999).

Ending the decline in members of the volunteer fire service is a trend that needs to be stopped (Winner, 2008). An effective method in eradicating eroding volunteer firefighter numbers should include a recruitment program that brings new and reliable

people. Recruitment programs are important, but they need to be implemented with a sound approach to the problem (Hawkins, 2015). Fire departments must set clear guidelines detailing exactly what they are looking for in people when they join (Maltbie, 2015). Detailed descriptions of the jobs and tasks required by personnel is highly encouraged (Heim, 2011). Job expectations explained early in the recruitment process may lead to better retention. Rufer (2015) recommended creating a volunteer recruit training program that meets all safety and national standards and is understood by new recruits. One strategy of recruitment today is to use TV and billboard advertising (Nedder, 2009). Holding meetings that detail requirements and the amount of time needed is critical to recruiting (Fleming, 2011). A good recruitment tool is questioning current members of the fire department to determine strengths and weaknesses within the department (Heim, 2011). Create a list of strengths within the fire department and a set of criteria for recruiting new members (Carter, 2013). Rural fire departments need to do a better job at getting out and recruiting new members which should include women and minorities (Stittleburg, 2013). Pennsylvania labor leaders have allowed some volunteer fire departments to organize into unions in an attempt to recruit new members (Brown & Urbina, 2014). The decline of young firefighters in Maine requires departments to actively recruit and entice younger members into the fire department (Crawford, 2015). Being able to provide the time needed to serve as a volunteer firefighter is a difficult hardship for many people to overcome (Chatfield, 2015). A volunteer fire department near a major college campus in Indiana has recruited college students to join as a means to supplement school work (Marello, 2014). Combination fire departments in Maryland rely heavily on students attending the University of Maryland. The department even

offers a live-in program to students majoring in the Fire Science and Administration programs. The Maryland program provides a good example for other states recruiting new members.

The requirements for service training vary from state-to-state but can be as much as 150 hours of classroom and practical skill classes (Story, 2007). Recruitment efforts have been hurt by training requirements that have greatly increased (Ellis, 2015). In every state that I researched for the study training was a requirement for all new firefighters. Training volunteer firefighters is no different than training career firefighters which cause difficulty finding the time to meet those demands (Hajishengallis, 2013). Meeting national, state, and local standards is not only necessary for the safety of firefighters but is important for liability protection. Training standards require people to give up more time, time they really do not have in abundance (LeBlanc, 2015). A sign of the greater role fire departments has today mean more training requirements being put into place (Crawford, 2015). No longer is the fire service strictly fighting fires. They are responding to calls for medical care, gas leaks, weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, motor vehicle accidents, and water/ice rescues. All of these additional compulsory responses require a fire department to take on more required training which translates into more time. Responding to a wider range of emergencies requires more training and more time to commit for volunteer firefighters (Mikulan, 2014). The requirements of time for training are turning firefighters away from departments in Ohio (Hage, 2014). In Arkansas all firefighters, including volunteers, must record 24 hours of training each year (Ryburn, 2013). Many volunteer fire departments schedule training drills during weekends or on weeknights. This requires individuals to be away from home



during peak family time. Schroeder (2015) stated that in Maine volunteer fire departments schedule training drills every week on the same weeknight. Training schedules need to be dispersed to new member's right after they join so they understand the training requirements necessary to get certified (Maltbie, 2015).

### **Changing Budget Landscape**

A new set of issues has been created for fire departments due to the tough fiscal conditions that exist in many municipalities (Walters, 2011). In volunteer fire departments, money is becoming increasingly harder to obtain as fiscal budgets remain tight (Charlton, 2011). States are in the midst of their worst financial difficulties in many years as the booming economy of the 1990s no longer exists (McEldowney & Jenkins, 2005). Local and state budgets are not able to sustain current tax and spend plans (Bencini, 2013). The global financial crisis in 2008 led to a halt in budget expansion (Orenstein, 2013). The trickle-down effect has reached local governments and which affects the ability of volunteer fire departments to recruit and retain personnel. Fire department budgeting becomes more complicated as municipal funds are depleted. Increased costs require justification proposals from chief officers detailed and specific to the needs of the community. The costs of providing fire protection have doubled since the 1980s (Schroeder, 2015).

The 2013 Affordable Care Act caused volunteer fire departments to pay a penalty in 2015 for not providing members health care insurance (Stittleburg, 2013). Budget constraints mean that volunteer firefighters will need to spend more time in the fund-raising trenches (Brown & Urbina, 2014). Fire departments need the tax revenue that comes from citizens to maintain equipment and apparatus (Story, 2007). Some states

have indicated that they will not be able to afford the cost of hiring career firefighters to fill the void for volunteer fire departments (NVFC, 2007). By examining fiscal year budgets from 2007-2009 in towns throughout Ohio, Mattson (2014) determined several essential services have been cut by over 10%. Fire services in Ohio were the second hardest hit with a 15% reduction in funding (Mattson, 2014). This process has created a trend where fire services were being contracted out to other municipalities (Mattson, 2014).

The fire service is faced with tough financial compromises and public scrutiny beyond the likes of any generation before us as previously accepted practices are going to be scrutinized and questioned. Declining budgets mean that fire departments will need to do more with less (Celock & Sledge, 2012). In Texas, volunteer firefighters are required to buy their own equipment because of budget cuts pushed through by the state governor's office (Celock & Sledge, 2012). Due to budget constraints in Lowell, Massachusetts the fire department counts on responses from surrounding towns (Walters, 2011). The fire prevention budget in Texas is comprised of funding that was allocated but never received (Ramsey, 2013). Volunteer fire departments have lashed out at Texas officials for the many issues that unfunded accounts have created. Departments need to focus more on fundraising activities in rural Texas communities in order to make up budget shortfalls (Jameson, 2013). South Dakota fire departments face mounting costs of properly equipping firefighters and must make money from several fundraising events throughout the year (Ellis, 2015). Volunteer fire departments in Maine are seeing similar budget constraints, which are requiring them to come up with other methods to raise money. Holes in budgets need to be filled with social events for the community

(Crawford, 2015). Of course, this means more time that volunteers are required to dedicate for the department. Economic conditions mean that volunteer firefighters are working more than one job, which severely limits the time they can provide to a fire department (LeBlanc, 2015).

Another problem is that of public perception when it comes to fire department budgets. The public wants the fire service to do more things with less financial resources (Schroeder, 2015). Budgets are being cut, the cost of running a fire department is increasing, and staffing is stretched to the breaking point (Buchanan, 2016). The issue is not just about dollars and cents, but one where the public needs to be educated (Pottle, 2014). In this regard, volunteer fire departments need to do a better job at communicating their message to the public and ensure the people that provide financial support understand the job of being a firefighter.

Connecticut is currently experiencing major budget shortfalls that could have long lasting and dire consequences for cities and towns throughout the state. The state will need to adapt to the changing times and government will need to set expectations of what can be afforded and how services will be provided (State of Connecticut, 2016). The budget shortfall for Connecticut is expected to be over \$500 million by the end of the 2016 fiscal year and over \$900 million at the end of the 2017 fiscal year (State of Connecticut, 2016). Many state residents are stunned by the increasing deficit numbers (Jones, 2016). This current budget crisis has meant layoff notices going out to over 650 state employees with a projection for nearly 2,000 layoffs in the near future (Phaneuf, 2016). The main culprits for the current crisis are the lack of return on state investments and the inability to solve the stagnant wage growth (State of Connecticut, 2016).

Corporations which provide greatly needed tax revenue have threatened to leave the state in recent years including the two largest in the state, General Electric and Aetna (Dixon, 2015).

The state government in Connecticut provides funds that are an important part of the yearly budget for municipal towns. Called State-Owned Real Property Payment-In-Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) pays towns for real property tax losses due to exemptions and are made as direct payments to municipalities (State of Connecticut, 2013). These funds help to finance emergency services, including volunteer fire departments. The PILOT reimbursement program provides funds for towns to make up for the revenue lost due to state tax exemptions (O’Leary, 2014). The loss of these funds will have a negative impact on municipal budgets and may force them into a situation where services are cut or impose an increase of taxes in order to make up for the loss of revenue. Some municipalities would be hard hit by this cut, particularly Stratford, which would lose more than \$1.5 million (Amato, 2015). A smaller community, with a volunteer fire department will lose \$144,000 in PILOT funding, and the town awaits the train wreck that is coming (Amato, 2015). A city leader in Connecticut noted that PILOT disbursement of funds has continued to decline during recent years adding to fiscal strain, especially for smaller municipalities (O’Leary, 2014). There is not enough data provided from the review of literature to support any clear consensus on the final impact of PILOT funds being cut further or eliminated altogether. The budget over the next two or three fiscal years will provide the needed data to draw any conclusions.

## Summary

The review of the literature documented an alarming problem that exists in the volunteer fire service. Departments across the country are struggling to maintain adequate personnel to meet the needs of the communities being served. Keeping members in departments once they join is a tremendous challenge (Fleming, 2011). Volunteer fire departments are struggling to provide the multitude of services required in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century fire service. Recruitment and retention is increasingly difficult (Nedder, 2009). The fire service as a community is steeped in a rich tradition of family values and serving the community. Both historically and currently volunteer firefighters are vital for the protection of lives and property (Long, 2007).

The review of literature also highlighted the importance of volunteerism in organizations other than the fire service. This correlation is important as it provides an insight into motivational factors of individuals deciding to volunteer for an organization or group. Those motivational needs are extremely important for fire departments to understand when addressing recruitment and retention challenges. As Beehr et al, (2010) concluded, motivation has both internal and external factors that drive volunteers to work with other people in a team setting, such as a volunteer fire department.

Public service motivation was examined as an important element for fire service leaders to recognize and use to their advantage for recruitment and retention of volunteers. This type of motivation represents the beliefs, values, and attitudes that concern an individual's wider interest (Alexandru, 2004).

Extensive data is available detailing the decreasing numbers of volunteer firefighters over the past three decades. Hawkins (2015) noted that it was an issue

affecting volunteer fire departments nationwide. The situation of dwindling numbers within the volunteer fire service is getting worse (Thompson, 2005). In a three-year period from 2010-2012, the volunteer fire ranks were reduced by 8.6% (Hajishengallis, 2013). Turnover rates in some of these organizations can be as high as 50% (Wodica, 2012). An aging rural population and young adults that move out of their home towns are contributing factors to the declining numbers (Brown, 2014). The majority of volunteer firefighters in the United States are over 50 years old (Crawford, 2015). Fleming (2011) described the situation as a critical issue. The number of calls that volunteers are required to respond to have increased and their numbers continue to fall (Sloan, 2014). Decreased involvement creates challenges for volunteer fire department leaders that were not an issue in prior years (Story, 2007). The review of literature highlighted states throughout the country facing the issues of decreasing numbers, including Connecticut, which this study will gather data in an attempt to determine a grounded theory for these declines.

Another vital area of study is that of employee retention programs. The corporate arena provides excellent programs which the volunteer fire service can employ in their own organizations. Employers must take the time to ask employees what their expectations are during the orientation process (Terra, 2009). An area that the volunteer fire service can greatly benefit from is determining expectations of new members. A study by Greiner and Smith (2006) noted employer expectations and continued communication with employees has shown increased retention rates. Haeberle & Christmas (2006) noted that recruiting should be constantly improved for each candidate. In a different study by Christmas (2008) it was noted that creating a positive work

environment is vital for employee retention. Another important part of the retention process is to provide opportunities for career advancement (Zontek, & DuVernois, & Ogle, 2009). This also includes increasing opportunities for continued education, such as the benefits of participating in the FESHE program.

A landmark study completed concluded that retention programs were a vital part of an organizations mission (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953). This study looked at how volunteers can be motivated to get a sense of fulfillment in their work. Meeting the motivational needs of volunteers is now a widely accepted practice (McCurley & Lynch, 1989).

Recruitment and retention programs are vital to the continuation of the volunteer fire service. Rufer (2015) detailed the process of recruiting volunteers was not easy and can become frustrating. The people conducting recruitment programs need to have good inter-personal and communication skills (Markley, 2014). Workforce solution programs are helping volunteer fire departments in Connecticut to attract the best possible people (Schassler, 2015). Through the review of literature, it can be concluded that volunteer fire departments throughout the country are actively engaged in recruitment and retention practices. Incentive programs are an attractive option for both fire departments and members (Marello, 2014). Wodicka (2012) concluded that fire departments must take an approach that is proactive instead of reactive. There are several challenges that fire departments and members must address to overcome retention problems (Daskel, 2010). Creating an environment that focuses on teamwork and harmony is especially important as concluded by Geis (2015). Volunteer fire departments must create a strategy of recruitment and retention which in turn will build a strong, stable membership (Raffel,

2015). Recruitment and retention programs will continue to shape the future of the volunteer fire service. The success or failure depends on the willingness of fire departments to work on implementing programs that meet their goals and objectives.

The changing budget landscape throughout the nation, including Connecticut, was also examined. The review of literature showed that funding for volunteer fire departments has decreased, along with membership. Brown and Urbina (2014) concluded that lack of funding will force volunteer fire departments to focus on fundraising activities at a time when they need to focus on recruitment and retention. Communities want their fire department to continue to provide the same services only with funding that is more limited (Schroeder, 2015). Economic conditions, such as job losses, will force volunteer firefighters to work longer hours or more than one job which will have a negative effect on their participation (LeBlanc, 2015).

The state of Connecticut faces a financial crisis that will decrease important state funding to cities and towns (O'Leary, 2014). Budget projections as far out as 2017-2018 indicate a possible short fall of over \$2 billion dollars (State of Connecticut, 2016). There is no evidence that indicated an improved budget in the foreseeable future. Volunteer fire departments throughout the state need to brace for the fiscal reality that is upon them. One way to do that is to shore up membership ensuring vital services are maintained without interruption.

The continued downward spiral in volunteer firefighter numbers may force municipalities to hire more career firefighters, which has the potential to inflict an increased burden on tax-payers. Based upon the thorough review of literature that was completed, a gap exists regarding why volunteer numbers have steadily decreased. This



study contributed to the literature by exploring the causes that are leading to people not volunteering in the fire service and provided recommendations for improved recruitment and retention programs. This study may begin a process that revitalizes the volunteer fire service in Connecticut and brings participation numbers up to levels of sustainability for the future. It is imperative that volunteer firefighter membership numbers are increased along with solved problems of retention. In Chapter 3, a review of the methods, materials, procedures, participants, and research design of this study will be presented.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

Volunteer firefighters provide an essential service protecting lives and property. The results of this study indicated the need to improve current recruitment and retention efforts and help ensure departments follow the policies established by the State of Connecticut. The contributions from this study may enable municipal governments to make informed decisions on how to increase volunteer fire department recruitment and retention in their respective communities. The findings may contribute to safer communities that can depend on their fire department to respond in a timely manner with enough personnel to mitigate the emergency. The purpose of this qualitative was to explore and understand why the number of volunteer firefighters in Connecticut is decreasing. Finding led to recommendations for improved recruitment and retention programs to assist volunteer fire departments.

In this chapter, I will outline the qualitative research methods that were used to conduct this study. The chapter will provide a framework for examining the reasons behind the decrease in volunteer firefighter numbers in Connecticut. I included the design and the justification for that design, along with the instruments that were used in the study. The chapter concludes with a description of the data collection and analysis techniques used.

A series of interview questions was created to elicit responses from a participant pool of volunteer firefighters in the State of Connecticut. The population included volunteer fire departments that serve a population of no more than 25,000 citizens and respond to less than 1000 calls for service in a calendar year. According to the

Connecticut Department of Homeland Security, there are 36 volunteer fire departments serving 26 communities in Litchfield County, Connecticut (State of Connecticut, 2015). Twenty fire departments in the county fit the data and call volume profile, and those departments were invited to participate in this study. I interviewed former volunteer firefighters and chief officers using narrative inquiry, specifically oral histories to collect data. The advantage to a qualitative study is that a limited number of questions can be asked to several different participants (Patton, 2015).

### **Research Methodology**

The selected method of inquiry for this study was qualitative. This methodology was selected for a number of reasons. The heartbeat of this research study on decreasing volunteer firefighters is a human story. Riese, Carlsen, and Glenton (2014) noted an increase in the amount of research being conducted in society due to the rise in knowledge and determined that qualitative means of data gathering are best suited for this practice. Specifically, qualitative study increased in the health sciences, education, and organizational studies areas. This methodology of research searches for theories in the data via means that are inductive (Bilken, 2011). Qualitative research is a broad approach to research that uses many different methods to collect and analyze data. This type of research typically employs coding, especially for studies using interview questions, to break data segments down into smaller parts (Given, 2008). Research validity is the main component for qualitative research and supports the theory that is generated (Lub, 2015). Creating a theory out of the narrative that is developed helps to structure and shape an understanding of a problem (Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2011). According to McBeth and Jones (2010) the narrative is used to shape explanatory theories.

Qualitative research has several important strengths that make it a good choice for social science research. This form of research involves the collection of data in natural settings to people and places which are under study (Lub, 2015). Qualitative is conducted to answer a question by using a number of different data collection techniques. Qualitative studies provide detailed descriptions of specific events or situations (MacLaren & Mills, 2015). Qualitative research provides in-depth understanding into the experience of participants (Lub, 2015). The qualitative method addresses the why and how of decision-making and has a strong basis in the field of sociology to understand government and social programs (Patton, 2015). This method of research and data analysis takes time and energy (Lub, 2015). Choosing a methodology provides a map for what is being studied (Green, 2015).

### **Research Design**

The selection of a research design determines how a study will be carried out. The narrative design became the guidebook and enabled me to obtain answers for the research question. Narratives provide descriptions and settings of everyday life that can be used to give advice about the future (Kaplan, 1986). The narrative presents a rich texture of information into a rich texture that policymakers can understand because of the vivid descriptions that can be developed (Kaplan, 1986). The main ingredients for narrative analysis are truth, richness, consistency, congruency, and unity which (Kaplan, 1986). Narrative research helps to form a focused understanding of world topics (Jones & McBeth, 2010). Linking the past with the present is something that only narratives can accomplish (Kaplan, 1986).

Narratives are a protracted answer to a research question in a story form that can become an entire life story (Gray & Jones, 2016). Narratives have several functions including recounting stories to construct individual and group identities along with arguing a point and rallying people into action (Jones & Radelli, 2016). Gray and Jones (2016) concluded that narratives are a field of inquiry that has evolved over the years because scholars have been able to use them to respond to the different challenges of the times. The validity of narrative researches lies in the ability to inform future studies and contribute to social change by empowering participants (Jones & Radelli, 2016).

### **Participants in the Study**

Participants in this study included current chief officers and former members of volunteer fire departments in Litchfield County, Connecticut. I ensured that all participants were fully aware of the study and how the data provided were being used. A letter was sent to volunteer fire departments in Litchfield County asking for their participation in the study. The letter described the proposed study, the intent of the interviews, and how the data would be used. A copy of this letter is located in Appendix A. The study sample included 10 participants; five current chief officers and five former firefighters. Two participants from each fire department were interviewed for this study. Fire departments that consented to the study were asked to provide a list of former firefighters from the membership database so that I could contact them to interview. A consent form was also created that was provided to each interview participant prior to the commencement of data collection. The consent form ensured participants that the data collected would remain secure and names of participants would remain confidential.

Conditions set forth on the consent form were agreed upon prior to the commencement of interviews.

Based on the findings from this research study, fire departments in Connecticut will be able to make informed decisions on how to increase the numbers of volunteer firefighters recruited in their respective communities. As the data showed, volunteer numbers in Connecticut have been dropping for over two decades. Exploring the reasons behind this phenomenon may help fire departments solve their recruitment and retention issues problems. The selection of the primary data collection method also correlates well with a qualitative study. Participants were interviewed using interview protocols based on recommendations from a report by Jacob and Furgerson (2012). It is important to ensure that whatever data collection technique is used, participants feel comfortable with the process (Al-Yateem, 2012).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to gain an understanding of why people leave the volunteer fire service in Connecticut and how to improve recruitment and retention. I sought to determine the reasons why people leave the volunteer fire service and to provide recommendations for improving recruitment and retention programs. I analyzed the recruitment & retention policy for volunteer fire departments in the State of Connecticut and determined that participating departments were not following this policy.

### **Research Questions**

In alignment with the previously stated research problem and purpose of the study the following primary research question was posed: How can current volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention policies be improved in Connecticut to increase participation?

### **Ethical Protection of Participants**

In order to alleviate any ethical concerns, I ensured that all participants were fully aware of the study and how the data was to be used. Ethical protections meet all requirements of Walden's Institutional Review Board. Walden University's approval number for the study is 10-02-17-0113051, with an expiration date of October 1, 2018. I created a series of interview protocols to ensure any ethical or other risks associated were fully taken into account. The participants of the study were current chief officers and former members of volunteer fire departments serving Litchfield County, Connecticut. Audiotapes and transcripts of the interviews are stored in a secure location in my home. Any information contained in the interview transcripts which can be used to determine the identity of the interview participants was removed.

### **Procedures**

The guide detailed below were used to inform interview participants of the overall process including data collection, analysis, and validation of findings.

1. Sent out a letter detailing the nature of the study to 25 volunteer fire departments in Litchfield County, Connecticut.
2. A total of 11 departments responded stating their willingness to participate in the study. I reached out to the five departments that were the first to respond.

3. Five fire chiefs from the selected departments were contacted. Contact information for former members of those departments was provided by the fire chiefs.
4. One-on-one interviews were scheduled with each participant. I drove to meet participants at a place of their choice.
5. At each interview, participants received consent form which they signed. This form provided details of the study being conducted, how the data was used, and consent for the interviews to be audiotaped.
6. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed per the steps outlined in the Data Collection and Data Analysis sections of this chapter.
7. Follow-up interviews were discussed with participants; however, none were scheduled.

### **Data Collection**

Interviewing was the primary method of data collection. The interview process primarily used open-ended questions to encourage detailed responses using interview guide for assistance (Doody, 2013). It is recommended that new qualitative researchers use interview protocols to help collect data (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Interviewing is a powerful format in qualitative research (Al-Yateem, 2012). In a qualitative study an observation of subjects would coincide with the research problem and look to directly answer research questions. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions provide a good format to generate responses (Schilling, 2009). Mishra (2015) noted that a researcher needs to conduct qualitative interviews in a manner that makes the process enjoyable and engaging. There is greater potential for better information using open



ended questions than trying to guess at all of the reasons for retention challenges (Schilling, 2009). By answering the research question a long-range plan may be developed to increase the number of volunteer firefighters to ensure swifter responses with adequate personnel to mitigate emergencies. Before beginning to collect data, a researcher should provide time to tell participants a personal story or anecdote to create a feeling of ease (Al-Yateem, 2012). Qualitative research has several tools for collecting data, which are free of bias. A researcher should use the best tools based on upon the interaction required (Mishra, 2015). Recorded data is often transcribed for data analysis later (Al-Yateem, 2012). As data collection begins, interview protocols become a set of questions along with a guide for walking a new qualitative researcher through the process (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

To address each the research question participants were asked the questions and permitted to answer at their discretion. Follow-up questions were asked as needed. Once completed interview participants were debriefed and excused from the interview process. An area that needs to be carefully monitored during this process is making sure participants stay on topic and do not venture off into stories that are unrelated (Doody, 2012). The interviews should be audio recorded for transcription during the data collection phase (Mishra, 2015). Single individual interviews provide sources of data through firsthand accounts of events (Mckether, Gluesing & Riopelle, 2009). McLellan, MacQueen, and Neidig (2003) noted that audio taped interviews are best supported by transcribing or writing detailed notes. The first step in reducing the data by a researcher is completed when a decision is made on what to transcribe and what will be removed (McLellan et al, 2003). This process is challenging and needs to follow the level of

analysis that will be completed, which may not require a complete transcription (McLellan et al, 2003). I transcribed each interview verbatim from the audio recordings.

### **Data Analysis**

Utilizing a comprehensive data analysis process ensured that the interview responses were descriptive enough to provide a rich context of usable data. Analyzing data sets for qualitative studies requires organizing and coding data into themes (Wahyuni, 2002). This analysis involves ensuring that data is labeled, categorized, and accounted (Charmaz, 2006). Each of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed to determine relevant themes. That data set was coded using the NVivo 11 software package. Data was analyzed shortly after the interview process completed which helped ensure information obtained remained accurate and current.

As previously noted, interviews were the primary source of data collection. The transcribed data was analyzed line-by-line. This method breaks data into segments, looks for assumptions, takes out actions and meanings, is able to determine significance, and identify any gaps (Charmaz, 2006). The final step in the data analysis process was to categorize the data, which involves looking for a collection of instances from the data for issue-relevant meanings and patterns (Douglass & Moustakes, 1985). This involved identifying themes in the data. Using those methods, emerging themes and patterns were extrapolated, which helped answer the research question and will provide Connecticut volunteer fire departments with solutions to solve the personnel shortage problem.

Some themes that were expected to be found with former members were the lack of time they were able to provide to fire departments, personality conflicts with

department personnel and/or chief officers, poor communication within the department, and membership guidelines that were not clear. Themes expected with chief officer interviews were failure to follow or not being aware of the Connecticut policy on recruitment and retention, ineffective committee work, and not enough time to focus on recruitment efforts.

Coding is a process for organizing data to develop theories which can be further researched (Walker & Myrick, 2006). For the study, recommended coding stages by Corbin and Strauss (2014) were used to analyze the data these stages are: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, (c) selective coding. Open coding analyzes data line-by-line to create units of meaning that are separated (Orlovic, 2015). During axial coding, sections of data were reconstructed to create a system of categories and/or sub-categories (Orlovic, 2015). Coded data gathered and merged in order to compare and contrast categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Selective coding breaks apart data into themes that are pertinent to the research questions (Orlovic, 2015). Using the four key elements of narrative policy analysis; setting, characters, plot, and moral aided coding the data into themes. Relationships between categories and themes link participants shedding light on the phenomenon being studied (Rabinovich & Kacen, 2010).

The software program NVivo 11 was used to assist in coding data into categories and phrases. It is a systematic system allowing for a researcher to analyze data into smaller segments. The process of coding enables a researcher to analyze and compare the selected data and to recognize any patterns that involve further investigation (Saldana, 2009). The most complex part of the data analysis phase is properly coding transcribed interviews (Mckether et al, 2009). Computers now have an important role in assisting

researchers with data analysis, the manual process still has a place, and most likely a combination of the two will be utilized (McLellan et al, 2003).

The first step in the data analysis process was to code the interview transcripts using the NVivo software package. NVivo allows for a number of active links, moving from node to node with ease (Bringer, Johnston & Brackenridge, 2004). Coding all parts of a project is an ideal approach and is the simplest method for organizing data (Tagg, 2002). Nodes represent ideas allow coding to be organized into data trees, which can be restructured as needed (Crowley, Harre, & Tagg, 2002). NVivo provides some very good tools that allow researchers to find and filter data in order to get results (Wiltshier, 2011). The querying feature is also a very reliable tool for searching data for quick results based on the coding that has previously taken place (Stanford University, 2021).

### **Verification of Findings**

Once the data analysis process was completed the findings of the study were verified. There were several avenues available to perform this verification process. The study used three steps detailed by Creswell (2013); member checking, clarifying bias of the researcher, and using peer debriefing (Creswell, 2013).

Using the member checking technique allowed the participants of the study to view the findings and determine whether or not those findings were accurate. In the study, participants were members of a volunteer fire department and have expert knowledge of the volunteer fire service. Interview participants were sent copies of their transcripts to ensure I correctly captured the data. Each participant verified the accuracy of the interview transcripts.

A peer reviewed the data findings. The reviewer has graduate level work in qualitative studies and experience in the volunteer fire service. Researchers contribute to a peer review process by providing analysis for scientific studies (Petchey, Fox & Haddon 2013). Specifically, the selected reviewer for the study has a PhD, performed a qualitative study centered on the volunteer fire service, and is currently a chief officer in a combination fire department. The reviewer was provided with full transcripts of the interviews, information on how the data was processed and analyzed, the types of participant in the study, and the findings. A form of peer-reviewed research is used regularly in research and makes significant contributions to the overall process (Gallo, Carpenter, Irwin, McPartland, & Travis 2014). The reviewer approved the data collected and verified the recommendations and conclusions of this study.

The third and final step in the verification of findings process was clarifying the bias of the researcher. I am a longtime volunteer firefighter and understand the many difficulties associated with being an active firefighter, juggling a career, and supporting a family. As discussed at length in previous chapters, calls for service can come at any moment. There have been numerous occasions when I have left home on Thanksgiving or Christmas right before dinner was served. I missed my children's sport activities and even a couple of birthday parties. These experiences can create bias, which may have led to pre-conceived feelings on the researcher and data that were collected. By employing a self-reflective attitude, I was able to contain and separate these feelings from the study that were conducted. I view the study as an extremely important and vital step into solving the crisis of membership within the volunteer fire service. Setting aside bias and rushing to any predetermined judgments were removed from the process.

## Summary

This chapter detailed the research methodology and design for the study. The rationale for conducting a qualitative study was detailed. The selective research methodology was qualitative with a focus on narrative policy analysis. The policy being analyzed for the study is the State of Connecticut policy on recruitment and retention. Participants were volunteer firefighters serving fire departments in Litchfield County, Connecticut. Five current chief officers and five former firefighters were interviewed using the interview questions outlined in this chapter. As detailed interviewing participants for a qualitative study have several advantages and this method of data collection was proven successful in many past studies. A series of interview protocols ensured that participant information remained safe and confidential. Ethical considerations were also carefully adhered to during the collection and analysis phase of the study.

Once the data was collected, I analyzed using a qualitative method of coding provided by Corbin and Strauss (2014). Three different types of coding were used; open, axial, and selective. The NVivo 11 software package provided the tools for analyzing the data collected. NVivo provides qualitative researchers with a tremendous number of tools for organizing, categorizing, coding, and filtering data of a qualitative study. When the analysis was completed, data must be verified. Using methods prescribed by Creswell data was member checked, peer-reviewed, and clean of researcher bias.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of why people leave the volunteer fire service in Connecticut. Much of the research conducted for the review of literature addressed the declining numbers however; researchers did not identify the root cause(s) for these shrinking numbers. The current study addressed the State of Connecticut policy on recruitment and retention to determine whether volunteer fire departments follow this policy. I interviewed former volunteer firefighters and current chief officers in five Litchfield County, Connecticut fire departments.

In this chapter, I provide an analysis of the data and how the data were coded. I present the results of the study as the following themes: lack of recruitment and retention policies, personality conflicts, and failure to follow Connecticut policy on recruitment and retention. The process consisted of collecting data via 10 interviews; establishing groups of data codes using NVivo 11 software; developing themes from the coding process; analyzing the data using open, axial, and selective coding methods; and developing conclusions. The main goal of interviewing, collecting, and analyzing the data was to answer the primary research question of this study: How can current volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention policies be improved in Connecticut to increase participation?

Participant responses were separated into categories using NVivo 11 to search for patterns and themes. By analyzing the data provided by the participants, I was able to determine a connection between the conceptual framework and the literature review provided in Chapter 2. The data indicated that numbers of volunteers are decreasing,

current recruitment and retention programs need improvement, and fire chiefs are not aware of the policy on recruitment and retention provided by the State of Connecticut. This chapter presents the data analysis in relation to the research question, followed by a summary and interpretation of the results.

### **Setting**

All of the interviews for this study were conducted at the participating chief officer's or former member's fire department in response to each participant's preference. To obtain the 10 participants, a letter of intent to participate in the study was sent to volunteer fire departments in Litchfield County, Connecticut. The first five departments that responded positively, after having verified that they met the criteria for the study, were sent a letter of cooperation (see Appendix B). The signed cooperation letters were returned to me electronically prior to the interviews. Once each participant greeted me at their individual scheduled time and fire department, we moved to the private office that was provided by the organization. Interview times ranged from approximately 20 to 30 minutes. All of the interviews were conducted in a private office with only me and the participant present. The private office was secluded enough to ensure a quiet place to conduct the interviews with no distractions

### **Demographics**

The participants were contacted via e-mail and phone to coordinate an interview time and location. I met each participant and proceeded into a private office. At that point we made ourselves comfortable and I set up two recording devices, one for audio recording and one for transcription. Each participant was handed the Interview Consent Form. Participants signed the consent form, and we were ready to begin the formal



interview. No incentive for participation in the study was offered, and the decision as to whether or not to participate was left up to the individual participant. The 10 participants in this study consisted of five chief officers and five former members, who were all male. Their educational levels ranged from high school to bachelor's degrees. Each participant was provided with the opportunity to remove themselves from the interview at any time. I explained to each participant what the purpose of the study was and how the data collected were going to be used. I also told participants that the interviews were being record and transcribed. I told them that their identity would remain confidential and refer to them as chief officer and former member. They were also told that they could review the research findings were open to them to view after the study was completed. Data were secured, and I was the only one who had access to them.

The five chief officers who were interviewed each had more than 10 years of experience in the fire service. They also had more than 5 years of experience as a junior officer in their respective fire department. Each chief officer participant had fewer than 5 years in their current administrative rank. All of the five former members who were interviewed served less than 5 years in the fire service before leaving. In terms of occupation, four of the chief officer participants are employed in the public safety field. Of the former members, two have full-time employment in the public safety field. None of the former members interviewed served as a junior officer in their fire department.

### **Data Collection Process**

The data collection process was initiated after the Walden University institutional review board (IRB) granted approval. Walden University's IRB approval number for the study is 10-02-17-0113051. Walden University's established research protocols were

followed to ensure the validity of the study and compliance with the university's ethical procedural guidelines. Throughout the interviews, data collection, and data analysis process, all of Walden University's established protocols for conducting interviews that involved human subjects over the age of 18 years were followed. Interviews were scheduled at an available and convenient time for each participant. All of the interviews were completed at a fire station, which was the preferred location for each participant.

Most of the questions for the chief officers and former members were open-ended and allowed participants to answer freely. Each interview question was constructed with the goal of answering the research question of this study. The interview questions allowed participants to share their feelings thoughts on recruitment and retention in their respective fire departments.

When we entered the private office to conduct the interview, I asked the participant to read and sign the interview consent form. Prior to the commencement of the interview, I also informed participants of the recording and transcription devices present. I reviewed the letter of cooperation and consent form to make sure participants fully understood the expectations and were comfortable with the process. I reviewed how the data being collected were going to be used and how confidentiality would be ensured. Each participant agreed to the terms and conditions and how the data were going to be used for completion of the study. At that point, I explained the two devices that were present. Each interview was recorded using the Smart Recording application on my personal Verizon cell phone. An i-Pad was also used that recorded and provided a rough transcription of each interview. Both recording devices were set on a table between me and the participant. The devices performed perfectly with no loss of data during the

transcription process. I also took notes during each interview detailing my initial reaction to the responses from the participants. At the conclusion of each interview, I thanked the participant and turned off the recording devices. The settings provided a private, uninterrupted location that was free of distractions for each interview. Overall, I was very pleased with how each participant engaged in the process.

Each interview was downloaded to my personal computer from the two recording devices and saved on a thumb drive. Once the downloads were complete, my Verizon phone and I-Pad were deleted all files related to the study. The thumb drive has been used as a back-up device and is securely stored. Access to my personal computer is password protected.

During the transcription process, I used the rough transcription provided by the I-Pad. Each transcript was roughly transcribed so I listened to each of the interview recordings for a complete transcription. I reviewed the recordings and transcripts a second time to ensure 100% accuracy. Along with the digital recordings, field notes were also used to document key points during the interviews. The field notes were then reviewed to create brief journal entries that reflected key points mentioned during each interview. The notes contained a list of frequently used words that served as the main source to identify open-coding categories.

Table 1

*Coded Sources/Themes*

<u>Name</u>	<u>Sources</u>	<u>References</u>
CT recruit/retention	5	5
Lack of recruitment	5	15
PSM	10	17
Retention	25	43
Time	10	17
<i>Total</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>97</i>

*Note:* Sources = Interview questions. References = the number of responses related to themes.

### **Data Analysis**

To assist in the data analysis process, I used the NVivo 11 software tool. The three coding stages by Corbin and Strauss (2014) were used to analyze the data those stages are: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding. To begin the analysis, I uploaded each of the transcripts into the NVivo program. I placed the transcripts in the sources file as internal documents. I made two files; chief officers and former members and placed each transcript into their respective file. I read each of the interview transcripts and wrote down a list of open codes that became the characterizing codes and categories in NVivo. These codes were turned into nodes with the NVivo program, and files were created for each node. As the data was further broken down into axial codes, core themes began to emerge. I looked for conditions, context, interrelationships, and consequences of the data. Finally, after breaking the axial codes down further I systematically looked for direct links from the data that formed story lines and relationships. They are as follows: lack of awareness of state policy on recruitment and retention, lack of recruitment, public service motivation, retention, and time. These

themes (selective codes) also follow the narrative policy analysis and themes of setting, characters, plot, and moral discussed in Chapters 1 and 3. Relationships between categories and themes link participants shedding light on the phenomenon being studied (Rabinovich & Kacen, 2010). Within each, I sourced transcript data that I could directly attribute to specific themes. In total, I sourced each fire chief interview 14 times and each former member interview 12 times.

Text queries in NVivo enabled me to search the body of interviews to pinpoint all text that was relevant to each of the established codes. When this level coding was concluded, I coded the combined text and assigned it to a node or organizational classification within the NVivo program. By analyzing the conditions and context within each node, I moved back and forth within the data to identify relationships among the open codes. This process of axial coding provided a road map to make connections between the codes. As I continued to analyze the data I began to selectively code the categories and interrelationships to form a storyline of what were occurring within the study. To assist with axial and selective coding I used the NVivo program and created relationships for several nodes. In total, 7 relationships were created for nodes that were associated with one another or leads to a result. These features were helpful in shaping the storyline and bringing the data together. I also used the NVivo feature memo to document my initial and final reactions to the data analysis process.

Table 2

*Relationships*

<u>From Source</u>	<u>Node</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>Consequence</u>
Former member	CT recruit & retention	Leads to	Lack of recruitment
Chief officer	CT recruit & retention	Leads to	Loss of membership
Former member	Recruitment	Associated	Number of members
Former member	Retention	Associated	Time
Former member	Retention programs	Leads to	Loss of membership
Chief officer	Monetary programs	Associated	Loss of membership
Chief officer	Recruitment	Leads to	Loss of membership

*Note:* Sources = Interview participants. Node = Themes. Type = How the aligned source and node affect each other. Consequence = End result of relationship.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness, no alterations were made to the strategies discussed in Chapter 3. Confidentiality for all of the research participants were maintained at all times. I ensured that all research participants were given an opportunity to employ free choice to participate in the research study and were advised that their participation was voluntary. Additionally, they were informed that they had the right to cease participation at any time. To reduce potential personal biases, I summarized the key points that were documented in the interview procedures and verified their accuracy with participants before conclusion of the interviews. To promote rich, well-informed results at the end of the interviews each participant was asked if they had anything else they would like to add that was not addressed.

During the interview process, probing questions were used to seek clarification when needed. Participants were assured that their additional input would be used to make modifications to accurately reflect their responses. I went back to the field notes during

the data analysis process to remind myself of how any of them could possibly influence the participants and to update the data analysis process. I also referred to these notes in order to caution myself of my own feelings and experiences to minimize their influence.

### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding why people leave the volunteer fire service in Connecticut. One of the primary goals is to help researchers create solutions for improving recruitment and retention strategies. The primary research question is: How can current volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention policies be improved in Connecticut to increase participation? Below are the specific interview questions that were asked of participants.

**Former Firefighters:** Why did you become a member of the volunteer fire department in your community? How many years did you serve in the volunteer fire department? Was compassion to help others a factor that motivated you to join the fire department? Any family legacy in the fire service? Highest level of education? What is your occupation? During your time in the fire service what was your marital status? Did you have children during your time in the fire service? Were you recruited to join the fire department? Did you know of any recruitment programs in your fire department for getting new members? What were the contributing factors that caused you to leave the fire department? Would you consider coming back to the fire department? Were there any retention efforts in your former fire department? Do you think your former fire department recruits and retains members sufficiently?

**Chief Officers:** Why did you become a member of the volunteer fire department in your community? Do you have a family legacy in the fire service? How many years

have you been in the fire service? How long have you served as an officer? How many of those years as a chief officer? What is your occupation? What is your marital status? Do you have children? Are you aware that the state of Connecticut has a policy for recruitment and retention for volunteer fire departments? Were there any specific motivational factors that lead you to join the fire service? Are there any recruitment programs in place in your department? Does your department have any formal or specific methods that are utilized to retain members? Are your department's recruitment and retention efforts sufficient, and how can they be improved? How many current members do you have that are active? Over the past decade, how has that number moved, increased or decreased? Does your town support the recruitment and retention efforts in your department? Would you recruit a specific demographic from your community? How would you like to leave your position as a chief officer in terms of recruitment and retention?

My analysis identified common themes that emerged from the participant's interviews and the relationships of their experiences. The data analysis and coding process identified five themes that consistently emerged among the data.

### **Theme 1: Lack of Awareness of State Policy on Recruitment and Retention**

The current policy on recruitment and retention in Connecticut states that all volunteer fire departments should have recruitment campaigns and procedures in place to ensure member retention (State of Connecticut, 2000). One of the questions asked of the chief officers (CO) was to ascertain their awareness of this policy. Each of the chief officers responded that they were not aware that Connecticut had a policy for recruitment and retention. My reflection was that the chief officers were as much surprised at the



question as they were of their own response. This policy states that pools of personnel should be identified and recruited for membership; such as municipal employees and local private employers (State of Connecticut, 2000). CO4 looked at me very inquisitively when I asked the question. He took a beat and leaned back in his chair. I asked him the question again and he simply said, “No.” I asked a follow up question, “Does that surprise you?” He replied, “Yes, I am not sure if it is a failure on my part to not know about it or a failure with the state for not sharing it.” Similarly, CO2 looked at me puzzled answered, “No” and wanted to know how long the policy had been in place. Two of the relationships that NVivo was able to categorize were that unawareness of the recruitment and retention policy leads to a lack of recruitment. This lack of awareness also leads to a loss of membership numbers because of the documented decrease of the number of members in the volunteer fire departments interviewed.

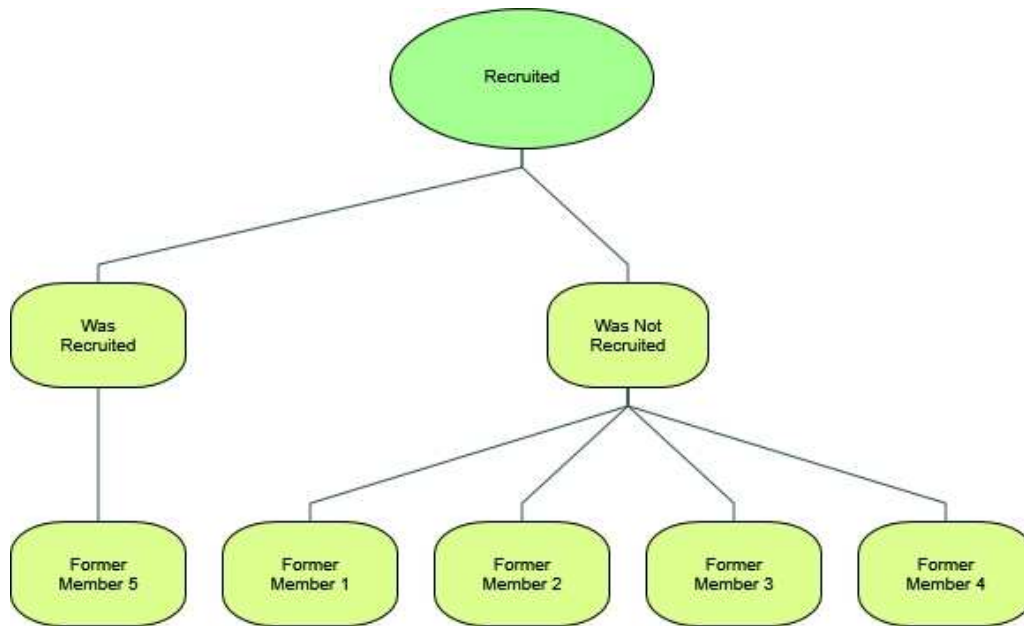
## **Theme 2: Lack of Recruitment**

The second theme that emerged was the lack of recruitment taking place in the participating fire departments. When asked about recruitment programs in place CO1 and CO3 reported they conduct an annual open house at their fire departments each year. In Connecticut, more than 80 percent of the state's 26,000 fire personnel are volunteers; many departments are experiencing a volunteer shortage and use open houses for awareness and recruitment (Day, 2016). CO2 and CO5 stated that their departments rely on “word of mouth”; fire department members bringing their friends, family, or neighbors to possibly join. CO4 recruited mostly from the “junior program,” which is a program designed for high school students that are used in several communities to familiarize youth with the fire service.

Former members (FM) were also asked about recruitment programs in the departments they had served. The answers aligned with the corresponding chief officer statements. FM1 and FM3 talked about the open house event organized annually. FM2 and FM5 did not identify any specific program. I asked if a “word of mouth” method was used and they both answered affirmatively. FM4 discussed the junior program as the primary method of recruitment.

I asked each chief officer if they were satisfied with their recruitment efforts. All chief officers stated that more needed to be done in the area of recruitment and retention. CO2 indicated a desire to get the message out via social media sites. CO1 and CO3 discussed reaching out more to the community with special programs or mailings.

Another area connected with recruitment examined how former members were brought into the fire service. I asked all former member participants if they themselves were recruited. Only one, FM5 was recruited into the fire service by a specific program. The other former members came into the fire service by different methods. FM1 stated, “I arrived here on my own.” I asked if he had any prior knowledge of the fire service, and he responded that he did not, “just thought it would be cool.” FM2 had a family legacy in the fire service but was not recruited, “decided to give it a try, my dad had been talking about it for a long time. I thought it was something I would enjoy.” FM4 reported that he was not recruited but “felt a duty to help in the community.”



*Figure 1.* A mind map tool created by the NVivo software system showing a graphic representation of Recruited vs. Not Recruited former members.

Recruiting within the community is the primary method of obtaining new members. What type of members did chief officers want to recruit? Were they looking for younger members or more established members of the community, such as those that recently purchased a home and are a long-term community resident? CO1 replied, “Younger members are the key to our fire department.” CO2 also discussed getting younger members and using youth programs to recruit. CO3 is looking for “established members of the community. Those homeowners with responsibilities and a drive to see the town well protected.” CO4 and CO5 had no specific demographics in mind. CO4 simply stating, “I will take anyone that walks through the front door.”

Finally, in the area of recruitment, I asked about the support that the town government provides to their respective departments. CO1 and CO5 spoke negatively about the town. CO5 stated, “the town gives us very little support.” CO’s 2, 3, and 4

spoke positively of the town support. Each indicating budgets were well-funded and the town personnel take an interest in the fire department.

### **Theme 3: Public Service Motivation**

The third theme was public service motivation and also served as the selected theoretical framework of the study. It is based on research completed by Perry (1997) on public service motivation (PSM). Perry developed a model for studying PSM using the theoretical framework that the motivation of individuals to serve stems from four main areas. They include policy making and politics, public interest or civic duty, compassion, and self-sacrifice (Perry, 1997). I asked all 10 participants questions related to their motivational factors for joining the fire service. Using NVivo, I created nodes and relationships to assist with the analysis of data from the PSM questions. CO4 stated, “We were taught that neighbors helped neighbors. For me it was a no brainer to be a member of the fire service.” CO2 replied, “I enjoy helping people and making a difference in my community.” CO3 and CO5 discussed “compassion” they had for helping people in their time of need and “giving back to the community.” CO1 discussed years of public service and seeing “happy expressions on faces after many of our responses.”

FM4 was the only individual of the group indicating a civic duty as motivation for joining the fire service. FM2 stated that he was drawn into it because of a family legacy as a motivational factor but could not specify a specific PSM factor. FM 1, 3, and 5 did not join the fire service with any of the PSM factors. FM3 walked into the fire department because of proximity to his job and “wanting to see what it was all about.” While, FM5 noticed a recruitment banner hanging from the side of the building. I asked a follow up question to FM1, FM3, and FM5 based on their answers; they each replied that

PSM was not a factor they consciously thought about when becoming a fire fighter. I also asked them if they believed that lacking a strong PSM was a factor in leaving the fire service. FM1 stated that it was possible “with that motivation I would have stayed in the department, but I cannot say that for sure.” FM3 and FM5 did not feel that the lack of PSM was a contributing factor in leaving. Chief officers have a greater sense of public service motivation versus the responses from former members.

#### **Theme 4: Retention**

The fourth theme that emerged had to do with retention, which is the ability of an organization to keep the same employees. It is extremely important for volunteer organizations to keep their members for a long period of time. All of the participants were asked questions in this area.

Chief officer participants were asked about any retention programs currently in place at their respective fire departments. One of the difficulties with retaining employees is salary and limited chances for advancement (Zontek, DuVernois, & Ogle, 2009). Volunteer fire departments by their nature do not provide a traditional salary, but other monetary incentives can be set in place. In response to the question of retention programs, CO1 indicated that his department gives out service awards once a year, for example, Fire Fighter of the Year. CO2 discussed the paid-on-call program his department utilizes which pays members \$5.00 for each call for service, training, or meeting that is attended. CO2’s members also receive a tax abatement check from the town if members respond to 25% of the overall calls for service in a calendar year. CO2 stated, “One of the best things we do, in my opinion, is recognize the efforts of members through annual awards. It is a great night in which we all get together and talk about the

past year. The comradery really shows on this night.” In response to the question on utilizing retention programs, CO3 discussed a “length of service” program his department has in place. It is a pension program that has been “fully vested by the town for over thirty years.” CO3 also noted that he does not believe this type of program keeps younger members around the fire department. “I don’t think it is really a motivator for the younger people. Retirement is not something they are thinking about at that stage in their life, for better or worse. What helps is staying busy, training, and advancement through the ranks.” Gaffney (2005) concluded career development and succession planning as good retention strategies. CO4 also has a “small” pension program in place for members that serve at least 15 years. However, CO4 noted that the pension program alone, which is all they currently have in place, is not going to keep younger members around for the long term. “The pension program works much better for older members. The younger guys do not care about retirement. I am much more concerned about keeping the younger guys here for ten years than the older members.” CO5 discussed morale and engagement as the driving factors behind retaining members in his fire department. Davis (2013) concluded employee morale is a major factor for continued retention. “Every Monday night we do something here, a big difference from just two years ago. We train, go over equipment, work on apparatus. Guys say that is what keeps them coming back. It’s all about trying to get better for the next time and that is our big focus.” CO5 noted that no financial benefits were in place as the budget does not allow for such a program.

Continuing this theme with chief officers I asked how their retention programs could be improved. CO1 talked about instituting a paid-on-call program as an incentive for members to stay. CO1 mentioned that such a program had been discussed in past

years but was never given the time needed to properly study how to get it started. CO2 had no specific retention programs in mind that could be added or improved upon. I asked CO2 a follow-up question based on the concept of employee satisfaction and work atmosphere. Davis (2013) concluded creating work environments that support employees improves morale and job satisfaction, which is a key retention factor. CO2 said that he did think there was validity in that type of retention program. “It can get confrontational here on occasion. There is a lot of type a personalities in the fire service and throwing those personalities in one room can be explosive. A work area that fosters open, yet respectful discussions should be our goal.” CO3 stated that a program for tax abatement could be in place before the end of 2018. “We also are very close to providing extra gratuities for becoming an officer trying to instill the younger members to want advancement in the department.” CO4 wants to develop a retention program that focuses on long-term membership. “One of the ideas we have been bouncing around is being able to pay for training that members want to take. Right now, it is an out-of-pocket expense because our training budget does not support it.” CO5 discussed the need to move toward a paid-on-call and/or pension plan as something that may entice long-term membership. “Right now, the budget simply will not support additional expenses.”

I asked former members about their reason for leaving the fire service, and if there were any specific contributing factors that caused them to walk away. FM1 stated that a combination of caring for family and time were the reasons for leaving. “It became too much for me to manage. Something had to give, and it was the fire department.” FM2 discussed buying a new home as a major factor for leaving. “House needed and still needs a lot of work.” FM2 also talked about his work schedule and the 60 to 70 hours a

week he can average during the winter months. “When working that many hours in a week, it is really hard to get much else accomplished, especially needing to work on a house. I did not feel like I could contribute what was needed to the fire department.” At great length FM3 discussed the interpersonal conflicts and “disorganized training” as the primary reasons for leaving the fire department. “Lots of cliques between members and making drama out of nothing I felt like they targeted certain people that did not fit into their group and drove people away.” I asked FM3 if he could provide a specific example of this type of group dynamic and behavior. “I was in school full-time and working. As a result, I could not make meetings and many calls. I told them about this and for a while it was okay. A few months later I got a letter saying I was not making calls and meetings. It was very disheartening.” FM4 described some of the reasons for leaving the fire service as wanting to spend time with family and the difficulties in juggling many other responsibilities. FM5 also noted increased responsibilities at his job along with longer hours. “I felt there was some pressure on me to make a choice to come around the fire department more or step aside. It might have just been my perception, but the one thing I could afford to lose was the fire department so I left.” I asked a follow-up question for FM’s 1, 2, 3, and 4 based upon the monetary retention program used in their departments as described by the chief officers I wanted to know if a change or increase in monetary incentives would possibly bring them back into the fire department. They each responded that monetary incentives alone would not be a motivational factor for returning to the fire service.



### **Theme 5: Time**

The final theme that emerged from the data was time. In regards to my study this refers to the time that former members could not make for the fire service because of work and/or family commitments. Coding the data using open, axial, and selective methods showed a relationship between former members and their ability to remain in the fire service. The use of NVivo also helped in shaping this theme together. I created a node for time in NVivo along with completing a query search on how often the word “time” was used by former members. In total the word was spoken 17 times in question responses, or 12.09% of the weighted average for the complete former member transcripts.

FM’s 1, 2, 4, and 5 stated that time was a contributing factor for them leaving the fire service. They were not able to juggle work, family, and other responsibilities with the demands placed upon them by their fire departments. FM4 stated, “I simply did not have enough room in my day-to-day schedule for the fire department. It was disappointing and I understand that the fire department isn’t something that you can just come and go from whenever it is convenient. It is dangerous work, and you need to be able to attend calls, training, and other events.” FM5 described his work hours as “being out of control” but as he was new to his profession, he needed to give that commitment. “Lots of weekday and weekend work. I was at the bottom of the food chain. When boss called I had to respond and as a result, I started missing a lot of calls, trainings, and meetings.”

I asked a follow-up question of each former member on their willingness to return to the fire service if circumstances changed. FM1 stated, “To come back now would be difficult. And honestly the longer it is, the less likely I am to return.” FM2 discussed the

many conversations he has had with his family about returning to the fire service, however, has made no definite plans to do so. FM3 stated, “At this point in my life and looking ahead, I would say no.” FM4 said that with work schedule changes it was a possibility. “However, I have no real control over my schedule.” FM5 stated, “I want to come back. I did not care for how I left feeling the pressure to make certain choices. Maybe that was an overreaction on my part.”

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the findings and results of the research methods and protocols described in Chapter 3. This chapter presented the findings from interviewing 10 participants providing a sample of chief officers and former members of five volunteer fire departments in Litchfield County, Connecticut. I also presented the procedures for collecting and analyzing the data obtained from the interviews and an analysis of the results of the study. The transcribed interview responses were analyzed and coded with three coding stages by (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) open, axial, and selective. Emerging from this process were five themes (1) lack of awareness of state policy on recruitment and retention, (2) lack of recruitment, (3) public service motivation, (4) retention, and (5) time. These themes were reviewed from the transcripts of the participant responses to develop interrelationships and storylines that connected directly with the main research question of this study.

The data analysis confirmed that each of the five themes discussed in this are related. The NVivo 11 software package was used to help separate the interview transcripts into manageable sets of data that could be set up in nodes for open coding. I was able to take those open codes and examine them closer using axial and selective

coding forming relationships with the data. NVivo displayed those relationships as two types; associated and leads to. By placing the data into the five themes that were created through the final selective coding process, participant responses to questions are directly connected with the primary research question of this study. The methods used to ensure the quality of the research and data analysis were also discussed. A large section of this chapter presented the research findings on the themes related to the main research question of this study. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the lack of recruitment and retention in the Connecticut volunteer fire service. Findings from this study indicated that public service motivational factors of the Perry study (1997) are important factors in retention of volunteer firefighters. When those motivations are present individuals are less likely to remain in the volunteer fire service which caused a shortage of firefighters. The methods used to ensure the quality of the research were also discussed. The majority of this chapter presented the research findings on the themes related to recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters. Chapter 5 will focus on the implications of these alongside conclusions and recommendations from the study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, Recommendations

In this qualitative study, I explored recruitment and retention in five volunteer fire departments in Litchfield County, Connecticut. I identified the main themes from the data collected from the 10 study participants, who included five chief officers and five former members. Interview data were analyzed with the assistance of the NVivo 11 software package to code the interview responses as open, axial, and selective. By selectively coding the data, I was to develop a story line of recruitment and retention in participating fire departments.

This chapter includes my interpretation of the findings for each of the themes presented in Chapter 4. I also provide recommendations based on the findings and review the implications for social change. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The NVivo qualitative software package was used to code and determine themes from the interview transcripts of the 10 study participants. The participants represented chief officers and former members from five volunteer fire departments in Litchfield County, Connecticut. Most interview questions were open-ended, allowing the participants to answer with as much detail as they felt necessary. The themes that were identified represented answers to the research questions, which were central in answering the primary research question of this study. In the next section I will break down each of the themes discussed in Chapter 4 and interpret findings in the context of previous studies and the theoretical framework.

**Theme 1: Lack of Awareness of State Policy on Recruitment and Retention**

One of the central themes of this study was on how well volunteer fire departments recruit and retain members. The State of Connecticut has a policy for volunteer fire departments on recruitment and retention. As described in Chapter 4, when chief officer participants were asked about their knowledge of this policy, each officer responded that they did not know it was available. I also noted a few expressions of confusion and disbelief from these participants when the question was asked. These responses are concerning for a number of reasons. Additional data in this study confirmed the lack of institutional knowledge displayed in the interview responses. Each of the chief officer participants indicated that they were unaware of the state policy on recruitment and retention. Using the NVivo program, I was able to identify relationships that have led to a lack of recruitment and a loss of membership in the participating fire departments. The relationship between chief officers and their lack of awareness of state policy on recruitment and retention led to loss of membership throughout 80% of the fire departments in my study. Of the five chief officers that who were interviewed, only CO2, stated that recruitment numbers had increased during the previous few years. The remaining four chief officers noted that membership had declined and was not currently improving.

This theme indicated a communication gap between the state government and volunteer fire departments. A disconnect clearly exists in terms of communicating the recruitment and retention policy out to the chief officers that are responsible for implementing it at the local level. One of the recommendations is how that communication chain can be improved. These answers were surprising and shocking.

During the interviews, there was some recognition of this fact from participants with CO4 stated it was his failure as an officer and the state's failure for not pushing the policy out to the departments that need the information.

## **Theme 2: Lack of Recruitment**

Chief officers who were interviewed discussed a variety of recruitment methods used to bring in new members to the fire department. The most recent study conducted by the National Volunteer Fire Council showed that since 1984 the number of volunteer firefighters nationwide has dropped 15%; from 905,650 to 786,150 in 2013 (NVFC, 2014). None of the chief officers interviewed were satisfied with their efforts on recruitment. This theme indicated that lack of recruitment continues to be a problem for the volunteer fire service in Litchfield County, Connecticut. Only one of the five former members interviewed were recruited into the fire service. The decline in numbers is not going to be resolved unless until specific recruitment plans are put in place to address the issue. As chief officers noted, overall membership in their fire departments is falling. As the older members of the fire service are retiring, their ranks are not being filled as they leave. This creates a problem of limited response personnel to emergencies, lengthened response times, and years of experience that are lost as older members step away from the fire service.

I asked chief officers about recruiting demographics. It is a challenge to recruit members from any demographic group within a community, so I wanted to know if chief officers had any particular segments in mind. CO1 and CO2 stated that they were interested in filling open positions with younger members. CO3 would like to target established members of the community because they are homeowners, have steady jobs,

and have a community commitment. While CO4 and CO5 reported that they would accept anyone who comes to their door interested in volunteering. I also asked the chief officers what methods they used to recruit new members into the fire service. Their answers were varied. When asked about town support and funding for recruitment programs, three chief officers were pleased with the level of support the town supplies, and two chief officers wanted to see an increase of support from the town government. There does not appear to be any uniform method for recruiting new members or type of demographic group within the departments would want to recruit. The responses of these chief officers indicate the lack of a cohesive policy between volunteer fire departments in Litchfield County. Solving the lack of recruitment problem will require coordinated efforts among all volunteer fire departments in the county.

### **Theme 3: Public Service Motivation**

All 10 participants were asked about their public service motivation for joining the fire service. The feeling of making a difference in an individual's life was a significant motivational factor for all five of the chief officer participants. Helping people, showing compassion, and giving back to the community were indicated by the chief officers in their responses to the PSM question. The factors described by chief officers align with the Perry (1997) model for PSM, which includes civic duty, compassion, and self-sacrifice. Those who answer the call may be different than their fellow citizens because see public service as an attitude or duty (Perry, 1997). The chief officers described their motivation in the terms that Perry lists in the model. Motivational drive was a factor for all five chief officers several years into their tenure as officers and leaders in their respective fire department. Despite internal conflicts that CO3 and CO5

discussed within their organizations over the previous years, each officer has worked through those issues with the continued motivation of helping and serving the community. PSM is a strong factor in retaining members. Individuals who remain motivated despite the politics and internal strife that can affect an organization continue to serve in the fire service.

Only one former member interviewed noted PSM as a factor for joining the fire service. It was striking that only (20%) of the former members had a PSM for joining the fire service. Fire department members are often viewed as having self-sacrifice and civic duty because of the dangerous 24/7 nature of responding to calls for service. Chief officers all discussed their continued PSM drive. Those five individuals were retained and now have leadership roles in their fire departments. The five former members interviewed had all left the fire service and only one former member discussed a PSM, which was not enough to keep him in the fire department. Based on the findings, PSM has a major influence on retention. Without motivational influences, people are less likely to remain in the fire service. Because fire department leadership is not in a position to force individuals to have an internal PSM, it is incumbent upon leaders to provide other external goals to keep members committed.

#### **Theme 4: Retention**

The capability to retain members was a major concern for Litchfield County volunteer fire departments. Turning over members in rapid succession is not a plan that chief officers discussed in their responses to retention questions. They need people to join their fire department and remain members for a long period of time. Several of the studies discovered through the review of literature highlight the importance of leaders and



managers acknowledging employees for their work and making them feel included in the day-to-day operations. CO1 and CO5 discussed service-based awards that are distributed on an annual basis to members, usually during a banquet or other such formal event. The chief officers noted that this kind of recognition helps keep members engaged and active in the fire department. CO5 discussed keeping morale high by engaging fire fighters in a regular training program and making them feel like they all had a stake in the organization. Promoting this type of atmosphere has shown to be an important tool in employee satisfaction and retention.

Chief officers used monetary methods to retain members by offering a paid-on-call or pension program. Those programs are in place in several volunteer fire departments in Litchfield County and are used in other volunteer fire departments throughout the State of Connecticut. Four of the chief officers interviewed discussed value in these monetary programs however, they also noted that younger members do not recognize monetary rewards with the same value as older members. When analyzing the data and interpreting the findings for this theme, I completed a comparison/contrast with the assistance of the NVivo software package. I created a relationship in NVivo with the responses from the chief officers and former members that used a monetary program. CO1, 2, 3, and 4 have a retention program with a monetary reward component. FM1, 2, 3, and 4 left the fire service primarily due to lack of time. Improved retention programs were a strategic goal for each of the chief officers interviewed. All five of the chief officers described adding a type of monetary incentive as a method to retain members. However, the results revealed that the monetary retention program was not enough to

keep former members in the fire service, and based on follow-up responses, that program alone will not bring them back.

Former members were asked their reasons for leaving the fire service. Four former members described the challenges of juggling work and family responsibilities with the fire department. FM3 discussed internal conflicts and poor training as the primary reasons for leaving the department. Each of the former members stated that they could not manage to give the amount of commitment necessary to the fire department and choose to leave the service. The majority of former members were concerned about the amount of time they had to give toward the fire department and the amount of time that was being asked of them to remain members. This issue was prevalent enough in the interview process that it became a theme of this study and is the final theme that emerged from the data analysis.

#### **Theme 5: Time**

Based upon question responses and data analysis, a fifth theme was formed regarding the time complications for former members. Eighty percent of the former members interviewed stated they could not find the time necessary to continue in the fire service. They described long work hours, new home ownership, and family responsibilities as the main culprits in seizing their time away from the demands of the fire service. The study revealed that a majority of former members were unable to make room for fire department activities; responding to calls, attending training sessions, attending meetings, and attending public service events. A follow up question was asked to determine if any circumstances existed that could get them back in the fire service. Noting that they did not have control over work schedules and other responsibilities,

former members did not see a path to a return. Former members stated the additional necessary time to be a valuable asset to the fire department was not possible.

### **Recommendations**

The findings and recommendations from my study may help volunteer fire departments improve their recruitment and retention programs. My study has shown that lack of good recruitment and retention is causing a decline in the number of volunteer fire department members. In Litchfield County, Connecticut volunteer fire departments account for nearly 100% of the response personnel. Lack of adequate programs to address recruitment and retention lead to longer response times, which may jeopardize the safety of people living in those communities. Budgetary implications may force communities to hire full-time fire fighters to fill the void. I recommend that volunteer fire departments use the findings from my study to assist in the development and implementation of recruitment and retention programs. Creating and enhancing these programs will ensure long-term membership stability.

The findings of my study concluded that volunteer fire departments are not aware the State of Connecticut has a recruitment and retention policy in place. The policy was first drafted in 1986 and last updated in 2000. I recommend that the Connecticut Commission on Fire Prevention and Control form an advisory committee on volunteerism to survey the current health of the volunteer fire service in the State of Connecticut. The Commission may reach out to volunteer fire departments statewide and share the current version of the recruitment and retention policy. Through the office of the State Fire Administrator, an electronic message may be sent to inform departments of this policy and provide them with a copy. At the very least, the current policy can provide

volunteer fire departments with a foundation for beginning or enhancing their recruitment and retention efforts.

I recommend that the Litchfield County Fire Chief's Association hold a meeting to discuss the recruitment problems that have been documented in my study. The association should determine recruitment policy that each fire department implements. The recruitment policy may place an emphasis on the following: the responsibilities of volunteer fire fighters, the hours of training required, a detailed job description, meeting with family members to ensure they know what the responsibilities will be, and the amount of time required of volunteer fire fighters. Departments need to meet with perspective new members and discuss the motivational factors which led them to become a volunteer fire fighter. I recommend that the association detail specific demographic groups that can provide membership stability. For example, community members that own homes and are tax payers. A unified approach is needed for the Litchfield County Fire Chief's Association in order to address the recruitment issues directly and in a manner that the entire county can support.

When the recruitment program has been put in place, I recommend that the Litchfield County Fire Chief's Association meet to discuss the retention programs noted in this study. The association should focus on creating an Employee Retention Program that addresses several different areas including: workplace environment, motivation, performance, merit awards, job satisfaction, and monetary compensation. A program that addresses each of those areas has the potential to increase retention in the volunteer fire service. Of all the programs listed above, I recommend focusing greater attention on workplace, motivation, performance, merit, and job satisfaction. Monetary compensation

is an issue to address; however, may findings show that among younger members it is not a motivational factor.

While policies are enacted at the executive and legislative branches of state government, fire department leadership directly implements these policies with the rank and file members. Based on these needs, chief officers may need align personnel's expectations on merit pay, attend professional development trainings pertaining to human resources, employee relations, and trainings on the state's merit pay program with state civil service. Furthermore, the findings of this current study suggested the implementation of initiatives that gives employees the recognition and reward they deserve to retain those employee who are committed to the organization.

### **Implications**

The conclusions of my study are significant, data confirmed the recruitment and retention problem in the volunteer fire service. The recruitment and retention problem has been validated by the data collected and analyzed. The research question was to answer how current volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention polices in Connecticut can be improved. The completed data collection and analysis along with the suggested recommendations have a very good chance to improve the existing policies and increase membership numbers. The implications for the volunteer fire service in Litchfield County, Connecticut for not following the recommendations of my study could be severe as membership numbers may continue falling. It is imperative that a cohesive policy plan be developed and implemented at the earliest possible moment.

The framework my study used was based upon was the public service motivation model by Perry (1997) using qualitative inquiry through the use of interview questions

for data collection and analysis. Based upon the PSM model, the research has shown the lack of solid PSM for individuals in the fire service creates an internal void that may make it easier for them to walk away from the fire service. The study validates the PSM model as an important element of retention. Chief officers need to have an understanding of what drives people to volunteer in this very dangerous profession. If the elements of PSM exist, it is probable that an individual's internal drive will retain his/her services for a long period of time even when conflicts within the organization exist.

The sustainability of volunteer fire departments to continue providing services is also in question as member numbers further decrease. Figures provided by the Department of Labor show a drop of over 2 million volunteer firefighters in 2015 compared to total numbers in 2005 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). The NVFC presented statistics included in a 2007 study that showed a consistent drop in volunteer fire service membership (NVFC, 2007). Chief officers interviewed described numbers consistently declining and the difficulties with recruiting and retaining new members. The recommendation may provide a springboard for departments to start reversing the current trend. It will be impossible for high level of service to be continued if volunteer firefighter numbers continue to erode. The implications of departments not being able to provide service will have an extremely negative effect on a community. Full-time firefighters will need to be hired; creating an increased tax burden on municipalities struggling with budget deficits and revenue shortfalls.

The findings indicate that recruitment and retention are ongoing problems and proactive solutions are required for positive change to occur. The literature review documented an aging volunteer fire service in need of a new generation of fire fighters

with long-term participation. Policy decisions that improve recruitment and retention programs may have a profound impact on the volunteer fire service. The findings provide chief officers with conclusions on the declining numbers allowing them create new policies to increase their membership.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A potential limitation of this study that was noted in Chapter 1 was the possible difficulty in preventing researcher-induced bias. That potential impact was resolved by multiple open-ended questions for the interview, which allowed participants to provide honest responses to questions without leading them with a series of options. Another limitation noted was the relatively small sample size and small geographic area that was covered. I interviewed 10 total participants for this specific research study. Although the data set represents a small percentage of the volunteer fire departments in Connecticut, it was not feasible to conduct an interview-dominant study over a wide geographic area. As a novice researcher, interviewing more participants could have created additional problems such as properly being able to analyze large amounts of data. Additional research in this area is practical which may include other counties in Connecticut not covered in this study. The fire departments that were represented provided a solid cross-section of the Connecticut volunteer fire service. Each of the volunteer fire departments have an average of 30 active members and respond to average of 350 calls for service each year. Rural departments throughout Connecticut have similar numbers in terms of members and yearly responses.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Based upon data collected from participants, my study showed that a wide range of social change implications are connected with volunteer fire fighter recruitment and retention policies. Building and maintaining a solid volunteer fire service is essential for municipalities that cannot afford to hire full-time firefighters. The increased tax burden on those citizens is not feasible. The findings of my study are not just limited to a single county. Chapter 2 detailed the decreasing volunteer firefighter numbers from coast-to-coast. The implications for positive social change from this study can be brought to counties and states throughout the country. The services that volunteer fire departments provide are essential. The calls for service can come at any moment in time, day or night, during holidays, or inclement weather. The point of view provided by the interview participants created a storyline and foundation upon which to build. The potential for research-based solutions in this area is very good and provides an opportunity to make an important, positive impact. Now that the root problem of recruitment and retention has been determined, chief officers can begin to rebuild their struggling departments. Leadership must take advantage of the opportunities provided by the recommendations of this study. A volunteer fire service that increases recruitment and retention for the long-term positively affects millions of people. Volunteer fire departments are at a tipping point. It is time for them to act and move forward with new policies and programs to ensure their future stability.

Chief officers must take every opportunity to intrinsically make their firefighters feel appreciated for their work performance efforts. Highlighting efforts throughout the organization and on its website can be a great reward them for their performance efforts.



Recognition from management for high performance can be just as effective as merit pay. Former members indicated that a handwritten note or email will have a positive influence on their motivation to perform at high levels. One participant noted, verbal or written recognition for efforts exhausted on work task will motivate firefighters to increase the effort exhausted a specific work task, which in turn will result in increased performance. Firefighters need to feel like their work is valued and that it is appreciated. Recognition methods can assist in acknowledging those individuals for their performance, effort and commitment.

### **Conclusion**

The main research question in my study was: How can current volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention policies be improved in Connecticut to increase participation? This study examined that question and found in the theoretical framework that public service motivation is an extremely important factor in recruitment and retention. The theories and literature on PSM and narrative policy analysis provided a solid framework for developing interview questions and data collection. My study concluded that chief officers are unaware of the recruitment and retention policy authored by the State of Connecticut. It was concluded that volunteer firefighter participation in Litchfield County, Connecticut fire departments have been steadily decreasing. It was concluded that the volunteer fire departments that participated do not employ effective recruitment and retention programs. Further, there is not a cohesive recruitment and retention programs across volunteer fire departments in the county. An investigation of the research question yielded five themes.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with 10 participants from five Litchfield County volunteer fire departments in Connecticut. One chief officer and one former member was interviewed from each participating department. I analyzed the data using audio recorded interviews that were transcribed into text. I also used notes based on observations made of each interview participant. Emerging themes discovered during the data analysis process were validated using the NVivo software program. Themes that came to light during the interviews which contribute to the study on public service are: motivation, recruitment, and retention.

This study attempted to provide solutions for improving the recruitment and retention policies in the state of Connecticut for volunteer fire departments. The data collected, analyzed, and interpreted provided recommendations for improving those policies. It can be concluded that more research in this area needs to be completed. This is an area that needs ongoing work to fully understand the implications that have been documented.

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## Appendix A: Letter of Intent

My fellow volunteer firefighters:

Finding the time to be an active volunteer firefighter in today's world is a difficult prospect. As a volunteer firefighter myself for over fifteen years I understand the difficulties involved in making a commitment to the community. Many of you I have worked with in the past whether it be at major emergency incidents or training. Data from the past twenty years has shown a continuing drop in volunteer firefighters throughout the nation. Connecticut is not immune to these shrinking numbers of available personnel.

As part of my doctoral work, I am conducting a study of recruitment and retention programs. The focus is to develop a grounded theory on why numbers of volunteer firefighters continue to decline. There is a great deal of research on the effect of this phenomenon; increased response times, working emergency incidents with fewer personnel, and relying more on mutual aid from surrounding departments. What we need to determine is the Why. Answering that question will help us focus our attention on recruitment and retention programs that increase our numbers and provide our community with a better fire department. The data collected from these interviews will be used not only to develop a grounded theory, but for further research studies sampling a larger population of volunteer firefighters. I am requesting to interview a current chief officer and one former member of your department in order to collect data to be later analyzed. There is one main research question, followed by three sub-questions.

How can current volunteer firefighter recruitment and retention policies be improved in Connecticut to increase participation? Specific interview questions will be made available upon request.

The interviews will be recorded and later transcribed. It is important for me to note that no names of individuals interviewed will be used and the data collected will only be used for my study. In order to maintain the strictest adherence to ethical standards and protecting interview participants, I will provide interview protocols to all those participating prior to any questions being asked. If, based on the protocols, an individual chooses not to take part in the study the interview will not be conducted. I want to be sure that each participant is comfortable and confident that data collected will be securely protected. I will also have consent forms available for all interview participants to sign.

In closing, I would like to thank you for taking the time to read my letter. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to get in contact with me. I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,

Jason Decremer

[jdecremer@yahoo.com](mailto:jdecremer@yahoo.com) or 203-232-6035

## Appendix B: Letter of Cooperation

Current Date

Walden University

Institutional Review Board

Jason Decremer is requesting permission to collect research data from (1) current chief officer and (1) former fire fighter at the [REDACTED]. Your department was previously informed of the purposes of this study and the nature of the research procedures. Each participant will also be given an opportunity to ask questions of the researcher.

As a representative of the [REDACTED], I am authorized to grant permission to have the researcher recruit research participants from the [REDACTED]. The researcher, Jason Decremer, is also permitted to collect research data at our fire department in a private conference room.

If you have any questions, please contact me (Area code and phone number)

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

## Appendix C: Interview Protocols

Jacob & Furgerson (2012) established a set of interview protocols for qualitative research that will serve a model guide for this study. The protocols detailed in this Appendix will be provided to participants prior to the start of the interviews. Further, Appendix D is a consent form to be signed by each participant.

Script to be read to each participant:

*Thank you for taking the time to take part in this study. I am studying the effect of decreasing volunteer firefighters and attempting to develop a theory as to why numbers continue to decrease. Your assistance in providing vital information today will greatly help me in this process. Determining a root cause for the decrease in volunteer numbers will be able to help fire departments develop programs to ensure recruitment and retention work in the long term. As a volunteer firefighter myself for over fifteen years, with a full-time job and a family, I understand the time commitment needed to have a positive impact in our respective departments. As you may know I also work for the Connecticut Fire Academy. I am closely involved with volunteer fire departments throughout the state delivering training programs at their request. In discussions I have with these departments they note the difficulty with getting strong numbers of firefighters to attend training or respond to fire calls. This background and experience has led me down this path, one that I am committed to solving.*

*The information you provide will only be used for this study, your name and likeness will not be disclosed. I can assure you that information gathered here today will be held with the utmost confidentiality. This interview will be taped for transcription at a*

*later time. There are three main research questions that will be asked. These questions are open-ended and will allow you to provide as much information as you see fit. Based upon your responses, follow up questions may be asked. I anticipate the interview to take no more than 20 to 30 minutes.*

*I have a consent form that I would like you to sign. The purpose of this form is to be sure you understand and are comfortable with providing information for this study. You can ask any questions you may have and you have the right to withdraw at any time.*

*I am going to start the interview by asking questions that will provide me with background information. Such as your name, occupation, age, where you grew up, years in the volunteer fire service, and your fondest experience in the fire service to date. Following we will move forward to the formal interview questions. Once again, I greatly appreciate your time. Here is the consent form; please review, ask any questions about the form you may have, and sign if you are comfortable to proceed. When the interview is complete I will ask that you stay for a short debriefing session.*