

OURAY COUNTY

Colorado firefighters: high value volunteers

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Volunteer firefighters protect all of Ouray County and serve 70 percent of the total land surface of Colorado, but with rigorous training requirements, unpredictable hours and the inherent physical demands of the job, these men and women are in high demand.

As varied as the terrain they cover, Ouray, Ridgway and Log Hill Volunteer Fire Departments all rely on well-trained volunteers to operate.

A Rocky Mountain PBS I-News article released on Sept. 2 reported the Colorado State Fire Chiefs Association estimates that

Colorado is short 3,500 volunteers in meeting National Fire Protection Association standards, requiring greater than a 40 percent increase in staffing.

Other challenges for volunteer districts identified by the Rocky Mountain PBS I-News article included slower response times during the day and high training and equipment costs.

Of the three Ouray County departments, Ridgway Fire Volunteer Department is currently feeling the greatest need for new recruits.

RVFD Chief Dan Bartashius said, "We've lost five (firefighters) over the last four months. We've had a lot of people move away."

While a young, able-bodied volunteer force is a clear advantage for RVFD in rough terrain, Bartashius explained many of Ridgway's volunteers have difficulty responding during the typical workday from 8:00 a.m to 5:00 p.m.

"For a structure fire, most everybody will drop what they are doing," explained Bartashius.

But RVFD responds to a wide array of emergency calls, from vehicle accidents to gas leaks, and the department is not able to reimburse volunteers for the time they spend away from work.

"It's a problem," said Bartashius. "We provide a small stipend, but we can't cover those hourly wages. It's getting to be difficult to keep enough volunteers."

In the brand new fire department building on the way, RVFD has included living quarters.

Bartashius indicated that the department might eventually hire a few paid firefighters as the need for additional staff increases over the years.

For now, RVFD is seeking new recruits that can commit to the training and service requirements of the job.

And as Bartashius pointed out, not everyone's first response is to run toward a fire.

Interested volunteers should speak with a

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wildland fire calls quickly and in force.

Log Hill Volunteer Fire Department Assistant Chief Tom Austin emphasized the importance of quality training for new recruits.

"Our number one priority is the safety of our fire department and the citizens, and I'm sure it's the same for the other fire chiefs," said Austin. "We take care of our firefighters."

Austin explained that despite the costs of fire academy training, the department and community fully supported the development of these valued volunteers.

"We've never had to tell a firefighter that they can't go to a training because of a lack of funds," he said.

According to Austin, LHVFD would accept "five more good candidates," but with support from recent retirees, LHVFD's need for new recruits is less acute.

LHVFD has two fire stations: one in Log Hill Village, and one near Colona.

The department splits its equipment between both stations in order to minimize response time.

Additionally, Montrose Fire Department responds to working calls in the Log Hill District, such as active structure fires or wildland fires, with their on-duty, paid firefighting staff. LHVFD does not respond to emergency medical services calls.

A "mutual aid" relationship among all of the county's departments also helps to lessen the burden of large fire calls.

More information on LHVFD's training, facilities and community resources is available online at loghillfire.org.

In Ouray, Ouray Volunteer Fire Department Chief Trevor Latta said two applicants have already expressed interest in the one remaining opening on the department.

"We're looking pretty good," said Latta, in reference to staffing numbers.

OVFD serves both a metropolitan district, supported by the city of Ouray, and a larger fire district that stretches from the Idlewild Subdivision north of Ouray up County Road 361 to McNulty Lane.

All three departments also respond to fires on National Forest lands in the county's unin-

VOLUNTEERS P21

VOLUNTEERS

FROM P2

corporated areas, depending on which department is the closest.

Since many OVFD firefighters work at the mines, Latta said their variable work shifts could be both a strength and a challenge.

Despite the challenges, Latta said, the department's response times are "absolutely not" hindered by the many demands on volunteer firefighters.

"We take a lot of pride in what we do," said Latta, noting the departments' history through the past century.

Latta said his department works diligently to keep its volunteers and chooses new, quality recruits carefully.

Using a selection process, Latta said, the department found volunteers who could make the commitment and were "not joining just for a t-shirt."

"Firefighters are a different breed," he explained.