

Volunteer corps fight decline



AIMEE K. WILES staff photograph

Incentive Perinton Volunteer Ambulance dispatcher Stephanie Barbero checks on her children in the station's playroom. She can volunteer — and free up other parents to volunteer — because she can watch children there.

■ Recruitment drive tries to counter rising number of calls but garners mixed results.

BY STAFF WRITER
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For years, local fire and ambulance corps have watched the available hours and numbers of their volunteers decline.

This year, they took action with an ambitious \$45,000 re-

ruitment drive to rebuild their ranks. Some volunteer companies are pleased with the results, saying this is just the first wave of what looks to be an ongoing cycle of replenishing volunteer crews. But other groups are still sending distress signals.

Monroe County has no data

on current volunteers; neither does the state. But the total calls for assistance from volunteer agencies rose by 32,000 — nearly 50 percent — from 1992 to 1997. Even with the recent drive's road signs and television and radio ads, the 111 new fire volunteers and 53 ambulance recruits won't be enough to handle the workload.

Some local agencies are experimenting with approaches to woo volunteers.

A growing number are hiring people to help cover emergency calls. Some communities, such as Webster, are evaluating their fire and ambulance systems to see whether merging with neighboring corps or using commercial services — such as Monroe Ambulance, — is a good idea.

For local residents, fewer

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volunteers means spending more money to have emergency services available.

Hiring staff for fire and ambulance shifts isn't cheap.

The Honeoye Falls-Mendon Volunteer Ambulance started adding paid staff last year, after the number of calls it could cover sank from nearly 100 percent to half of that.

The village of Honeoye Falls budgeted an extra \$45,000 to supplement its daytime ambulance staff with the full-time equivalent of a paid paramedic. Using village staff to help firefighters with maintenance and administration cost an additional \$15,000.

"We've been able to keep our taxes flat, but it takes a lot of planning," Honeoye Falls Mayor Anne Morton said. "The reality is that if we have to continue to add paid staff, those are huge expenses — salary, benefits, retirement. It all adds up."

The county's eight-week recruitment drive started in May. Volunteer squads raised \$20,000, and Monroe County lawmakers pitched in \$15,000 for it. Businesses also donated.

"I think it went tremendously well," said county fire coordinator Ed Riley. "We weren't really sure what to expect. Besides, it's not how many people you get as much as how enthusiastic the people are who are joining."

The Perinton Volunteer Ambulance Corps gained 22 members. Fourteen joined Greece Volunteer Ambulance.

Some agencies were less successful.

"This was a much smaller recruitment than we had hoped for," said Laura Enders of the county Emergency Medical Services Office.

Five of 26 fire squads and two of eight ambulance corps reporting results got no new members. Some departments had large initial turnout but few recruits.

But many volunteers say the drive's power is in its residual effect, because more corps are still receiving more applications than is usual.

Greece Volunteer Ambulance, which usually receives two to four applications a month, has received six to eight since the drive began.

"This is just the first wave," said Brighton Fire Commissioner David Metzger, an organizer. "We've generated more awareness, and we're just starting to reap the benefits."

Some squads disagree.

"We're losing more than we're getting," Greece Fire Chief Ron Timmons said. "Paid staff seems inevitable."

Chili Fire Chief Scott Miller called the drive "sparse at best."

Open houses drew 10 people; two signed up.

"I don't know if it's the medium we chose or a comment on our society," he said.

Enders, who received written comments from the companies, cited the following complaints about the drive:

■ There was not enough ambulance involvement featured in the commercials.

■ Dates and times of open houses were not stressed enough.

■ The drive did not reach enough young people, and some open houses were held during school vacation weeks.

■ Marketing experts weren't consulted.

"We've got to try to get more grass roots — maybe get into some schools and try to get some businesses more charged up with helping with the campaign," Riley said.

Teachers, for instance, could talk to high school students about becoming Explorer Scouts. Businesses could help underwrite some recruitment costs, slip reminders in monthly bills and post ads.

But some say today's hustle and bustle keeps many would-be volunteers away.

"Volunteerism has declined greatly in the last five years," said Chris Kozik, spokeswoman for Honeoye Falls-Mendon Volunteer Ambulance Corps. "We're talking real big drops."

Kozik, a single mother who's going back to school, has had to cut down her volunteer hours.

Riley says the biggest trend affecting volunteer groups is the increase of two-income families.

"There's too much of a demand on people's leisure time today," he said. "People want quality time with their families when they're not working because both parents work. They don't want to give time up to spend a couple hours at a brush fire."

Another recruitment roadblock started in the early 1980s, when the state started demanding more volunteer training. For instance, last year the state increased the training hours needed to become an emergency medical technician from 100 to 140. Ambulance workers now need to train more hours for AIDS, other blood-borne pathogens, hazardous materials and cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

Some agencies are offering incentives to lure recruits.

The Gates fire district started offering retirement benefits to volunteers in the early 1990s. The district also offers flexible training times.

Perinton Volunteer Ambulance, meanwhile, allows volunteers to bring their children with them. A dispatcher will watch their children while volunteers respond to calls. The corps is also in a state pilot program in which volunteers can work on recertification gradually and still receive credit, rather than having to

recertify all their skills at once every three years.

East Rochester Volunteer Ambulance is allowing people to work fewer hours a month.

And state Sen. James Alesi, R-Perinton, proposed a bill that would waive tuition at state colleges for certified fire or ambulance volunteers. Nothing has come of this yet.

Other volunteer squads hope cooperation will help.

The North Greece and Lakeshore fire departments, for instance, are buying big-ticket items together and helping each other with calls.

"It's not going to work if everybody sits around fat, dumb and happy," Riley said. "Now we have to ask ourselves, 'How can we work together to make this happen?'" □

Includes reporting by staff writer Michael Caputo.