

New Bill helps Firefighter Volunteerism in North Carolina

Writer: Tiffany Plusnick

Rural areas are facing a decline in volunteer firefighters, but a new proposal offering funding for training and recruitment could help reverse the trend.

North Carolina relies heavily on volunteer firefighters, yet the number of volunteers has steadily dropped in recent years. According to [NC Impact](#), a website by UNC-CH's school of government, the shortage stems from younger people leaving the service and increased training requirements. To respond to these challenges, lawmakers introduced [House Bill 355](#), a measure that would study what support to rural fire departments and help keep them financially stable and fully staffed.

“The study will be great because not only will it tell us what we need to do for recruitment retention but what the fire service is going to look like in 10, 15 or 20 years,” said Brian Taylor, the state Fire Marshal in North Carolina.

Statistics and fire officials say volunteerism simply isn't what it used to be. Data from [the NC State Firefighters' Association](#) shows that about 60% of firefighters in the state are volunteers, while the remaining 40% are paid full-time or part-time—a shift that contrasts sharply with earlier decades, when many rural departments were staffed almost entirely by volunteers.

Taylor said volunteerism used to mean everyday people—like service station owners, farmers, and shopkeepers—dropping what they were doing to hop on a fire truck and help their community.

Scott Burnett, Executive Director at North Carolina Association of Fire Chiefs, recalls how in the 1980s, firefighting was a far more common volunteer path, with many community members able to leave work and respond to calls, officials say. Today, however, the demands of the job—and of everyday life—look very different.

“When I became a volunteer firefighter, the responsibilities, and what our community asked the fire department to do, is different from what it is today,” Burnett said. “So, when you are working a 40-hour week job or full time student, it becomes difficult to drop everything and then go answer that call.”

The role itself is demanding, and the rigorous training it requires can deter many potential volunteers. According to the [North Carolina Firefighter Training Certificate \(580G\) Program](#), earning certification requires at least 247 hours of training. The training emphasizes practical skills, teamwork, and the ability to handle high-stress situations with a strict schedule that includes physical training, hands-on practice, and extensive classroom instruction, according to [the government of Raleigh](#).

“The work tension to become a firefighter could be mentally exhausting to some people,” Burnett said.

The legislative proposal will address the physical, mental, and emotional toll that rural firefighting places on volunteers, including the need for programs that support firefighter health and well-being throughout the process.

Beyond volunteer recruitment, departments also struggle to attract and retain career firefighters. Many K-12 schools in North Carolina offer firefighter programs to introduce students to this career. For example, [West Forsyth Fire Academy](#) went to Clemmons Middle School to show students opportunities in this workforce.

“I don’t remember seeing firefighters in elementary school or anything like that,” Jay Mebane, Fire Chief at Chapel Hill Fire Department, said.

Mebane and his department work closely with Chapel Hill High School to recruit students. They talk to the students about what the fire service entails and are honest about the experience, he said.

The proposed bill seeks to expand youth outreach through middle and high school programs, offering a vocational trade pathway to future firefighters. This initiative aims to build early awareness and strengthen the recruitment pipeline.

“The fire department is the most vital and instrumental thing in any community, so it’s important that the communities embrace their local fire department,” Taylor said.