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3 non-monetary solutions to volunteer EMS retention

Volunteer EMS providers are motivated by respect; use appreciation, clear expectations and creature comforts to keep them engaged and satisfied

Mar 15, 2019

Editor's Note:

There are [many reasons why providers leave](#), from safety concerns, to the physical and mental toll EMS can take, to outdated technology and policies, disconnected management, and [low pay](#).

In this feature, learn how volunteer EMS agencies are using non-monetary incentives to satisfy members. Learn more retention strategies in our Special Coverage package, "[Defying the EMS retention crisis](#)."



By EMS1 staff

Most people who volunteer in EMS already have their basic needs (physiological, safety and security) satisfied; likely by a paid job. [More money is not their goal](#) or need for EMS volunteering, Nancy Magee, volunteer EMS consultant and owner, [MEDIC Training Solutions](#) notes. "So why is money always the first answer to keeping your members [motivated, engaged and happy](#)?"



Creature comforts, like well-kept ambulances, outfitted with safe, comfortable seating, and updated equipment, go a long way in EMS retention. (Courtesy <https://www.facebook.com/HarrisonburgRescue/>)

Here are three ways to recognize the contributions of volunteer EMS providers, and to keep them satisfied and engaged for years to come.

1. CONTINUOUSLY DEMONSTRATE APPRECIATION

A volunteer EMT is motivated by respect shown by the community, their leaders and their peers for their skill and personal sacrifice, Magee points out. Leaders need to seek out opportunities and be intentional in giving respect, recognition and appreciation.

- **Attend public events.** One of the great things about getting your staff out in public is the number of former patients and their loved ones who will come up just to say "thank you."
- **Ask for and share feedback.** Seek testimonials from patients and their families. The chief or a designated officer can make how-did-we-do phone calls or send a self-addressed postcard for written feedback. Ask permission to print kudos, well wishes and testimonials on your Facebook page and website.

- **Announce milestones.** Use local newspapers and social media to recognize recertification, new training courses completed or positive feedback from patients.
- **Open every meeting with kudos.** Use the first 10 minutes of every squad meeting thanking members for their contributions and reading patient responses.
- **Appreciation events.** At least quarterly, host an appreciation event and include families. A promotion ceremony, picnic, banquet, dance, group trip to an amusement park or sporting event [boosts camaraderie and address the needs for belonging and self-esteem](#).
- **Service awards and gifts.** Service awards accompanied by a gift card and personally signed by the leadership are generally more meaningful than plaques, mugs and T-shirts.

2. USE CLEAR POSITION DESCRIPTIONS TO SET GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS

Nonprofit and public sector organizations establish different job titles and descriptions for employees and volunteers. EMS volunteer organizations could [adapt this strategy to reflect the squad's expectations](#) of their roles and tasks of each type of caregiver, according to Michael Ward, a senior associate with Fitch & Associates.

“Our challenge is that clinical certification has been the de-facto job description in emergency service, regardless of pay status,” Ward writes. “Personnel are defined by their EMS credential, regardless of their tasks within the organization.”

There are task assignments, such as chart review, inventory, vehicle/equipment maintenance, training and state compliance, that may be different for each type of caregiver within the squad.

Establishing different titles with detailed job descriptions will provide the framework of relationships between caregivers.

The Virginia Beach Rescue Squad offers five membership categories. Only the patient care/operational category requires certification. The other four do not require a clinical EMS certification to join. The categories are:

- Patient care/operational
- Special response team

- Marine rescue team
- Search and rescue team
- Support member

Engaging caregivers in resetting the organizational goals and expectations can focus attention on what is important now and in the near-future, Ward notes.

3. PROVIDE UPDATED EQUIPMENT AND CREATURE COMFORTS

[Living quarters, high-functioning technology and creature comforts](#) help keep members happy and active.

Nathan Stanaway, BS, NRP, an EMS consultant with over 10 years' experience in the field, has observed several high-performing volunteer organizations over the years. He notes one of the most impressive is the Harrisonburg (Virginia) Rescue Squad.

The member area of the station includes day rooms, kitchens, media rooms, training rooms and fully furnished living quarters. These living quarters help ensure that members spend more time at the station, which of course helps with the ability of HRS to handle a relatively large number of calls (sometimes over 21 a day).

Stanaway notes he's also observed volunteer organizations that build attached living quarters and allow members to actually live at the station for a small amount of rent – with the understanding that when calls come in, they will be willing to respond.

HRS provides their members with high-quality equipment, Stanaway reports. Their vehicles are well kept, and the crew seating in the patient compartment was some of the nicest he's ever seen.

"It makes sense that if you are asking someone to do something for free, you should do everything in your power to make sure they are as comfortable as possible while doing it," he said. "Money matters, but isn't everything. A little creature comfort goes a long way."

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Posted by **wmcMichael** Mar 24, 2019

Having been a volunteer EMT for approx 25 years, one can appreciate ideas & concepts shared to retain individuals in EMS. In addition I've also worked for private EMS as well as felt comfortable in both aspects. I've noticed over the past several years that its getting tougher to retain as well as recruiting in both volunteer & career fields. Volunteer EMS is needed nationwide to meet the needs of our communities and I hope that more efforts are made to acknowledge those that volunteer and stay in EMS. I'm currently semi-retired serving on a committee for volunteer EMS and exploring options, incentives and perhaps tax benefits to keep EMS staffed. away from the negativity that has developed. I'm also thankful to EMS 1 for posting important topics like this one. Looking forward to some positive feedback to share.

♥ 0



Posted by **pumble1234** Mar 19, 2019

Our Connecticut volunteer EMS department has a number of people who work in career positions and they have grown into "chief" positions. They have worked hard to make sure the "rules" are all employment type rules and are forcing out long term volunteers in rapid fashion. Many with 20-30 years experience have left or have been thrown out by these experts. To keep volunteers, you have to remember that they're not there for a paycheck and treat experienced providers with respect.

♥ 0



Posted by **trixie7766** Mar 21, 2019

Please feel free to email me if you want some specific input. I am very familiar with staffing in Ct-
Nancy@medicsolutions.org

♥ 0



Posted by **recruitment18** Mar 16, 2019

Thank you for an awesome article on Volunteer Retention. I volunteer with the Virginia Beach Rescue Squad, one of ten volunteer squads along with a Marine Rescue Team, Special Operations Team and Support Team that make up the


Volunteer Rescue Squads of Virginia Beach system. I work for the VA Beach Rescue Squad Foundation as a citywide VB-EMS recruiter. A different approach utilizing a non-profit organization with a mission to "maintain a volunteer based EMS system in VA Beach" focusing on recruitment-retention-marketing the volunteer system.

The reasons you presented as motivators for retention are many of the same reasons we are able to recruit volunteers in Virginia Beach in the first place.

Thank you again for referencing the Harrisonburg Volunteer Rescue Squad and the Volunteer Rescue Squads of VA Beach.



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