

PUBLIC SAFETY VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS FIRE EMERGENCY SERVICES

2010-11 Solano County Grand Jury

I. SUMMARY

Due to the current economic situation in Solano County, the 2010-11 Grand Jury elected to examine the volunteer programs of the Solano County City Fire Departments. Volunteers have allowed city fire departments more flexibility in providing a high level of service to our communities. This mixture of career full-time and volunteer/reserve firefighters eases the burden on already restricted budgets. This approach has allowed cities to improve efficiency and reduce cost.

The cities of Benicia, Dixon, Fairfield, Rio Vista, and Suisun City actively promote the use of volunteers in their fire safety programs. The Vallejo and Vacaville Fire Departments do not use volunteer firefighters.

Because the relationship between the fire departments and cities is crucial to the well-being of the citizens given the critical functions they perform, fire department volunteer programs are beneficial to the community. The cities should take advantage of the use of volunteers in their firefighting services.

II. INTRODUCTION

Due to the current economic situation in Solano County, the 2010-11 Grand Jury elected to examine the volunteer programs of the Solano County City Fire Departments. The following table gives general information about each city and its fire department in Solano County:

City	<i>Benicia</i>	<i>Dixon</i>	<i>Fairfield</i>	<i>Rio Vista</i>	<i>Suisun City</i>	<i>Vacaville</i>	<i>Vallejo</i>
Population	26,865 (2010 Census)	17,605 (2010 Census)	106,502 (2009, per Fire Chief)	8,374 (2010 Census)	28,188 (2010 Census)	96,905 (2010 Census)	117,798 (2010 Census)
Fire Department Current Budget	~\$7,000,000	\$3,309,252	~\$14,000,000	\$1,069,741	\$909,100	\$16,157,901	~\$17,000,000
Square Miles Served	13	6.7 320*	36.7	7.5	4.1	28 160**	53.58
Number of Full-time Paid Staff	1 – Chief 1 – Deputy Chief 2 – Battalion Chiefs 20 – Career Firefighters 1 – Fire Code Enforcer 1 – Secretary ½ - Mgmt Analysis	1 – Chief 2 – Division Chiefs 3 – Captains 6 – Fire Engineers 5 – Career Firefighters/ Paramedics 1 – Career Firefighter	1 - Chief 1 - Deputy Chief 3 – Battalion Chiefs 1 – Code Enforcement Officer	1 – P/T Chief 1 – Fire Marshall P/T 3 – Captains 3 - Paramedics	1 – Chief 2 – Admin. Fire Captains	1 – P/T Chief 1 – Division Chief 3 – Battalion Chiefs 12 – Captains 15 – Engineers 25 – Firefighter/ Paramedics 14 – Firefighters 1 – Fire Prevention Specialist 1 – Fire Plans Examiner/Inspector or 1 – Fire Safety Coordinator 1 – Sr. Admin Clerk	1 – Chief 3 – Battalion Chiefs 67 – Career firefighters 1 – Training Division Coord. 1 – EMS Coord. 2 – Fire Prevention Inspectors

Abbreviations:

EMS – Emergency Medical Services

P/T – Part Time

* Dixon Fire Protection District

**Emergency Medical Response only

City	<i>Benicia</i>	<i>Dixon</i>	<i>Fairfield</i>	<i>Rio Vista</i>	<i>Suisun City</i>	<i>Vacaville</i>	<i>Vallejo</i>
Number of Fire Safety Volunteers	8 – Reserve 3 – Phoenix 6 – Logistic Unit	9 – Firefighters (12– additional approved)	14 – Reserve Firefighters (18 approved)	19 – Reserve Firefighters 5 – Volunteers	1 – Deputy Chief 4 – Battalion Chiefs 8 - Captains 4 – Engineers 3 – Drivers / Operators 20 – Firefighters 4 – Rookies		
Number of Incidents	2,039 (68.8% medical, 5.4% fire)	1,834 (50% medical, 30% all others)	9,500 (80% medical, 20% fire)	1,100 (70% medical)	1,842 (70% medical)	7,880 (80% medical; 5% fire)	12,500 (75% medical)

Volunteers are community members who perform tasks without salary. All volunteers go through training depending on their placement. Reserve firefighters receive appropriate advanced training and must serve a specified number of hours per month according to the individual city's requirements. Reserve firefighters are required to complete a competency program by fire departments.

A. Benicia Fire Department

The Benicia Fire Department (BFD) uses volunteers to support career firefighters in the delivery of fire and life safety services. BFD has three categories of volunteers:

- The Reserve Volunteer Firefighters
- The Phoenix Volunteer Firefighters
- Logistical Support Unit

In addition, BFD has two other volunteer programs involved with fire safety: the Fire Explorer program, which is made up of young men and women ages 14 to 21, and a program that uses amateur radio operators to assist with communication.

B. Dixon Fire Department

At the time of this investigation, the Dixon Fire Department (DFD) had nine volunteer firefighters and was expecting to add 12 more volunteer firefighters. The DFD provides emergency fire, rescue, and medical services to the citizens of Dixon. By contractual agreement, the City also provides fire protection services to the surrounding 320-square-mile Dixon Fire Protection District, with a total population of 21,000.

C. Fairfield Fire Department

With further budget cuts affecting Fairfield, the use of volunteers is increasing in the Fairfield Fire Department (FFD), which allows for services and programs to be available for the public. Currently, the FFD uses volunteers for the following:

- Reserve firefighters
- Fire explorer cadets
- Assistants in the administrative division

D. Rio Vista Fire Department

All fire departments in Solano County are trying to reduce costs and maintain services. Although the City of Rio Vista had authorized 40 volunteer/reserve firefighters, due to budget constraints, the total volunteers at the time of this investigation was limited to 24. The Rio Vista Fire Department (RVFD) has the following categories of volunteers:

- Reserve firefighters

- Volunteer firefighters
- Fire explorer cadets

E. Suisun City Fire Department

The Suisun City Fire Department (SCFD) has three full-time paid personnel, and the remainder are volunteers. The Grand Jury learned SCFD volunteers are the regular On-Duty Firefighting Force, with full duties. Every response is answered by the volunteer firefighters. SCFD has the following categories of volunteers:

- Deputy Chief
- Battalion Chiefs
- Captains
- Engineers
- Drivers/Operators
- Firefighters
- Rookies

F. Vacaville Fire Department

Historically, the City of Vacaville and the surrounding area relied heavily on volunteer firefighters. Currently, the Vacaville Fire Department (VVFD) consists of 71 sworn full-time firefighters, four civilian employees, and no volunteer firefighters.

G. Vallejo Fire Department

For at least 35 years, the Vallejo Fire Department (VFD) has operated without volunteers. During the Grand Jury investigation, it discovered the situation was complicated: the Union was concerned about displacing career firefighters; there were concerns about the costs associated with providing workers' compensation; the VFD did not currently have the resources to start a volunteer program; there were concerns about the potential availability of volunteers to respond to emergencies; most importantly, there were safety issues.

III. METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury sent letters requesting information on volunteer programs for the following city fire departments:

- Benicia
- Dixon
- Fairfield
- Rio Vista
- Suisun City
- Vacaville

- Vallejo

The Grand Jury reviewed all the information received from the city fire departments to ascertain their use of volunteers, and it interviewed the Fairfield Fire Chief and the Rio Vista Interim Fire Chief. In addition, site visits, emails, and telephone interviews were conducted with other Fire Departments. The Grand Jury reviewed each city's website for pertinent information.

IV. STATEMENT OF FACTS

A. Benicia Fire Department

The Benicia Fire Department has three categories of volunteers. The Reserve Volunteer Firefighters are assigned to work alongside career firefighters and serve a minimum of two 24-hour shifts per month. The BFD increased its use of volunteers with the addition of the Reserve Volunteer Firefighter (RVF) program approximately a year and a half ago. There are currently eight members of that group. BFD trains volunteers for their assigned roles.

The second category of volunteers, referred to as the Logistical Support Unit, does not serve as firefighters. Instead, they assist at the scene of emergencies by providing support functions, such as changing air bottles the firefighters use, picking up fire hoses, providing refreshments for the working crews, and managing staging areas.

The Phoenix Volunteer Firefighters report to the main fire station as requested to support emergency operations. BFD is currently having difficulty in attracting and retaining volunteers for the Phoenix Volunteer Program. The department is looking into ways to increase participation, which could result in changes to the program.

Background checks are run on all volunteers except Logistical Support Volunteers, who do not engage in firefighting activities.

BFD has an approximate annual budget for the following programs:

- Volunteer Firefighter - \$28,500
- Fire Explorer - \$1,500

Volunteers are not paid for their time but are covered by the City's Workers' Compensation insurance. The Grand Jury learned that the use of volunteers saved the City an estimated \$36,560 in 2010, based on 4,570 hours at \$8.00 per hour (data provided by BFD).

B. Dixon Fire Department

The Dixon Fire Department requires new volunteers to be Fire Academy graduates and provides training in-house. Orientation for all City volunteers is provided at City Hall. There is ongoing training for new volunteers and in-service training on new equipment. Specialty training is available when courses are hosted on-site.

The use of volunteers has allowed the DFD to provide public education programs and events that it would not otherwise support due to limits on overtime costs. Volunteers are also used to supplement staffing where resources are lacking. At the time of this investigation, DFD had nine volunteer firefighters and expected an additional 12 volunteer firefighters.

C. Fairfield Fire Department

Currently, the Fairfield Fire Department uses volunteers for the following positions:

- Reserve firefighters (18-30 years old) – trained in firefighting skills
- Fire Explorer Cadets (14-20 years old) – trained in basic CPR and basic firefighting.
- Assistants (volunteers who perform clerical functions) – drawn from the Citywide Volunteer Program

The FFD relies heavily on volunteerism and spends approximately \$35,000 on volunteer programs. The money is used to equip, train, and conduct background checks on all volunteers.

During the past three years, the use of volunteers by the FFD has increased due to the economic downturn. The Grand Jury learned the use of volunteers will continue to rise based on the economy. The FFD service level capability has improved exponentially, in part because of the volunteer programs. For example, the Vegetation Management Program (Weed Abatement) would have been eliminated because the paid part-time firefighter's position was eliminated. Instead, a volunteer is patrolling the area and posting signs on abandoned properties.

The Grand Jury learned the annual cost savings realized through the use of volunteers is \$336,220, determined by multiplying the annual hours logged by volunteers times an hourly rate of \$22.79 derived from the California Independent Sector (the Independent Sector publishes an average hourly rate comparison for agencies to use when calculating cost savings from volunteer usage). It also learned that the benefit to the community is well worth the expense and the ongoing effort by staff to administer the program.

D. Rio Vista Fire Department

The Rio Vista Fire Department, with the help of volunteers, is still able to maintain a three-man engine company. When volunteers are available, it uses four- or five-man engine companies.

After completion of Firefighter 1 Academy, the RVFD provides a mini-fire academy as part of its tailored training programs. All volunteers are also required to participate in a minimum of two training drills each month. Specialized training may be required beyond the two monthly drills.

The City of Rio Vista has undertaken a new program of building a live burn structure, a building used to practice fire-fighting. It was built primarily by firefighters and city volunteers.

RVFD has a part-time paid interim Fire Chief who is a retired firefighter. The Fire Chief's position is part-time, which saves the City \$76,000 annually. The Fire Marshal's position is also part-time.

E. Suisun City Fire Department

The Suisun City Fire Department has a completely different staffing model than other paid fire departments in the county. The paid staff responds and supervises the day shift. They also support the volunteers in training, maintenance of equipment and facilities, and administrative functions. The paid staff supervises the weekday shifts. All staff except the Fire Chief and two Station Captains are volunteers. The Deputy Chief, Battalion Chiefs, Captains, firefighters and rookies are volunteers.

The volunteers staff the fire engines 24/7/365. Volunteers fill all positions including the Command staff functions at a response. The volunteer Duty Officer – Battalion Chiefs are in charge of the shift. Volunteers for the SCFD work 12-hour shifts in the station and are required to do a minimum of five shifts a month. Most do several more than minimum.

All SCFD volunteers are trained to the firefighter 1 level. Most volunteers have already finished a Firefighter 1 academy and become a State Fire Marshal Certified Fighter 1 within one year. Volunteers that live within the City limits will be trained from no experience to a State Fire Marshal Firefighter 1 level. About 80% of the volunteers are EMT-1's. The SCFD Fire Chief is responsible for training and offering various other training opportunities. In addition, the Chief plans and coordinates all operational activities for the department.

The Grand Jury learned that through volunteer efforts, the SCFD is currently saving the city about \$6.3 million annually and that the department successfully responded to 1,756 incidents in 2010 (data from SCFD).

F. Vacaville Fire Department

At the time of this investigation, the Vacaville Fire Department had no volunteer firefighters. VVFD consists of 71 sworn full-time firefighters and four civilian employees.

G. Vallejo Fire Department

At the time of this investigation the Vallejo Fire Department had no volunteer firefighters.

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1 – Not all Solano County cities are taking full advantage of fire safety volunteers, which could potentially decrease the cost to taxpayers for fire protection services.

Recommendation 1 – All Solano County cities should maximize the use of fire safety volunteers for their fire departments.

Finding 2 – The Cities of Vacaville and Vallejo are not taking advantage of the use of fire safety volunteers to minimize the expense of providing emergency services to those communities.

Recommendation 2 – These cities should investigate and implement the use of fire safety volunteers.

COMMENTS

The Fairfield Fire Department is to be commended for offering educational scholarships for financially disadvantaged young adults who are interested in a fire service career.

Suisun City provides a good working model for fire volunteers helping their city to the fullest.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Vacaville City Council (Findings 1 and 2)
Vallejo City Council (Findings 1 and 2)
Benicia City Council (Finding 1)
Dixon City Council (Finding 1)
Fairfield City Council (Finding 1)
Rio Vista City Council (Finding 1)
Suisun City Council (Finding 1)

COURTESY COPIES

Solano County Director of the Office of Emergency Services
Benicia Fire Department
Dixon Fire Department
Fairfield Fire Department
Rio Vista Fire Department
Suisun Fire Department
Vallejo Fire Department
Vacaville Fire Department