

# City of Columbia

701 East Broadway, Columbia, Missouri 65201



**Agenda Item Number:** REP 39-15

**Department Source:** Fire

**To:** City Council

**From:** City Manager & Staff

**Council Meeting Date:** 3/16/2015

**Re:** Report on Utilizing Student Volunteers in the Fire Department (CM#4013)

## Documents Included With This Agenda Item

Council memo

**Supporting documentation includes:** None

## Executive Summary

At the January 20, 2015 Council meeting, staff was directed to prepare a report on whether a student resident program would be of benefit to the Columbia Fire Department.

## Discussion

Across the country, Fire Services utilize differing levels of volunteerism to assist in providing services to their respective communities. The transitional progression of fire and emergency services in an area typically follows a specific path. Services begin as a volunteer only response. As demand grows (driven by population growth, incident growth, services required/expected by the community) the service transitions to what is referred to as a "Combination Department." This typically results in the addition of paid professional staff to handle management, coordination of volunteers, and training in the early stages with the addition of some full-time emergency response personnel in the later stages. It is usually during this stage of growth that the use of a student resident program is utilized. However, as demand continues to grow, the final transition is to a fully paid staff available for response 24/7/365 at a level of service expected by the community.

### Potential Benefits of Utilizing Student Residents

Utilizing Student Residents (or other volunteer firefighters) would allow the Fire Department to bolster staffing numbers and support operations without the salary and benefit expenditures associated with full-time paid staff.

### Concerns/Potential Negative Impacts

Retention/Turnover – Nationwide there has been a steady decline in the number of firefighter volunteers due to the tremendous time commitment involved in meeting necessary training requirements and responding to increasing demands for service. Retention is an issue, particularly with student based volunteers as they frequently move away from the community after completion of college, or take full-time positions that limit their time available for responding to incidents. Turnover is high, resulting in a continuous and short cycle of recruiting, determining suitability, training, and replacement.

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**Training Demands-** One of the largest issues facing volunteer usage is the required training that is currently needed to operate safely and effectively in today's emergency service environment. The required training needed to learn the skills, become proficient, and then maintain those skills takes a toll on both the volunteer and the supporting agency. Columbia Fire currently utilizes two personnel dedicated to the Training Division to conduct training for the department. This is an area that is already severely strained to meet the current needs of the department. Adding a cadre of volunteers would not be possible without increasing staffing to make the necessary training available especially given the high turnover rate of volunteers and the need for training at times outside of the normal work-week (typically, training of volunteers occurs in the evenings and/or on weekends in order to accommodate the volunteers work/school schedules).

**Management-**The coordination of integrating volunteers into the typical shift scheduling would require additional staff hours in order to work properly and effectively. Staffing needs are determined prior to 6:30 am each day in order to ensure city/station coverage. Typically, each shift utilizes "floating" firefighters to cover vacancies (for vacation, sick leave, injury leave) and adjust coverage as necessary. Utilizing resident students or other volunteers to supplement staffing in the same manner would be time consuming to manage. As they are volunteers, their schedules determine the hours that they are available for service and then the department would need to match those with the current needs if possible.

**Accommodations for Residents-** Currently our fire stations are constructed for rotating 24-hour shift work. Rather than having a continuous space to establish a residence, all spaces are shared not only among that particular shift, but with the other two shifts. For example, in the bunkrooms a single bed will be utilized by three different CFD members (one each shift). A student resident operation normally provides a place for that student to live on a full time basis in exchange for that student volunteering to respond to calls when necessary. Creating areas for continuous habitation vs. shift style accommodations would require additional space and modifications to convert stations as well as operational changes.

**Effect on local partners-** As mentioned above, there is a declining trend nationwide of volunteers available to the fire service. One effect of our use of volunteers would be the "splitting of the pool" of volunteers between ourselves and our local partners. This in turn could have a negative impact on their ability to operate effectively. Our local partner's operations are built to recruit, train, and utilize volunteer firefighters and their operations rely on the availability of those volunteers.

## Fiscal Impact

Short-Term Impact: Unknown

Long-Term Impact: Unknown

## Vision, Strategic & Comprehensive Plan Impact

Vision Impact: Not Applicable

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Strategic Plan Impact: Not Applicable

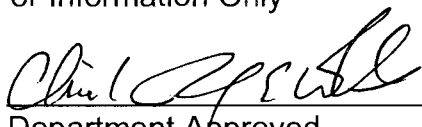
Comprehensive Plan Impact: Not Applicable

## Suggested Council Action

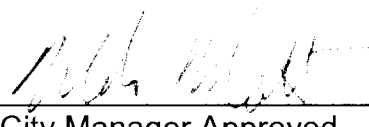
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## Legislative History

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Department Approved



City Manager Approved