



Municipal Technical Advisory Service
INSTITUTE *for* PUBLIC SERVICE

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The Value of Volunteer Firefighters

Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the MTAS website ([mtas.tennessee.edu](https://www.mtas.tennessee.edu)). This website is maintained daily by MTAS staff and seeks to represent the most current information regarding issues relative to Tennessee municipal government.

We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with municipal government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other MTAS website material.

Sincerely,

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All municipalities are facing the same challenge, which is how to stretch tax dollars, grants, and other sources of funding to provide the best municipal services possible. This is a particularly tough challenge for smaller municipalities with limited sources of funding, and for non-profit volunteer or combination fire departments. Personnel costs account for 85 percent to 95 percent of the operating budget in cities with fully paid public safety departments. Even in combination fire departments, personnel costs represent a large portion of the budget. Fire chiefs, city staff, and elected officials should consider the value of volunteer firefighters as a way to stretch financial resources. For fire departments that already have volunteer firefighters, it is important to understand the value the volunteer represents to the organization—not only in terms of their service, but in their value in offsetting certain operating costs.

Independent Sector (http://www.independentsector.org/volunteer_time [1]) estimates the dollar value of volunteer time for 2018 at \$25.43 per hour. The annual value of volunteer time has increased dramatically over the last three decades as the following chart illustrates.

History of the Dollar Value of a Volunteer Hour: 1980 - 2018

YEAR	\$ VALUE	YEAR	\$ VALUE	YEAR	\$ VALUE
1980	\$ 7.46	1994	\$12.68	2008	\$20.25
1981	\$ 8.12	1995	\$13.05	2009	\$20.85
1982	\$ 8.60	1996	\$13.47	2010	\$21.36
1983	\$ 8.98	1997	\$13.99	2011	\$21.79
1984	\$ 9.32	1998	\$14.56	2012	\$22.14
1985	\$ 9.60	1999	\$15.09	2013	\$22.55
1986	\$ 9.81	2000	\$15.69	2014	\$23.07
1987	\$10.06	2001	\$16.27	2015	\$23.56
1988	\$10.39	2002	\$16.74	2016	\$24.14
1989	\$10.82	2003	\$17.19	2017	\$24.69
1990	\$11.41	2004	\$17.55	2018	\$25.43
1991	\$11.76	2005	\$18.04		
1992	\$12.05	2006	\$18.77		
1993	\$12.35	2007	\$19.51		

NOTE: Values starting in 1990 were adjusted to reflect a new data series released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

For example, if a fire department responds to 500 alarms a year, averages 10 volunteers per response, and each response averages one hour in length, there is a direct value of \$127,150 per year to the community. There is additional value in the time spent in training, station and equipment maintenance, fire prevention and community risk reduction efforts, etc. that contributes to the successful operation of the fire department and the level of fire safety in the community. In addition, if the fire department has a volunteer shift staffing policy, volunteers riding out at the fire station on scheduled shifts receive the same credit as a paid firefighter does under the ISO Fire Suppression Rating Schedule. While \$127,150 is a significant amount of money, it is significantly *less* than the cost of staffing 10 firefighters 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, which would be over one million dollars, which is difficult to justify for a department answering 500 calls a year.

Another benefit of knowing the value of a volunteer firefighter hour is in billing for fire department services. A large special event, for example, may have police, fire and EMS coverage to protect participants. The event host may have to pay for police coverage, usually has to pay for EMS coverage, but rarely pays for the volunteer fire coverage. This is a disservice to the volunteers as the event could not occur without proper coverage, and the event host should pay for the services received that help make the event possible.

It is a common misconception that “volunteer” equals “free,” and many volunteer fire departments do not receive the financial support they need to operate safely and effectively. While a volunteer fire department may not have the expense of hourly rates and benefits for personnel, the department does have significant operating costs in insurance, fuel, utilities, supplies, training, maintenance, equipment replacement, and capital expenses. Communities must know and recognize the value of volunteer firefighters in terms of the service provided. Volunteer fire departments must communicate the value of their services to the community on a regular basis, and especially when requesting funds from municipalities, counties, and the public.

Links:

[1] http://www.independentsector.org/volunteer_time

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