

WAUKESHA FIRE DEPARTMENT

Department working with WCTC to address staffing challenges

Goal is getting more viable candidates through the door

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WAUKESHA — Twenty years ago, the hiring process for the Waukesha Fire Department would produce hundreds of interested candidates. But now, said Assistant Fire Chief Joseph Hoffman, they run a hiring process twice a year which produces less than 50 candidates.

Hoffman said the candidate shortage isn't the result of one issue.

"Obviously there are less people to apply for jobs and I think the workforce is down," he said.

The pandemic also was a big factor, with people not having the opportunity to be exposed to a career in fire service. Now, however, there are many programs aimed at finding interested candidates to fully explore what it means to be a firefighter or related worker.

The fire department launched its first-ever internship program one year ago.

"It takes individuals with no experience whatsoever in the fire department and provides them with their volunteers. They are unpaid. They receive training through the department at [Waukesha County Technical College] or another technical college for all the training they need to be eligible to apply for a full-time position," Hoffman said.

Interns receive their firefighter 1 certification, and EMT basics certification, which are required in Wisconsin. They can also apply to get firefighter 2 certification. The first two are the minimum qualifications to be hired in the department.

The internship program also helps to find city residents that maybe are considering a new career path who may not have the financial means to go to class.

"We're sponsoring them and allowing them to receive an internship and opportunity to understand what is going on in fire service and see if it is the right path for them," Hoffman said.

What is interesting for Hoffman is they ended up interviewing as many people in the internship program as they have for firefighter positions. They take about three interns each semester.



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Firefighter Amber O'Connell (left) and Firefighter/Paramedic Sara Murray (right) have been with the Waukesha Fire Department for seven years. Both women were inspired to become firefighters after a loved one's illness. On Thursday, both did an inventory of the supplies inside the ambulance.

Another issue is higher training demands due to more tactical situations — and candidates who can't meet those demands.

Hoffman said the federal government did a study in 2022 that said 77% of people who are in the age bracket for military service are ineligible to serve for one reason or another. It could be they are not physically, medically able to do it or their lifestyle choices aren't conducive to military service.

"If you are not eligible for

military service, you're probably not eligible to serve your community here as a firefighter," Hoffman said. "It is scary. We are not just seeing it in Waukesha. We are seeing it throughout Waukesha County and throughout the state."

Right opportunities at the right time

Nevertheless, the fire department has a lot of opportunities for people

who are interested in fire services such as those outside of the internship program. There are opportunities through Waukesha County Technical College such as the dual enrollment program. High school juniors can start taking college classes either through the Dual Enrollment Academy or the Start College Now Program. It allows people to start having career exposure at a younger age.

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The Waukesha Fire Department is working with Waukesha County Technical College to address job candidate challenges. Pictured is the outside of fire station 1, 130 W. St. Paul Ave.

EMS

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Courtney Hull, WCTC associate dean of Fire & EMS Training, said students are graduating high school with all the entry level requirements to get hired full-time with a fire department. At 18, they have the certifications needed.

The dual enrollment program at WCTC is in its fifth year

"We have 23 students in it from high schools all over Milwaukee and Waukesha County. For next year, fall 2023, we had 53 applicants. So we have doubled the seats and are taking 42. We'll have 42 high school juniors and seniors," Hull said.

There is also an internship program to get high school students out to fire departments, get training and better understand the fire service culture. Hull said when she entered fire service in 2003, she was told it would take seven years of volunteering or working part-time to get a full-time job.

Now, Hull said, there are students who are getting hired right out of the academy because they have those basic skills.

"They are getting a full-time career with a local service within a year of graduating," Hull said.

Twenty or thirty years ago, high school students may have known what they wanted to do as a career.

Now middle school and high school students are being better prepared to find their career path. These type of opportunities give students a hands on skills to be ready to be on the job once they graduate, according to Hull.

From 4 p.m.-7 p.m. on Tuesday there will be a meet and greet at WCTC, 800 Main St. in Pewaukee. It is the largest career fair with a fire and EMS focus. There will be 34 different fire and EMS agencies, one of which will be the Waukesha Fire Department. Students, community members and current firefighters looking to do transfers can attend.

"It's a one-stop shop for them to meet employers and learn about the variety of opportunities that are available," Hull said.

There will also be a presentation on women in the fire service.

For more information visit <https://www.wctc.edu/>.



Firefighter Amber O'Connell (left) and Firefighter/Paramedic Sara Murray (right) both check medical supplies on an ambulance on Thursday at the Waukesha Fire Department.