

Definition of a Volunteer Firefighter

Ask anyone on the street what a firefighter is or looks like and you'll most likely get descriptions akin to Charles Atlas (and yes, I know I've just dated myself with that reference). Public perception is one of 200+ lbs. of raw brute force, charging into burning buildings and saving babies. Unfortunately, this perception can invade the ranks of volunteer fire departments, undermining the efforts of those who work tirelessly to improve their community.

While career members go through a rigorous screening process, volunteer fire departments are a mosaic of different skills, experiences and abilities. It's not always that easy to find people who are willing to voluntarily give up their free time and dedicate themselves to a dangerous and often thankless job; we graciously accept the ones who are and work with what they have to give us.

As members are brought into the fold, their unique talents are quickly discovered and used to fill niches so that the department runs like a well-oiled machine. Whether it may be political savvy, radio communications, administrative skills, mechanical aptitude or public speaking and instruction, roles are arranged and individual gifts are utilized to keep the trucks rolling.

Because of the inherent diversity created in a volunteer department, not every single member is going to be capable of doing the exact same thing as the member standing next to them. Does this make them any less a firefighter? Absolutely not. What defines us as firefighters isn't so much our physical proficiencies or prowess on the fire ground; it's something much more basic than that. It is our willingness to do whatever it takes to get the job done, whether behind the scenes or up front with a nozzle in our hands.

Without pencil pushers, the trucks would run out of gas. Take away public education or politics and the department could lose its position in the community spotlight. If not for mechanics, the pumps might be rendered useless. Landscaping is important in maintaining the department's professional appearance, instead of resembling an abandoned parking lot. Our contributions and involvement with the department run far deeper than just stomping out grass fires.

Even on the fire ground itself, that diversity is put to use. Some members shine at medical assists, while the ones who abhor the sight of blood are exceptional at battling blazes. Support roles such as traffic or BA control are crucial to the integrity and safety of a scene, though the lack of glamour and heroics can make us forget just how important they are. Every assigned task is a necessary and indispensable undertaking.

The definition of a volunteer firefighter isn't and can't be strictly a physical one. It's our character, commitment, determination and altruism which identify and separates us from the crowd. What best describes a firefighter is the heart, not the brawn, that we put into our profession.