

Fire and Rescue Alternative Services and The Decreasing Resources to Provide Them

In 1979 one of Yadkin Counties fire departments realized that they could offer more to the citizens they served and as one of the few tax supported departments, to the citizens that are paying taxes to keep them going. At this time the department responded to less than 80 calls per year. They were well equipped to handle a house fire, grass fire, or even a car fire, but these calls for service were few and far between. The members were eager to serve their community and the biggest thing hurting membership numbers was having nothing to do but train for events that just didn't happen. This department decided to start assisting the newly formed Yadkin County EMS with medical responses. Questions were asked, research was completed, certifications were obtained, and the EMS was receptive since they too were in training for advanced levels of care and out of district a large portion of the time.

In 1980 the First Responder Program was born in Yadkin County. My department Arlington Community Volunteer Fire Department Inc. started giving its citizens and taxpayers additional services at no additional cost. As time passed and this new system gained popularity the two other tax supported Fire Districts came on board, first West Yadkin Volunteer Fire Department and then Buck Shoals Volunteer Fire Department. Time kept ticking by and this new system proved its worth, all of the other remaining eight departments came on board one by one. This formed one of the, if not the finest fire service medical response programs in the state and beyond. This county wide first responder program along with the added response from the Yadkin County Rescue Squad that was already in the medical business can be accredited for everything from saving many lives, to giving the words of comfort and security to a family member of a patient in need. This system and the personnel that respond have proven countless times that what we have in Yadkin County works and it has been copied in several places, in other counties, and states. This additional medical service also filled in the gaps of fire or rescue training and lower response numbers.

Let's fast forward to March 2017, 38 years later. Some of the very reasons that our first responder programs were started and flourished have long since fell by the wayside. One of the primary reasons was eager members that wanted to branch out from firefighting into the medical field to have more options and more to do. Boy has 38 years changed this mind set. The fire service has changed immensely with all of the certifications required, and the continuing education to maintain them. The training required to gaining proficiency of the multitude of equipment needed to do our jobs, not to mention all of the testing and service work it takes to keep this equipment in tip top shape. This is not just in the fire service but the rescue service has the same extreme demands. These services that we volunteer to do have changed into time and energy eating monsters. They still provide lots of assistance to our citizens much more than in years past, and we reach more people than ever with the high call volumes that each department has amassed. All of this has taken us from "just wanting to do a little more" (38 years ago) to "just needing a break" (March 2017).

In working with and around each department as I do, it is clear that the volunteer spirit is dying in society as a whole. In all departments and not just in Yadkin County, citizens are not beating down our doors to join and give of their time as they once were. Out of the volunteers that do come in many are not aware of the commitment needed to fill the shoes of a volunteer firefighter or rescue provider. This is leaving a gap in our services and a heavy burden on the most

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dedicated members who “always seem to be there”. With the major demands that are required to be a fire or rescue volunteer those that have made the additional commitment to get their medical credentials comes extra time, labor, training, worries, and lost sleep. In the fire and rescue service our primary function is not geared to be the medical side of the response. We are charged with ISO Ratings and maintaining the fire or rescue capabilities of our organization and rightfully so since that is what we were chartered to do. On the other hand most of us are dedicated “to protect lives and property” with lives being first.

I don't have all the answers and wearing all of the hats that I do, I probably have more questions without answers than most of you. The challenges that we all face today and in the future are how “to provide so much, with so few, to so many. Hanging in our station is a framed quote that has been hanging on the wall of the old building since before my time and is now hanging at the primary headquarters station today. It reads “We the willing, led by the unknowing, have done so much, with so little for so long, we are now qualified to do anything with nothing”. How many of you feel this way at times? It scares me to think about it but the reality of the matter is “our volunteer pool is drying up”. The very service that we all added to improve membership and add to the services provided to the people that we protect seems to be the area suffering the first hits. The personnel that we have that do it all, fire or rescue and the medical response are in most cases our top responders for each department. They are the ones that we expect the most from, and often some of the most overlooked since a lot of their calls are “JUST MEDICAL”.

I would like to challenge everyone here; the chiefs, officers, firefighters, rescue members, and families of all the aforementioned with this. The Association and the award nominees that we come here to commemorate tonight although they all have and continue to do outstanding jobs are in danger tonight. Our volunteers need to be put on the International Endangered Species List because they are just not making very many more like what you see sitting among you tonight. I would ask that we unite in efforts of recruitment and retention to be able to continue to provide services that the average citizens do not know how valuable they are until they have to dial 911. That we take effort to recognize those in our departments that take the extra steps to run the medical calls and bolster our department's public relations. That through research and public education assist the people in our communities to see and understand the importance and value of the volunteer department just down the road and the members giving of themselves and their families to help the person in need. What we have in Yadkin County is awesome. We lead the way in adding medical response to our services and bolstering immensely the capabilities of our EMS. Let's do whatever it takes to keep our volunteer departments staffed and able to respond to every call for service. Our volunteer services are precious resources that I for one could not imagine having to do without. From me to you as the Yadkin County Emergency Services Director and as a volunteer in Yadkin County, I would like to thank each one of you personally for the incredibly awesome job that you do and I would like to thank each of your family members for supporting you in doing this thankless job. The family members have to sacrifice as much as the volunteer. Thank you again and may each one of you always return home from each and every call for help!

Keith Vestal,
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