

The Aurora Volunteer Fire Department Needs Volunteers to Continue

Let me introduce myself. I am the current chief of the Aurora Volunteer Fire Department, which contracts with the towns of Amherst, Aurora and Great Pond to provide emergency response services. I was a game warden in the area for 30 years, so I am familiar with emergency response from the law enforcement side, but when I started with the Department, I knew nothing about fires and firefighting. Since then, I have trained to be an Emergency Medical Responder and went to the Hancock County Fire Academy to earn a Firefighter I and II. I've taken many courses, learned much from the Bureau of Labor and other sources to try to be a good chief. It has taken me about 2 years to learn the basics of running a small fire and EMS department and bring the department more or less into compliance with Bureau of Labor regulations.

It's been a challenge, and the towns have assisted by providing a slightly higher budget for us to work with, but now we face a personnel shortage that can't be solved by asking for more funding or donations.

The department has been able to continue through the years because of a faithful core group of volunteers who just would not give up on the idea of helping their communities. The problem is that these core people are aging and unable to do the "heavy lifting" needed at some calls. Many of these members cannot leave work during the day, so we have very few people available to respond during work hours.

The department responds to about 60 emergency calls a year. Most involve local residents with medical issues, traffic accidents, storm related wire and tree damage and other problems, many of which don't amount to a lot of strenuous work and may require an hour's response time, sometimes more if we have to divert traffic for extended periods. Often only a few people are required. We have about a half dozen "fire" calls a year which require multiple people and sometimes hours of hard work. It is the prospect of these calls that keeps me up nights worrying because we don't have the people to manage them.

It takes someone who is physically able to handle heavy extrication equipment to cut someone out of a crashed or overturned vehicle. It takes physically fit people to haul hose lines, raise large ladders and fight fires. It takes someone who is willing to take the time to train to fight fires and get up in the middle of the night to respond.

I am making an appeal to the residents of Amherst, Aurora, Great Pond and Osborn for volunteers to help with our fire departments. We need help with traffic control, firefighting, tree removal, scene control, building maintenance, information technology, computers, vehicle driving, vehicle repair, bookkeeping, selling unused equipment, filing, record keeping, cooking for events, building and vehicle cleaning and many jobs that don't require having to fight fires or getting up in the middle of the night. Being a member means you need to take about 3 hours of Bureau of Labor required initial training which we are setting up to be done online, and

after that the training commitment depends on your job tasks. If funding is available, we pay members small stipends for attendance at trainings, and will pay mileage to attend trainings out of town. We need people willing to get up at midnight and respond when lightning strikes your neighbor's house, or someone crashes on Route 9. When you need help, making connections with others in an emergency response organization means that others will help you when you need them. Being a member means that the fire department's liability and worker's comp insurance will cover you when you give your time to help others, and our call out system allows for unified communications. I'd also be happy to take names and contact information for people who want to help but are not willing to be a member.

If the department can't come up with enough members, our response will slowly dwindle until we have to become a "Rescue Squad" without the ability to fight fires, or close completely and give away or sell our equipment.

What happens when the fire department closes? **One**, communities lose a valuable emergency response resource and potential source of social interaction and community outreach. One reason we exist is because the nearest help from larger neighboring communities is sometimes an hour or more away, IF they can respond. **Two**, the cost of homeowner's and business insurance will go up for residences and businesses located within 5 miles of the fire station. How much depends on the insurance company, and if you are concerned, you should ask your agent for an estimate. The town of Osborn has already been notified that their insurance rates may go up because of inadequate personnel responding to fires. **Three**, the organizational knowledge and physical equipment and building now being used by the fire department will be lost and will probably never be recovered if our towns remain as small as they are, because the funding and knowledgeable people needed to reconstruct them in the future will be gone.

The AVFD is a rare breed in the area, a "regional" fire department before the days of regionalization. I'd like to see it continue, but I desperately need help to keep it going. Call me at 207-944-1131 or email me at dpalman1@rivah.net if you would like to join the conversation about emergency response in the Airline Communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Deborah Palman".

Deborah Palman
Chief, Aurora Volunteer Fire Department