

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building Resilient Infrastructure in Communities (BRIC) in Maine

A State-Wide Needs Assessment of Fire Workforce & Capacity, Community Risk Reduction, and Hazard Mitigation

Office of State Fire Marshal | University of Maine | Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center

About This Study

This preliminary report presents findings from our statewide survey of Maine Fire Departments conducted in 2025–2026, developed by the Office of State Fire Marshal (OSFM) in partnership with the Maine Association of Fire Chiefs and the University of Maine's Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center. The study inventories Maine's hazard mitigation and community resilience landscape, focusing on fire department staffing, certification, recruitment & retention, and response capacity.

347

Surveys Distributed

Fire departments statewide

219

Surveys Completed

63% response rate

4,464

Firefighters Rostered

from 155 departments

Fire Department Staffing Structure

Maine's fire service is overwhelmingly volunteer-dependent. The survey found:

- 60% of Maine fire departments are all-volunteer.
- 94% of all departments rely on some degree of volunteerism.
- 34% operate as combination (career + volunteer) departments.
- Only 6% are fully career departments.
- Among volunteer departments that provide compensation, 91% offer formal monetary payments of some kind.

Training & Certification Levels

Statewide, 74% of firefighters are interior certified and 74% are pump operator certified, but there is significant regional variation:

- Androscoggin, Cumberland, and Penobscot counties lead in both certifications, reflecting the presence of larger career departments in Portland, Lewiston-Auburn, and Bangor.

- Oxford, Franklin, Hancock, and Waldo counties lag the most in interior certification.
- Western Maine and Downeast regions fall below the statewide average and are also the furthest from approved Maine State Fire Training Facilities.
- Firefighters associated with multiple departments show notably higher certification rates: 90% interior certified and 86% pump operator certified, vs. 67% and 69% for single-department members.

Key Staffing Challenges

Fire chiefs consistently identified the following as their most pressing issues:

1. Training Burden

- Initial Firefighter I & II training requirements deter new recruits due to time commitments.
- Ongoing recertification is difficult for volunteers juggling full-time jobs and family obligations.
- Training sites are often more than an hour away, particularly in Western Maine.

2. Daytime Coverage Gaps

- Volunteers are largely unavailable during working hours (9 AM–5 PM).
- Departments increasingly rely on mutual aid, but neighboring communities often face the same gap.
- Underfunded departments cannot afford full-time positions to address this need.

3. Housing Costs & Geography

- Rising housing costs are pushing members outside of their first-due areas. This could have outsized impacts for younger staff and first-time buyers.
- Longer commutes reduce response availability and willingness to participate in local trainings.

4. Recruitment & Retention of Young Members

- Departments struggle to recruit, train, and retain younger members.
- ~30% of Maine firefighters are over 50; 14% are 60 or older.
- In unpaid volunteer departments, nearly 25% of members are over 60.
- As older members age out of active service, departments face growing capability gaps.

Recruitment & Retention Strategies in Use

- Social media campaigns (Facebook most commonly cited) are increasingly replacing in-person outreach.
- Partnerships with high schools, vocational programs, and community colleges including live-in programs at SMCC and EMCC show promise but are concentrated in York, Cumberland, and Penobscot counties.
- Financial incentives (improved pay, benefits, tax breaks, cost-of-living adjustments) are reported as the most effective strategies.

- FEMA's SAFER grants are being used by some departments to fund recruitment and retention programs.
- Word of mouth and open house events remain common grassroots approaches.

A Shifting Volunteer-to-Career Landscape

A notable trend is the emergence of "burgeoning career departments": i.e., historically volunteer departments that are hiring their first full-time staff. This is but one shift that's reshaping the state's fire service ecosystem:

- New career positions in small towns are drawing experienced personnel away from larger career departments, attracted by comparable pay, shorter commutes, and lower call volume.
- Volunteer departments have traditionally served as the primary training pipeline for career positions. As volunteerism declines, this "feeder program" is at risk.
- Changes in residency requirements, pay scales, and career pathways are creating cascading effects across volunteer, combination, and career departments statewide.

Areas Warranting Further Policy Attention

- Innovative regionalization and mutual aid models emerging at the grassroots level.
 - Maine's aging population and its downstream effects on the public safety workforce pipeline.
 - Geographic disparities in training access and their impact on statewide response capacity.
 - Distribution of certification levels across space; mapping where coverage gaps are most critical.
 - Built environment trends, infrastructure conditions, and community risk reduction policy.
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PRELIMINARY FINDINGS — Final Comprehensive Report Expected Fall 2026

Office of the State Fire Marshal | Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center | University of Maine