



Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities

A Research Collaboration Between Maine's Office of the State Fire Marshal
and University of Maine

'25-'26 Maine Fire Service Workforce Report

Study Context & Limitations

- Goal — Understand the role of Maine's fire service and needs related to:
 - Community safety
 - Recruitment & retention
 - Workforce
 - Capacity
 - Information systems
 - Support mechanisms (policy, funding, etc.)
 - And more...
- Point-in-time snapshot of 2025-2026 period
 - Conclusions pertain to larger trends and projections
- An ever-changing landscape
 - Some deliverables will benefit from routine updates, such as the workforce census

Study Development & Distribution

- Collaboration between OSFM, UMaine, and stakeholders
- Expansion of regional pilot study methodology (Hancock County 2019)
- Fire service survey distributed to 347 FDs, with 219 respondents
 - 63% response rate
 - 168 FD rosters collected
- Follow-up interviews with 25 fire chiefs representing departments across 14 counties
- Additional surveys to code enforcement officers and lead municipal administrators

Maine's Fire Service

A Workforce Snapshot & Pressing Challenges

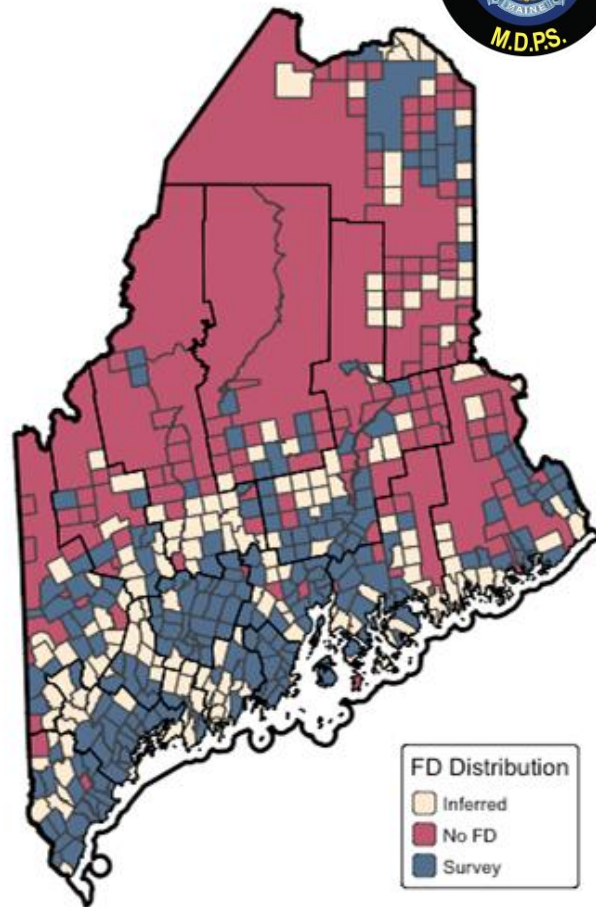
Maine's Fire Service Workforce by the Numbers

Fire departments (FDs) surveyed: **219**

Total Maine fire departments, estimate: **398**

Individual firefighters on survey rosters: **5,611**

Total Maine firefighters, estimate: **9,087**



FD Staffing Structures in Maine

Department Staffing Structure	Percent of Surveyed Fire Departments
Fully Career	6% (n=14)
Combination (Career & Volunteer)	34% (n=75)
Volunteer (w/ Compensation)	42% (n=92)
Volunteer (w/o Compensation)	18% (n=40)

“Right now, we have five full-time positions, including myself. It’s one firefighter, per shift, working 24 a day, and then they work with a per diem — so, part time firefighter. And that makes up the staffing. And then we have about 16–18 call company members.”
– Androscoggin Co.
Combination FD

94% of Maine fire departments rely on some degree of volunteerism.

Maine Fire Service's Top Staffing Challenges

1. Consistent personnel coverage

Challenges:

- Rising call volume
- Limited volunteer availability
- Recruitment and retention

2. Sufficient training & certification

Challenges:

- Volunteer time & availability
- Distance to training
- Training costs

Staffing Shortages

47% of surveyed Maine FDs reported being too short staffed to respond to a call in the last 3 years

Career Departments	Combination Departments	Volunteer Departments
36%	51%	46%

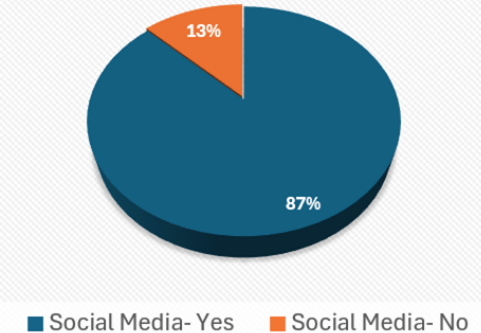
Reported causes for staff/volunteer turnover

1. Family obligations (73% of FDs)
2. Training requirements (68% of FDs)
3. Aging (52% of FDs)

Recruitment Challenges & Efforts

- 74% of surveyed FDs have taken steps to increase the number of their volunteer and/or career firefighters
 - Most common step: Social media (Facebook), esp. in “bedroom communities” w/o foot traffic.
 - Other steps: job fairs, partnerships w/ local schools, & positive reputation/word of mouth.
- FDs with career firefighters report “dwindling application pools,” once having 100–200 applicants for open positions and now fewer than 10
 - With impacts on overtime and training costs
- New need to “market” firefighter positions as a career path.

Surveyed FDs Social Media,
Yes or No



“We’ve never had to market the fire service as a career path. The people who have wanted to get in have got in... And now, we’re in competition with all other kinds of employment opportunities.”

Auxiliary Staff Capacity of Surveyed Fire Departments (n=219)

Office Administration Staff

Paid staff: 31% (n=68)	Volunteers: 11% (n=23)
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Event Coordination Staff

Paid staff: 21% (n=46)	Volunteers: 11% (n=25)
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Maintenance Staff

Paid staff: 21% (n=46)	Volunteers: 14% (n=25)
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Fundraising Staff

Paid staff: 5% (n=12)	Volunteers: 18% (n=40)
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Daytime Staff Availability

“A simple fire beyond a room and contents can tax this department depending on the time of day.”

- Lack of volunteer availability is particularly pronounced during weekday daytime hours

Department Staffing Structure	Understaffed During Weekdays	Understaffed During Weeknights	Understaffed During Weekends
Fully Career	38%	42%	42%
Combination (Career & Volunteer)	65%	44%	49%
Volunteer (w/ Comp)	67%	19%	18%
Volunteer (w/o Comp)	76%	11%	13%

Maine's Certified Interior Firefighters

Department Staffing Structure	% of Dept. Certified
Fully Career	99% (n=9)
Combination (Career & Volunteer)	80% (n=56)
Volunteer (w/ Compensation)	61% (n=54)
Volunteer (w/o Compensation)	55% (n=30)

“Once mutual aid departments arrive on scene, it isn’t so much an issue, but initially, it could be difficult to get one or two interior teams.”

— Kennebec Co. VFD

- 95% of VFDs said their department would be positively impacted by more interior-certified members.
- Firefighters affiliated with multiple departments are more likely to be interior certified.

– Washington Co. VFD

The map displays the percentage of certified teachers across various districts in Rhode Island. The color scale ranges from light blue (50%) to dark blue (90%). The highest percentages (80-90%) are concentrated in the northern and western parts of the state, while the lowest percentages (50-60%) are found in the southern coastal areas.

District	% Certified
Providence	~85
Warwick	~80
Westerly	~75
East Greenwich	~70
North Scituate	~65
South Scituate	~60
Woonsocket	~55
Coventry	~50
East Greenwich	~50
North Scituate	~50
South Scituate	~50
Woonsocket	~50
Coventry	~50
East Greenwich	~50
North Scituate	~50
South Scituate	~50
Woonsocket	~50
Coventry	~50

Interior Certified Members Across Counties

*“Being a call company,
most work a full-time
job, thus no time for
training. They offer very
little training in Western
Maine. You have to
drive a long way to get
it.”*

– Oxford Co. VFD

County	% Dept. Interior Certified	County	% Dept. Interior Certified
Androscoggin (n=224)	90%	Kennebec (n=575)	73%
Cumberland (n=970)	88%	Sagadahoc (n=101)	66%
Lincoln (n=37)	84%	Knox (n=193)	64%
Penobscot (n=440)	79%	Washington (n=183)	61%
Aroostook (n=234)	78%	Waldo (n=182)	53%
Somerset (n=57)	77%	Hancock (n=322)	51%
York (n=635)	76%	Franklin (n=34)	47%
Piscataquis (n=134)	74%	Oxford (n=140)	43%

Volunteer Departments are “Training Grounds” for Future Career Firefighters

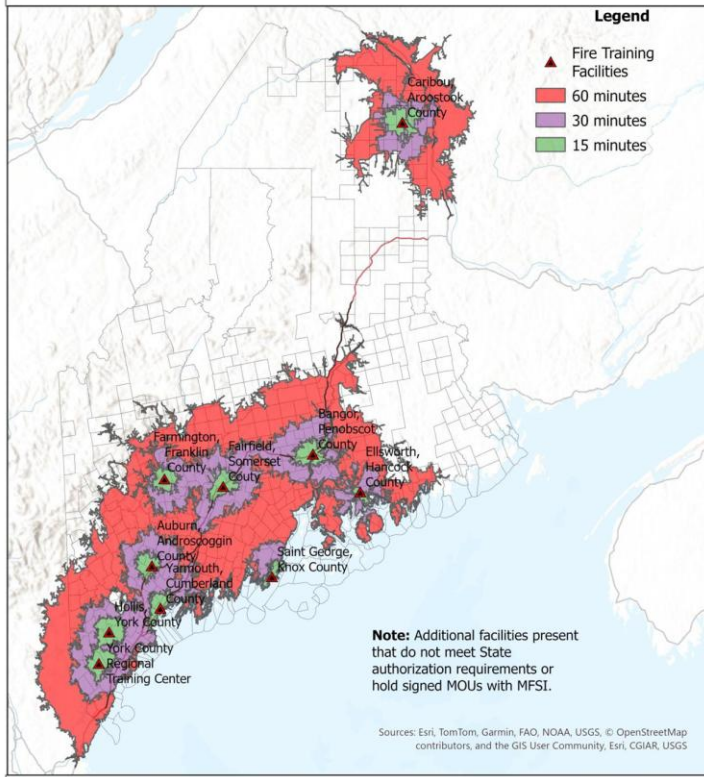
Volunteer Fire Dept. Perspective	Career Fire Dept. Perspective
“We’re not a full-time department. [...] We’re helping them get to that [certification] level, and then they’re going to a full-time department. I don’t blame them. <u>We’re a training ground for the full-time departments.</u>” – Knox Co. VFD	“<u>The best feeder program has always been the volunteer departments.</u> If you don’t have that link, I don’t know where we get that. [...] We have to have a feeder program coming out of those, and I don’t know how you backfill that as those volunteer departments dry up and disappear.” – Androscoggin Co. Career FD

New Trends in Full-Time Firefighter Movement

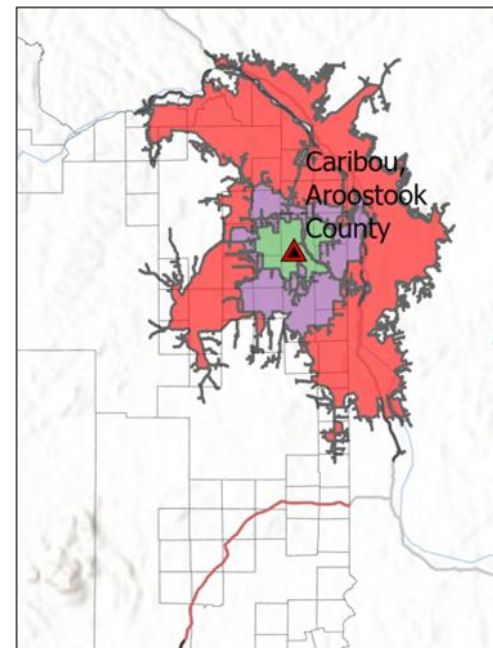
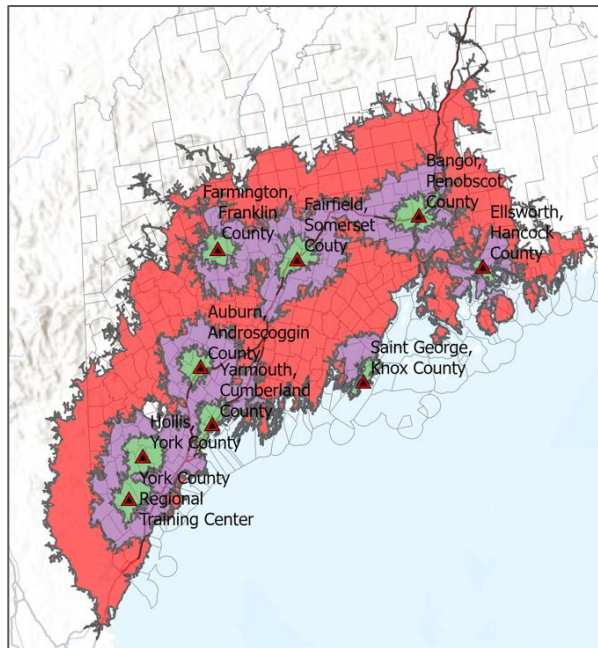
- Historically-volunteer departments are adding full-time positions.
- These are enticing opportunities for career firefighters seeking:
 - Less stressful call volumes,
 - A job closer to home,
 - Accelerated career advancement,
 - Better wages & benefits, etc.
- Fire chiefs report increased “fire department hopping” or “migration” between departments as career firefighters seek out their most desirable working conditions.
 - A “buyers’ market” for highly trained, career firefighters.
- Departments are eliminating or expanding residency requirements
 - Many career firefighters commuting 1–2 hours, or more

This is a highly competitive environment, and declines in volunteer staffing constrict the “volunteer-to-career pipeline.”

Access Fire Training Centers (MFSI Approved) -Within 15, 30, 60 Minutes Driving

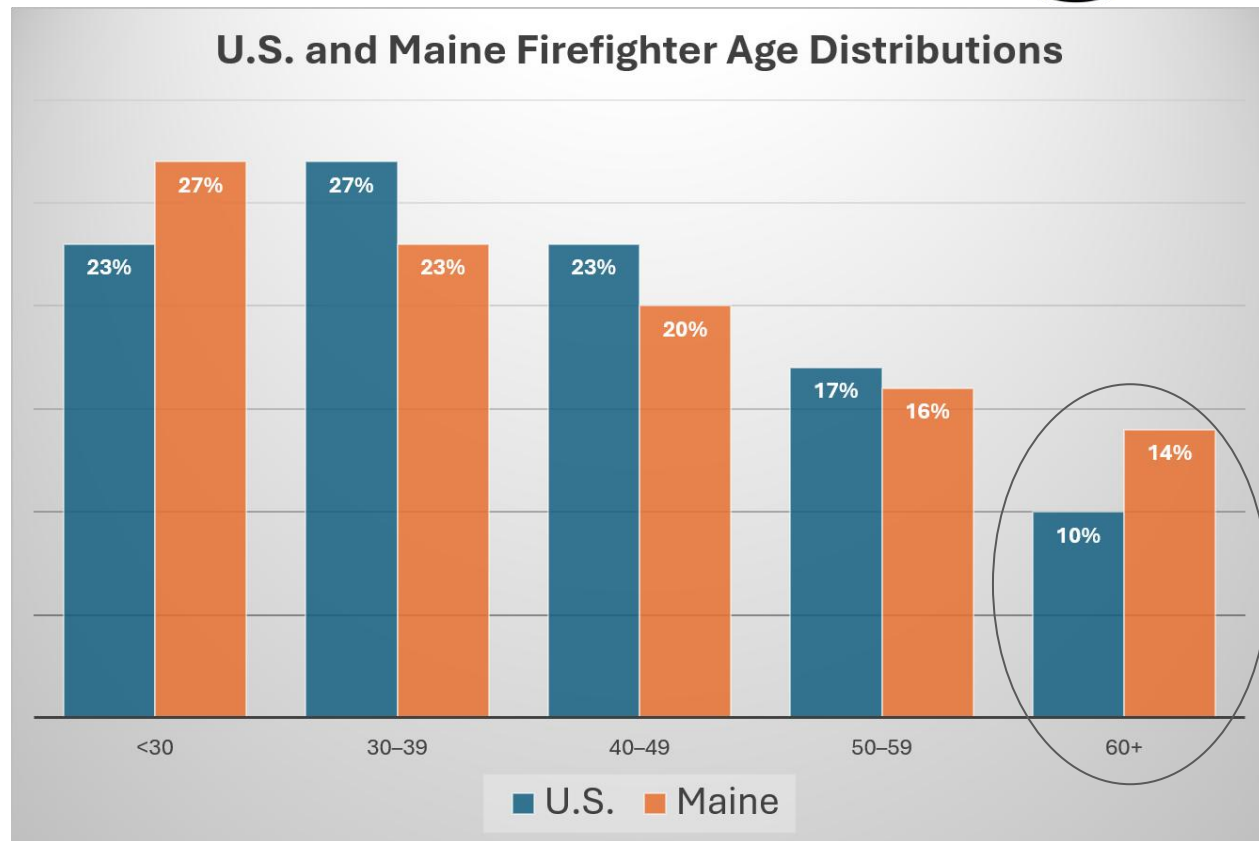


Approved Maine State Fire Training Facilities – Drive-time distance



Statewide Age Demographics

- 50% of Maine's firefighters are younger than 40, but
- Maine's 60+ year old population exceeds national rate.
- Lower than nat'l rates in 30–59 age groups.

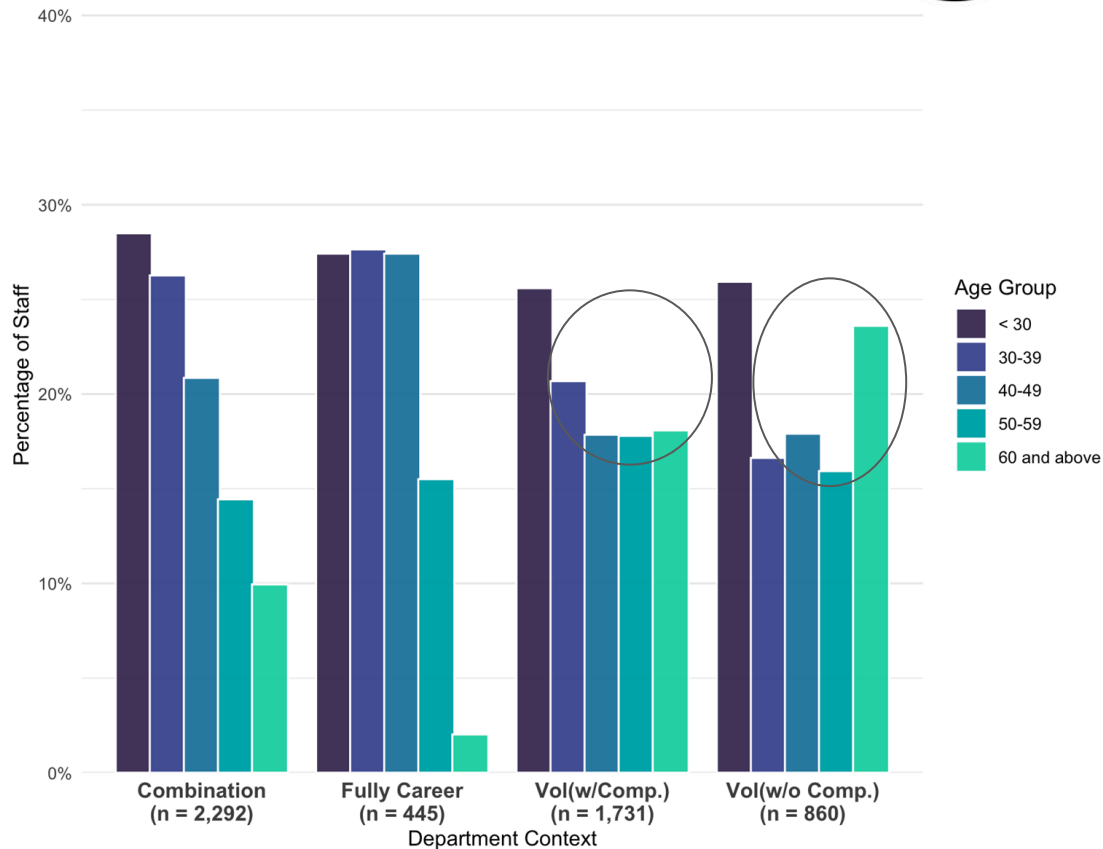


Age Distribution by Staffing Structure

Department Age Demographics

VFDs see a drop-off in staff aged 30–49, relying heavily on firefighters aged 50+

“Some of our seasoned volunteers are aging out of active service, creating a gap that is difficult to fill.”
— York Co. VFD

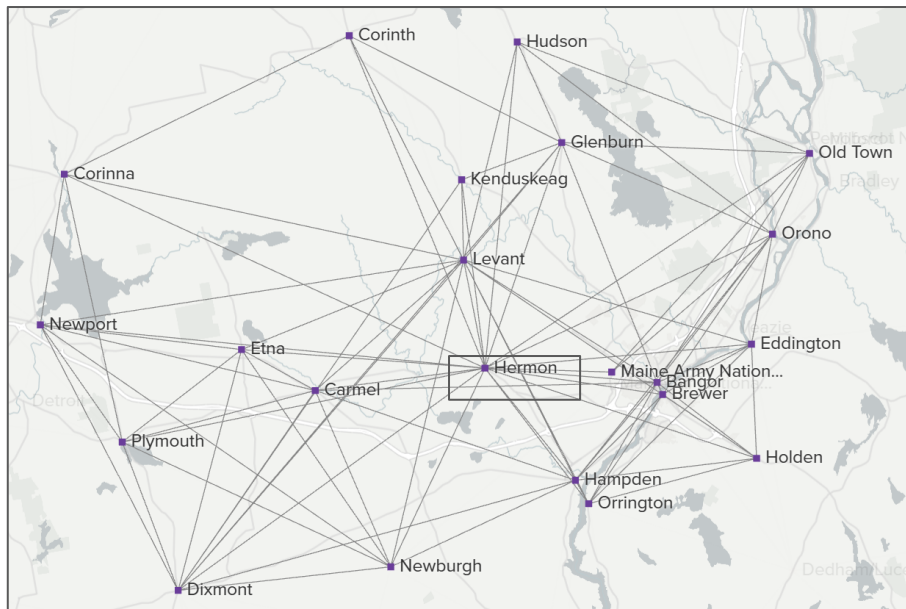
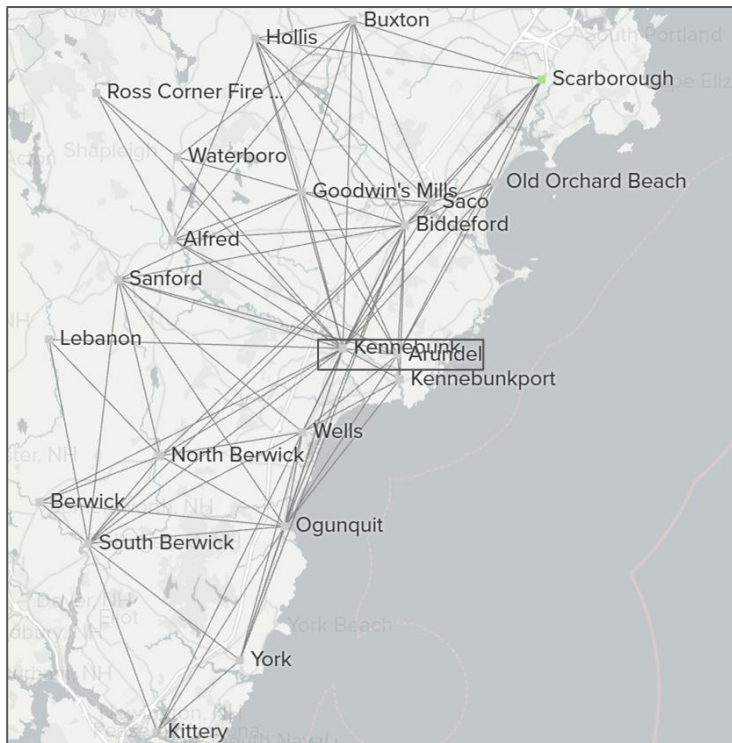


Mutual Aid & Regionalization

Systems, Stressors, & Strategies

Revealing Relationships: Mutual Aid

"We are, on a whole, going further than we ever have to provide mutual aid assistance."



Above: Hermon FD's 21 reported mutual aid relationships

Left: Kennebunk FD's 20 reported mutual aid relationships

Interactive Map: <https://embed.kumu.io/584fb278ad040210fe6d082a0ac5007d>

Growing acceptance and grassroots emergence of regionalization

Regional Issue	Current Efforts
Rising costs of equipment & apparatus	Shared equipment & apparatus agreements (formal & informal)
Lack of access to training resources & expertise	Coordinated, multi-department training programs
Leaders without advanced or specialty training	Emergence of “regional fire chiefs” activated during mutual aid
Short staffed departments	Increased mutual aid activation
Decreased volunteer availability	Shared personnel between depts.
VFD closure	Formation of fire districts

“We need regionalization.”

“I think regionalization is the answer to a lot of these problems.”

“There’s going to end up having to be regionalized departments in this county at least, if not this state.”

“I see [regionalization] as an important piece to the survival of our fire service.”

Maine's “All-Hazards” Fire Departments

“Fire departments, back through the 70s and 80s, were responding to fires. Now [...] when we talk about fire departments, they’re really ‘all hazards.’ And we collect everything that doesn’t fit.”

- Local FDs are planners, educators, communicators, and responders for natural hazards, including major storms, wildland fires, floods, etc.
 - Essential role in maintaining critical infrastructure (esp. in towns w/o Public Works)
- Increased responsibility in human hazards, industrial risk, & energy security
 - HazMat, factory & mill fires, landfill fires
 - Energy infrastructure (battery storage fires, oil terminals & transportation, solar farm fires, dam breaks, etc.)
- “All-Hazards Departments” = Increased training burden w/o reliable funding

Call Volume Changes

- 78% increase in total calls between 2014 and 2024 (NFIRS) statewide, with some individual departments' call volume reportedly doubling or tripling.
- Largely associated with EMS
 - 66% of Maine FDs perform some EMS
 - 42% increase in medical calls from 2014 to 2024
 - Rural hospitals/unit closures mean longer ambulance trips & time burden of EMS calls

Current call volumes are...

"Too much to be a volunteer"
– Washington Co. Combination FD

"Too demanding"
– York Co. Combination FD

"A deterrent"
– Penobscot Co. Career FD

Maine's Call Volume by Incident Type

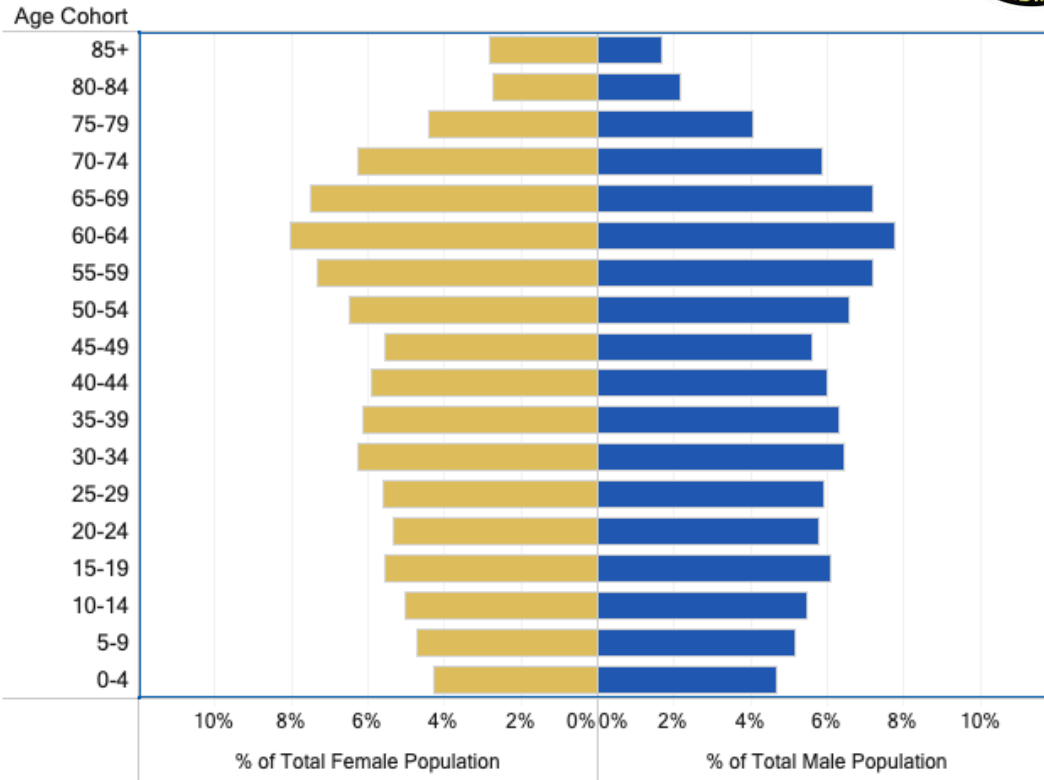
- Incident type by code reported (NFIRS, 2024)
 - Structure Fire: **4,528**
 - Medical Calls: **122,809 (63% of all calls)**
 - EMS calls (excluding vehicle accident with injury and pedestrian struck) account for 106,171 of these incidents
 - Hazardous condition: **13,128**
 - Power line down: **5,038**
 - Biological hazard: **2,171**
 - Natural gas/propane leak: **1,241**

Already the oldest state
in the nation, recent
growths in older
populations mean call
volumes are anticipated
to increase

*“The population up our way is
getting older. We’re dealing with a
lot of calls like that.”*

— Washington Co. Combination
Dept.

Maine | 2022, Historical population



From [Maine State Economist 2025](#)

Governance, Funding, & Costs

The Economic Role & Financial Position of Local Fire Departments

Increasing Apparatus Costs

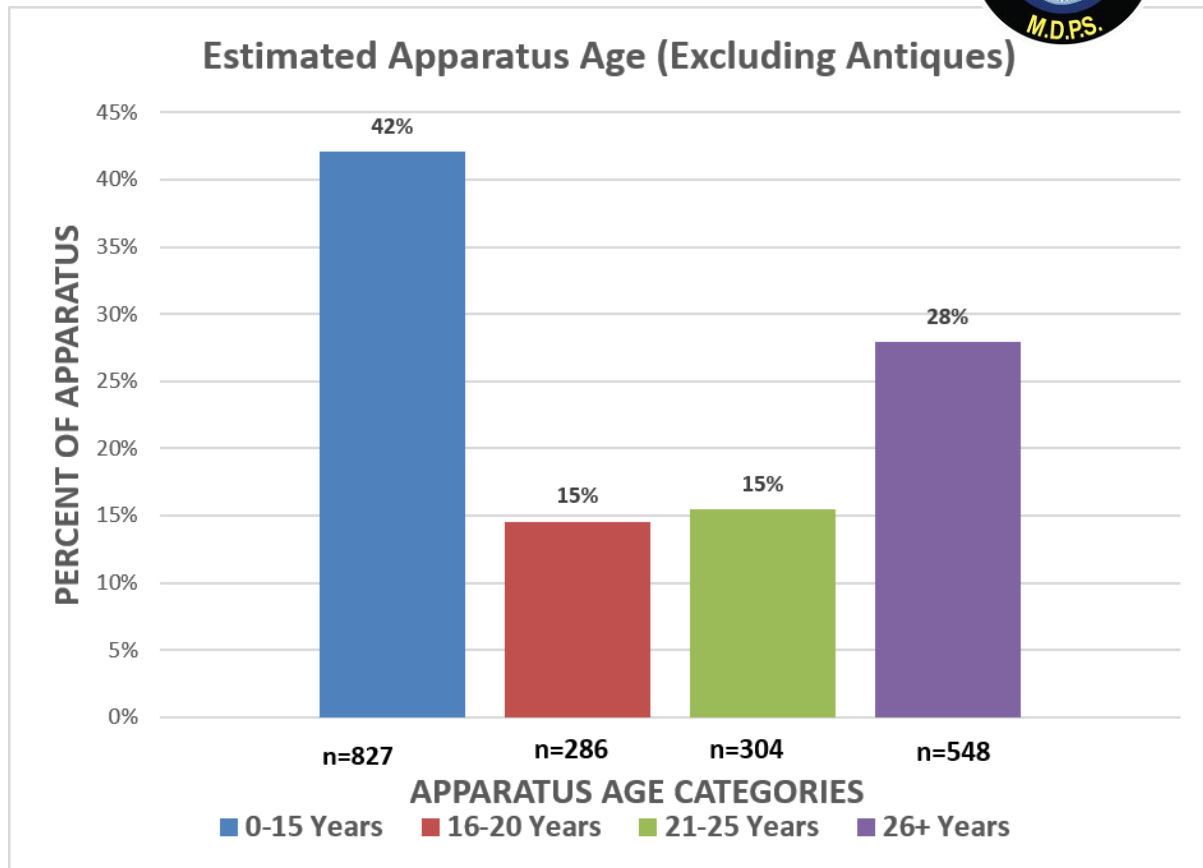
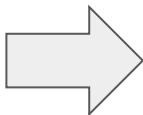
- Fire chiefs reported the average cost of a fire engine **doubled** between 2020 and 2026, up to >\$1 million
 - Ladder trucks up to \$2 million
- 46% of Maine's fire service apparatus fleet is over **20 years old**
- Extended build times mean departments must lobby/fundraise for new apparatus years before they are needed

“Fire apparatus [cost] is right through the roof, three to four years wait time. I have a 41-year-old ladder truck out here that we’re trying to replace. Small communities just cannot swing that.” – Washington Co. Combination Dept.

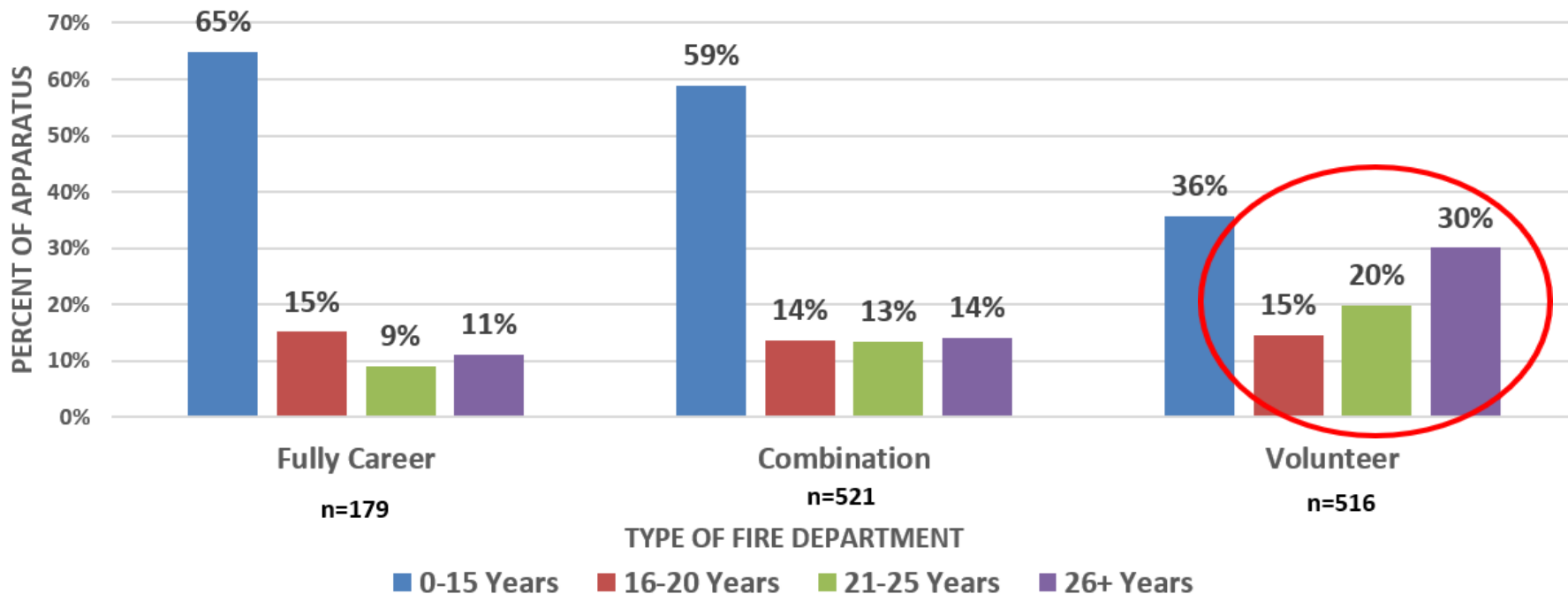
Maine's Fire Service Apparatus Fleet

Total apparatus (including
auxiliary vehicles and
watercraft): **2,310**

Total apparatus with a self-
reported age: **1,965**



Estimated Apparatus Age by Fire Department Type (Excluding Antiques)



Services by Government Level

Public Safety Services Provided by Government Level		
	Fire Protection	Law Enforcement
Local	✓	✓
County	X	✓
State	X	✓
Federal	X*	✓
*Federal financial support comes in the form of grants and often one-time investments in fire department capital costs		

There are no county-level fire service agencies in Maine that are comparable to sheriff's offices.

Local-level funding supplemented by:

- Grants
- Fundraising
- EMS billable services



Photos from Kennebunk Fire-Rescue Facebook

"The ambulance helps us survive, [due to] the sole fact of its income."

The Value of the Volunteer Fire Service to Maine

“The future of Maine’s fire service in rural areas [...] has got to stay where it is — with the volunteers. Otherwise, people are not going to be able to afford it.” — Kennebec Co. VFD

- Volunteer departments that responded to our survey protect
 - 262,000 people
 - 147,000 buildings
 - **\$68.5 billion** (21% of state total) of real and personal property
- To staff at NFPA recommended levels, Maine would spend **\$654.5 million** on wages and benefits annually if all firefighters were career members
- Smaller municipal tax obligations allow funds to be spent elsewhere

The Value of the Volunteer Fire Service

"If you call, we'll either fix it or figure out who can fix it for you [...] And that's the best part of the service. The truest essence of it is if you call 911, in almost every circumstance, someone's going to come, and they will make it better." — Somerset Co. VFD

- Volunteer FDs are trusted institutions, adapting to community need:
 - EMS, hazard mitigation & response, planning efforts, public health, etc.
- Chiefs prefer funding from state or federal sources over local sources, whenever possible, to relieve tax burden.
- Economic effects of volunteer vs. career department
 - Average volunteer department would spend an estimated **\$1.36 million** per year on wages/benefits as a career dept. (\$170 million across 125 volunteer departments with *reported staffing levels*)
 - Fewer fire stations needing more costly amenities (e.g., sleeping quarters)

Economic Implications of Losing Volunteers

- Half of surveyed volunteer departments received less than **\$100k** from their municipality
- More residents or greater property tax in a municipality often means more funding for a fire department, but that doesn't directly translate to better response capacity
- Example:

If a volunteer department in Hancock County switched to a career department, the cost to staff that department at *NFPA staffing levels* (6 firefighters prepared to respond at all times) for one year would be **\$1.66 million** in wages and benefits alone

What to expect with career staffing:

1. Improved predictability
2. Greater certainty reaching minimum numbers at initial attack/response
3. Higher rates of training
4. A younger workforce with fewer physical restrictions and health concerns
5. Increased capacity for fire pre-suppression, Life Safety inspections, public education, and community risk reduction
6. Staff available for equipment/apparatus maintenance
7. More administrative bandwidth for grant writing, budget presentations, etc.

Key Insights

- Most Maine FDs are volunteer, and 94% of Maine FDs rely on some volunteerism.
- There are training deficits in western, mid-coast, and Downeast regions and in volunteer departments.
- Declines in volunteer departments have downstream effects on career firefighter staffing.
- Working adults, aged 30–59, are often unavailable for volunteer calls and training.
- 30% of Maine’s firefighters are 50 or older.
- Call volumes reportedly doubled in the last decade, increasing the time sacrifice for volunteers.
- Apparatus costs have grown at an “uncontrolled rate,” and nearly half of Maine’s fleet is older than 20 years.
- Grassroots regionalization is happening on the ground to overcome staff and resource shortages — this is largely unsupported by state and county systems.

Needed Policy Interventions

- More support is needed to meet minimum training thresholds:
 - a. Develop a sustainable firefighter workforce information system. These results are a grant-funded, point-in-time analysis. Ongoing improvements require sustainable systems.
 - b. Increase accessibility to approved training sites, through travel/time reimbursements and/or new, strategically located training facilities.
 - c. Incentivize local employers to work with the FDs in their area, to improve availability of volunteers for calls and training. Many of these employers rely on volunteers to protect their property.
- Aspects of regionalization serve as cost savings for local budgets: (1) deduplication of costly equipment and apparatus, (2) regional purchasing agent that can buy equipment in bulk, (3) centralized, bolstered capacity for grant writing, fundraising, etc.

This project is the result of a partnership between OSFM and the University of Maine's Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center. It is funded by FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program.



FEMA



Thank you to the stakeholder group, survey respondents, and interview participants for contributing to this research.

This presentation covers the traditional roles and expectations of the fire service. Increasingly local FDs are collaborators in EMS, code enforcement, and hazard mitigation systems.

Comprehensive results on integrated community risk reduction efforts between FDs, code enforcement offices, and town administration can be made available by contacting the Fire Marshal's Office