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## Fire Protection in Rural Nebraska: A Focus on Volunteer-Based Organizations

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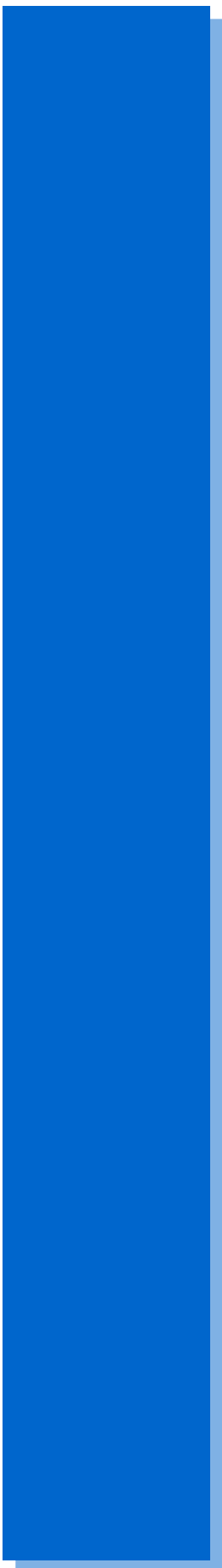
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# **Fire Protection in Rural Nebraska: A Focus on Volunteer- Based Organizations**

**Center for Public Affairs Research  
University of Nebraska at Omaha**

**June 2013**

Robert Blair, David Drozd, and Jerome Deichert

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# **Fire Protection in Rural Nebraska: A Focus on Volunteer-Based Organizations**

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Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska Omaha  
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Nebraskans obtain fire protection, rescue, and emergency medical services in a variety of ways. Citizens may be served by municipal departments or rural and suburban regional fire districts. The firefighters providing these services may be full time professional employees, volunteers who are not compensated, or volunteers who receive some type of payment per call. As would be expected, Nebraska residents living in the state's largest communities of Omaha, Lincoln, Bellevue, and Grand Island receive services from fire departments staffed by full time firefighters. And, conversely, departments with volunteer firefighters protect Nebraskans residing in the state's smaller communities or rural areas. However, the fire departments that serve many Nebraska communities, especially those in rural or nonmetropolitan areas, consist of a mixture of organizational structures and types of firefighters: professional, pay-per-call, or volunteer.

Providing fire protection services to rural and smaller communities, where volunteer firefighters play critical role, present special challenges. Organizational efficiency and effectiveness, for instance, are both affected by greater distances between communities and fewer people than in urbanized areas of the state. Fire protection, naturally, is more easily delivered in places with higher population densities. In addition, in many parts of rural Nebraska, an aging population affects the ability of some departments to recruit and retain volunteers for firefighting and emergency medical and rescue duties.

This study examines the nature and structure of fire departments in Nebraska that have significant numbers of volunteer firefighters, focusing on issues that may affect their ability to effectively provide services. Volunteer fire departments have a long and honorable tradition of community service in Nebraska. Hopefully, findings from this research will help community leaders and state policy makers better understand organizational issues affecting volunteer units that protect rural Nebraskans from the hazards of fire and emergency medical situations. Data for this study were obtained from the Nebraska State Fire Marshall's Office,<sup>1</sup> the U.S. Census Bureau, and a 2012 survey of volunteer fire departments commissioned by the Nebraska State Volunteer Firefighter's Association. This information was supplemented by case studies of selected and representative Nebraska fire departments, staffed by volunteers.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors want to thank Sean Schweitzer, Nebraska State Fire Marshall's Office, for his assistance in data collection.

## Number and Types of Departments

The organizational structure of Nebraska fire organizations varies across the state. According to the Nebraska State Fire Marshall's Office, the State has 478 departments and districts with 13,780 firefighters providing vital services to the citizens of Nebraska. Table 1 shows the general breakdown among Nebraska fire organizations. More than 70 percent of the departments provide both fire and rescue, including emergency medical services. This table also confirms that volunteers provide most of the fire protection services in the state. Nearly 90 percent of the firefighters in Nebraska are volunteers, and 94 percent of the departments consist of all volunteer units. There are 1,146 firefighters in the 5 fire departments that are all-paid; the remaining paid firefighters work in combined departments that also contain volunteers.

Table 1: General Description of Nebraska Fire Organizations

<i>Type</i>	<i>Number of Firefighters</i>	<i>Structure</i>
Fire & Rescue: 342	Volunteer: 12,117	All Volunteer: 450
Fire Only: 136	Paid: 1,435	All Paid: 5
	Paid per call: 228	Combination: 23
Total 478	13,780	478

Nebraska fire organizations consist of fire departments (or organizational units of municipalities) and fire districts. According to the 2007 Census of Governments, Nebraska contains 417 fire districts. That means that the remaining fire organizations are fire departments. In a number of cases, the municipal fire department may also partner with a regional fire district to provide services to the rural areas surrounding the city.

State statutes provide for the establishment of rural and suburban fire districts, which are technically local government units, or subdivisions. As described in the Nebraska Census of Governments, fire protection districts are a type of special district established by the county board on petition of voters after majority approval at a public hearing. An elected board of directors governs each district. The districts may levy ad valorem taxes and issue bonds.

There were 321 fire districts in Nebraska in 1962 and the number increased to the current 417 until a moratorium was established. A 1998 Nebraska state law declared that no new rural or suburban fire protection districts may be formed, with the exception that existing districts may merge to form a new district. There were as many as 437 fire districts in 1977, so at least 20 districts have consolidated by 2007. (The most recent 2012 Census of Governments data will be available later in 2013.)

## Staffing Patterns

Staffing patterns and services vary among Nebraska fire organizations across the state. Table 2 shows fire departments in the state with all or mostly all paid firefighters. As would be expected, the departments with completely or mostly full time firefighters function primarily in the metropolitan counties, Douglas, Lancaster, Sarpy and Hall where over 1 million people, 57 percent of the state's population, resides. However, there are still over 800,000 people living in vast areas of Nebraska who rely primarily on volunteers for fire protection.

Of the All or Mostly Paid fire departments, as shown in Table 2, Norfolk, North Platte, and Hastings are actually about evenly split between paid and volunteer firefighters. In addition, several of the Mostly Paid Departments have 5 or fewer volunteers (Papillion, Fremont and Scottsbluff) and are in essence All Paid fire organizations.

**Table 2: Nebraska Fire Departments with All or Mostly Paid Firefighters**

<i>Fire Organization</i>	<i>No. Paid</i>	<i>No. Paid per call</i>	<i>No. Volunteers</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Department Classification</i>
OMAHA FIRE DEPT	628	0	0	628	ALL PAID
LINCOLN FIRE & RESCUE	287	0	0	287	ALL PAID
BELLEVUE VOL FIRE DEPT	144	0	0	144	ALL PAID
GRAND ISLAND FIRE DEPT	67	0	0	67	ALL PAID
PAPILLION FIRE DEPT	40	0	2	42	MOSTLY PAID
NORTH PLATTE FIRE DEPT	39	0	28	67	MOSTLY PAID
NORFOLK FIRE DEPT	32	30	0	62	MOSTLY PAID
FREMONT FIRE DEPT	27	2	0	29	MOSTLY PAID
BEATRICE FIRE & RESCUE	23	9	0	32	MOSTLY PAID
HASTINGS FIRE & RESCUE	22	27	0	49	MOSTLY PAID
ELKHORN SUBURB FIRE DEPT	20	13	0	33	MOSTLY PAID
EPPLEY AIRPORT FIRE & RESCUE	20	0	0	20	ALL PAID
SCOTTSBLUFF FIRE DEPT	17	0	5	22	MOSTLY PAID
TOTALS	1366	81	35	1482	

Source: Nebraska State Fire Marshall's Office, February 2013

Table 3 shows Nebraska fire departments and districts that consist of mostly volunteers, but with a few paid firefighters. With the exception of York, Columbus, and Kearney with 10 or more paid firefighters, these types of departments are predominately staffed by volunteer firefighters, with very few full time employees.

**Table 3: Nebraska Fire Departments with Mostly Volunteer with Few Paid Firefighters**

<i>Fire Organization</i>	<i>No. Paid</i>	<i>No. Paid per call</i>	<i>No. Vol.</i>	<i>Total</i>
YORK FIRE DEPT	13	0	38	51
COLUMBUS FIRE DEPT	12	0	86	98
KEARNEY VOL FIRE DEPT	10	0	70	80
MCCOOK FIRE DEPT	7	27	27	61
KENESAW VOL FIRE DEPT	5	0	34	39
NO PLATTE AIRPORT AUTHORITY	5	5	0	10
ALLIANCE FIRE DEPT	4	0	49	53
FAIRBURY FIRE DEPT	4	18	0	22
SOUTH SIOUX CITY VOL FIRE DEPT	2	0	23	25
VALENTINE FIRE DEPT	1	0	49	50
GERING VOL FIRE DEPT	1	0	38	39
ALBION VOL FIRE DEPT	1	0	32	33
GRAFTON RURAL FIRE DEPT	1	0	30	31
CAMBRIDGE VOL FIRE DEPT	1	24	0	25
CHAPMAN VOL FIRE & RESCUE	1	0	20	21
DAKOTA CITY VOL FIRE & RESCUE	1	0	19	20
TOTALS	69	74	515	658

Source: Nebraska State Fire Marshall's Office, February 2013

## **Size of Communities and Types of Departments**

As one would expect, the population of a community will affect the structure of their fire department. Core Based Statistical Areas (CBSA), a definition used by the U.S. Census Bureau to measure and classify cities by population, is a useful way to identify metropolitan, medium to small, and rural communities. CBSAs include Metropolitan Statistical and Micropolitan Statistical Areas. A Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) consists of adjacent counties economically and socially linked to a core urban place of at least 50,000 people, and smaller Micropolitan Statistical Areas consist of urban areas with core populations between 10,000 and 50,000. Nebraska currently has 13 counties in 4 MSAs: Omaha-Council Bluffs, NE-IA; Lincoln, NE; Sioux City, IA-NE-SD; and in 2013, Grand Island, NE was added. The U.S. Census lists ten micropolitan regions in Nebraska. Bellevue, La Vista, and Papillion are part of the Omaha Metropolitan Statistical Area.

As shown by Tables 2 and 3, the ten micropolitan areas in the state include a mixture of organizational types of fire departments. Norfolk, North Platte, Beatrice, Scottsbluff, Hastings, and Fremont fire departments are essentially staffed by paid firefighters. Columbus and Kearney, on the other hand, are mostly volunteer departments, with only twelve and ten paid staff, respectively. The South Sioux City Fire Department, part of the Sioux City, IA-NE-SD MSA, includes only two paid firefighters, according to the Nebraska State Fire Marshall. And only the micropolitan area of Lexington has a totally volunteer fire department.

Nebraska includes 15 First Class Cities, with populations exceeding 5,000 that are not defined as micropolitan areas. With few exceptions, these cities have fire departments primarily staffed by volunteers. York has 13 paid firefighters; McCook has 7, Alliance 4, and Gering only 1. The cities of Blair, Seward, Plattsmouth, and Ralston are located in the Omaha or Lincoln MSA and have volunteer departments. La Vista, also in the Omaha metropolitan area, is studying the merging of their volunteer unit with the mostly paid Papillion Fire Department.

Tables 2 and 3 also show that nine departments include volunteer firefighters who receive some form of compensation per call. According to information from the State Fire Marshall, five other departments have paid-per-call arrangements, for a total of 228 volunteers in the state. As shown in Table 1, the number of paid-per-call volunteer firefighters constitutes a very small proportion of the total number of volunteer firefighters (2 percent). Also, as pointed out by Nebraska State Volunteer Firefighter's Association staff, much of the compensation to volunteers is minimal, consisting often of small stipends, or hourly rates for medical transfer calls. As the NSVFA staffer observed, "one could not make a living with these payments." Often these payments complicate income tax calculations for cities and fire districts. In terms of the

compensation of volunteer firefighters, then, paid-per-call appears to be limited in Nebraska.

## **Population Demographics and Volunteer Fire Departments**

Volunteer fire departments are staffed by people with commitments to community service with the ability to meet high levels of physical demands. A flow of volunteers is the lifeblood of many departments. Returns from the Nebraska State Volunteer Firefighter's Association 2012 Firefighters Survey showed that the recruitment and retention of firefighters were critical issues, with many respondents expressing concern about a range of issues affecting their ability to staff their departments. For instance, question 14 of the survey asked the respondents to identify the primary issues facing their department, and 45 percent listed topics that related to membership. About 13 percent specifically identified recruiting issues, 9 percent retention, and 8 percent each for general manpower and daytime volunteer issues. Training issues were the next most common broad category of results for this open-ended question.

In research conducted for presentation at the 39th Interdisciplinary Symposium on school consolidation in the Great Plains, convened by the Center for Great Plains Studies, April 6, 2013, at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, Blair, Deichert, and Drozd examined the dynamics of population of change in Nebraska. It is no secret that the state's rural or nonmetropolitan population has declined significantly. They pointed out that from 1950 to 2007, "while overall Nebraska increased its population by 33.9 percent, its population in the Great Plains portion (or those parts of the state west of Lincoln) decreased by almost 46,000 persons. Nebraska's growth, then, occurred primarily in the metropolitan areas that lie outside the Great Plains." When examining Nebraska's nonmetropolitan population (or the counties outside of the Omaha, Lincoln, Grand Island, and Sioux City, Iowa metropolitan regions), those areas of the state lost more than 101,000 persons between 1950 and 2010 (a 13 percent decline). The state's metropolitan regions gained more than 602,000 persons (109 percent) during that same time period.

Two interrelated components of population dynamics should be considered when examining this change in the number of people in rural Nebraska: net migration and the difference between births and deaths. From 1950 to 2007, for instance, outmigration, particularly of young adults, accounted for the population decline in nonmetropolitan areas. And, while births exceeded deaths in non-metro counties, this natural increase was insufficient to offset the loss from outmigration.

Research by Blair, Deichert and Drozd also revealed that the Great Plains region has an aging population that mirrors that of the United States as a whole. However, the growth of the elderly population in the Great Plains nearly doubles the size of the growth rate for children under the age of 18 (20.8 percent versus 11.3 percent). The rural part

of Nebraska, west of Lincoln, is generally considered part of the Great Plains. Central and western Nebraska is getting older faster than the rest of the country.

Changing demographics, including outmigration of young people and an aging population, have affected and will likely continue to adversely affect the future staffing of many volunteer fire departments, especially in rural Nebraska. These factors will affect communities differently.

## **Employment Patterns and Volunteer Departments**

An aging and declining population base is not the only demographic factor that affects suburban and rural volunteer departments. For instance, while population loss of key age groups for volunteers may not adversely affect suburban departments to a great degree, employment trends may. In suburban communities, or rural communities close to metropolitan areas or other employment centers, potential volunteer firefighters may not work in the community of their residence, but rather commute to a neighboring town. This then leaves the community with fewer available volunteer firefighters during the day. This also means that communities may have to rely on volunteers who live in other communities but work in their town during the day, and that presents a number of obstacles including training and coordination. Lack of daytime coverage, and not being able to leave jobs for calls, were identified as additional critical issues pertaining to membership in the Nebraska State Volunteer Firefighters Association 2012 Firefighters Survey in question 14 which asked “What are the primary issues facing your local fire department?”

In rural and suburban areas, people may work a significant distance from where they live. The U.S. Census Bureau tracks commuting patterns: the movement of people from places of residence to place of employment. Table 4 provides three examples of how commuting patterns in rural communities affects daytime coverage for volunteer fire protection. These communities, Gibbon, Wood River, and Shelton, with volunteer fire departments, are on Highway 30 with access to employment in the Tri-City area, mainly Kearney, Hastings, or Grand Island.

**Table 4: Examples of Commuting Patterns in Rural Communities**

<i>Community</i>	<i>Resident Workers</i>	<i>Work Locally</i>	<i>Work in Grand Island, Hastings, or Kearney</i>	<i>Work Elsewhere</i>
Gibbon	597	45 (8%)	302 (51%)	250 (42%)
Wood River	461	36 (8%)	269 (57%)	156 (35%)
Shelton	338	21 (6%)	204 (60%)	113 (34%)

As Table 4 shows, only 6 to 8 percent of the workers in the two communities are employed in the town in which they live. Most workers commute to one of the Tri-Cities, or other communities in the region. Of course, the age range of the working population mirrors that of volunteer firefighters, affecting fire protection and emergency services during daytime hours. The above examples reflect the situation in many Nebraska rural and suburban communities.

Suburban volunteer fire departments also face challenges, even in growing communities. For example, on March 7, 2013, according to an article in the Omaha World Herald, the mayor of La Vista announced that the City would study a merger of their volunteer fire department with the mostly paid department of Papillion. Fire protection in La Vista would be provided, then, by a consolidated Papillion-La Vista department. (The two communities consolidated schools many years ago.) La Vista currently has 61 volunteer firefighters. Calls for emergency services have increased 150 percent in the last decade in La Vista and the City needed 75 firefighters to be fully staffed, according to the mayor. The mayor noted that the City was not able to recruit an increased number of volunteers to meet the growing demand. At the present time, the Papillion Fire Department consisting of 40 full time and 2 volunteers provides protection to citizens inside the city limits of Papillion and serving people in the 58 square mile Papillion Rural Fire District. Likely the merged operation of the two cities would consist of full time professional firefighters. As demonstrated above, employment patterns likely played an important role in the inability to recruit volunteer firefighters in La Vista.

An Omaha World-Herald news article, dated June 9, 2013, discussed the challenges of volunteer departments providing fire protection to growing suburban areas. The movement from volunteer to professional firefighters in La Vista reflects the trend among the communities in the urbanized part of Sarpy County. Papillion first began switching in the 1990s. And Bellevue, in response to Nebraska legislative action, began hiring part time firefighters in 2010. Bellevue, in 2013, began the complex and costly process of hiring full-time firefighters.

This brief examination of demographic trends and statistics for Nebraska indicates that recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters will affect fire departments in rural areas, especially those communities near employment centers, and suburban locations.

### **Case studies: Illustrations of Volunteer Fire Organizations**

This section provides brief overviews of three volunteer-based fire organizations in Nebraska communities. While these case studies cannot begin to depict the complexity of fire departments throughout the state, they do illustrate some important community examples. Kearney was selected because it is one of the larger Nebraska communities with mostly volunteer firefighters serving an urban population and partnering with the rural and suburban fire district. Blair is within the Omaha Metropolitan Statistical Area

and has an all-volunteer department. Communities in metropolitan areas have special challenges. And finally, Scribner, a smaller community that is not within a metropolitan area, may provide a representative snapshot of the structure and issues of many rural and small towns in Nebraska. Data were collected through personal interviews with city staff, information from State Fire Marshall's Office, on-site facility tours, U.S. Census Bureau sources, and fire department websites.

Kearney. Organized in 1883, the Kearney Volunteer Fire Department (KVFD) provides protection to 30,787 persons in the city and to residents in Suburban Fire District #1 which serves portions of Buffalo and Kearney counties, and covers 272 square miles, including more than 40,000 citizens. This mostly volunteer department is among the largest for First Class cities in Nebraska, and the city has an ISO Class 2 rating. The department website states that their volunteer force of 76 is the largest in Nebraska and is supplemented by 12 full time staff: 10 firefighter/operators, a fire administrator, an administrative assistant, and a part time secretary. (Information from the State Fire Marshall's Office showed that Columbus has 86 volunteer firefighters.) The full time fire department staff of the city report to the city manager. The fire chief of KVFD is elected by the membership. Kearney has a Council-Manager form of government where administrative responsibilities are centralized in the city manager, as provided by state statutes.

The Kearney Fire Department includes 4 fire stations, and a training facility located in the industrial tract near the Airport. Station 1 located in the central business district, Station 2 which is located in the west part of town, and the Airport Fire Station are staffed 24/7. Fire Station 3, located northwest of Kearney, in Riverdale, is used primarily for rural and suburban fire calls. Station 1 contains fourteen pieces of equipment, including 3 engines, 8 trucks, 1 ladder truck, and 1 rescue vehicle. Stations 2 and 3 both include 1 engine and 2 trucks.

KVFD does not provide emergency medical services. The City contracts with Good Samaritan Hospital for these services.

The dispatching protocol of firefighters for city and rural calls in Kearney provides an interesting example of partnering among volunteer units in an area. While Station 3 serves mostly the rural area, apparatus from Station 1 respond to many fire calls in the Kearney urban and suburban area. As noted by City of Kearney staff, when the fire call is for an address in the city limits, one door opens at Station 1 and the city firefighter/operator drives the engine and the KVFD volunteers meet and don their gear that was on the truck at the call. When the call is for a suburban address, a different door opens and volunteers will normally meet at Station 1 and drive a different piece of equipment to the fire call. The city firefighter/operator does not participate in the call. In other words, there is a shared city/suburban/rural facility and equipment, but also equipment dedicated to one jurisdiction. This arrangement illustrates an organizational

structure in Kearney and the area for the allocation of volunteer firefighters that has been fine tuned for more than 100 years of collaboration and partnering.

KVFD firefighters receive workers' compensation benefits and \$10,000 worth of life insurance. The full time firefighter/operators receive City of Kearney 401(K) retirement benefits, not pensions.

Kearney functions as an employment center for central Nebraska. It has a growing population. It is unlikely that KVFD will experience critical recruitment and retention issues. Information from their website, however, shows that the KVFD has recruited a significant number of firefighters when compared the total of 76 members. The Kearney Fire Department Firefighter 1 Class of 2013 included 10 new members. Four members of the Class of 2011-2012 and 9 from the Class of 2011 completed their training, graduating from probationary firefighter status.

Blair. This community of almost 8,000 people has the largest all volunteer fire department within the Omaha metro area. (La Vista, the largest volunteer force in the Omaha MSA is studying a merger with the full time Papillion Department.) Blair has two fire stations: North and South. The North Station was built in 2000. Blair Fire and Rescue has 2 rescue units, 3 trucks, a ladder truck, 3 engines, a fire car, a hazardous material trailer, and a rescue boat. Blair has a Mayor-Council form of government with a city administrator provided by local ordinances. The city administrator functions as the administrative head of the city.

According to the State Fire Marshall's Office, Blair Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department has 65 members. Their website lists 51 active members. There is a chief and two assistant chiefs, and two captains for both districts. Blair provides rescue and emergency services, with a chief and two captains. The website has a contact name for those interested in becoming a member of the Department. Blair Fire and Rescue has a very stable volunteer membership, with only 4 new members since 2008.

Located in Washington County, Blair is part of the Omaha MSA. There is a significant level of economic interaction between the workforce in Washington County and Omaha, the primary city in the MSA. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2,343 people come to Blair to work, and 2,498 leave the community to work in other locations, primarily Omaha. Approximately 35 percent of the workers live and work in Blair. While Blair can be considered a suburb of Omaha, with many people commuting the 30 miles to Omaha, the city has a significant portion of its workers living and working in town. Blair likely will be provided with a stable flow of potential volunteers for its Fire Department.

Scribner. This city with a population of 857 is located in Dodge County. There are 36 members of the Fire and Rescue Department, with 23 members certified as Emergency Medical Technicians, and 4 as Paramedics. Scribner is classified as a Second-Class City in Nebraska, with a Mayor-Council structure of government. An individual serving

as the city clerk/treasurer/city administrator provides administrative services. The current holder of this position, created by local ordinance, is active in the Nebraska City/County Management Association.

Scribner is not within a metropolitan area, but rather the Fremont micropolitan area. The community is within a rural area where workers may commute long distances to their jobs. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Scribner sees 282 people come to their community to work, and 360 of its residents commute to neighboring towns. Just over 8 percent of its workforce lives and works in town. With only a small percentage of its workers living and working in Scribner, that would seem to result in challenges of daytime fire and rescue coverage and the recruitment and retention of firefighters, as noted by the 2012 NSVFA survey. However, the Scribner Fire and Rescue Department website indicates that it is one of the few communities in Nebraska with a waiting list for volunteers.

The Scribner Fire and Rescue Department website reported that they respond to approximately 170 calls per year. Their service area covers the community of Scribner and 1,320 citizens within 97 square mile area of rural Dodge County.

The Scribner Rural Fire Board, a special district that has independent taxing authority, partners with the City of Scribner for fire protection for the rural areas. The Fire Board shares costs with the Scribner Volunteer Fire Department. Tax dollars fund their joint operation. Shared facilities and equipment include the current fire hall built in 1969. The Rural Fire Board has a 55 percent share of a new pumper truck bought for \$400,000 in 2010. The City is paying for its share of the new pumper truck through in-lieu-of-tax from the electric utility and will likely cover its costs of a new or expanded fire hall through local option sales tax revenue.

In 2012 the City and the Rural Fire Board began discussions on replacing or adding to the current fire hall. The higher income levels of rural citizens, in relation to the citizens in the city, have limited the ability of the jointly operated Scribner Fire Department to gain grant funding for equipment and facilities. For instance, Community Development Block Grant dollars, available through the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, may be available to help pay for the fire hall. However, the relatively higher income levels of the rural citizens in the joint operation, may adversely affect their ability to gain funding in a competitive environment.

## **Summary and Policy Recommendations**

The goal of this study was to examine Nebraska fire departments with significant numbers of volunteer firefighters and help community leaders and state policymakers better understand issues relevant to these departments that protect many Nebraskans, not just rural citizens, from the hazards of fire and emergency medical situations. The findings from this study reveal several issues of importance.

Types of fire departments. Volunteer municipal fire departments and rural fire districts in Nebraska protect the vast majority of the geographic areas of the state. Most firefighters in Nebraska are volunteers. Of the nearly 500 fire departments and districts in Nebraska, only 13 are staffed by all, or mostly all, full time firefighters.

Staffing patterns and community size. Most of the larger communities, especially those in the eastern half of Nebraska, have fire departments with a significant number of full time firefighters. However, volunteers often constitute a major portion of many of these departments. Many First Class cities, though, have all, or mostly all, volunteer units, including communities in metropolitan areas, such as Blair and South Sioux City. Several First Class cities, including Kearney, Columbus, Alliance, and Lexington are protected by all or mostly all volunteer units.

Population changes. An aging population will likely begin to affect the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters, especially in rural areas. Surveys show this is a major concern, and changing population demographics will undoubtedly begin to exert greater influence as the number of people in key age ranges continue to decline.

Employment patterns. People in rural and suburban communities often commute to their place of employment. Information available through the U.S. Census Bureau shows that many small and rural communities have only a small percentage of their workers living and working in their hometown and potentially available for daytime duty on the volunteer fire department. Commuting patterns also affect the daytime coverage for volunteer units in many suburban communities.

Recommendations. There is no question about the critical importance in maintaining the number and readiness of volunteer firefighters in rural Nebraska. Fire protection affects the quality of life and economic vitality of rural Nebraska. The above research reveals that community leaders and state policy makers need to consider creating incentives to attract and retain people in volunteer fire services in rural communities. Examining the nature and effectiveness of incentives for the creation of a volunteer firefighting force in other states would be a good beginning. An aging and declining population in many parts of rural Nebraska will continue to decrease the number of people with the physical abilities to fulfill the many demands on the volunteer firefighter. Policy makers need to act.