

2016 JMGBL Awards Application

Submission Date	2016-08-10 16:06:50
This application is for:	J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award
Project Title	Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment & Retention Program
County/Counties	Lancaster
Staff Contact	Darren Player
Job Title	Emergency Management/Fire Rescue Director
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Please provide a summary of your entry (no more than 100 words) to be used in a handout for the awards competition and included in press releases/publications. You may either type the summary in the text box or upload it as an attachment below.	This county sought to address its need to both recruit new and retain current volunteers. The grant application addressed that issue and gives the opportunity to provide recruitment and retention incentives to volunteer firefighters, which ultimately results in excellent fire protection and phenomenal savings to the taxpayer.
Presentations may include more than one speaker; however, each speaker should be aware that the 10-minute time limit is strictly enforced. Please list the name, title, and e-mail address of each speaker:	Keith Wilson, Deputy Director Fire Rescue kwilson@lancastercountysc.net Nathan Wall, Recruitment and Retention Coordinator nwall@lancastercountysc.net
Will any of the speakers need accommodations (wheelchair accessibility, etc.) during the awards competition?	No



LANCASTER COUNTY FIRE RESCUE

VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER RECRUITMENT & RETENTION PROGRAM

Lancaster County Fire Rescue

is there
FIRE
in
YOU?

WWW.JOINLCFR.ORG

Lancaster County – Volunteer Fire Rescue Recruitment & Retention Project

J. Mitchell Graham Submission

Background on the Project

Across the nation 71% of all fire departments are volunteer fire departments. In South Carolina 82.2% of our fire departments are all or mostly volunteer fire departments. Unless you are in a major metropolitan area you can be assured that if a fire breaks, out volunteers will show up to put it out. But the ranks of volunteers are dwindling. What was once an iconic part of American life is losing its allure, and some would say, it is a lot less fun than it used to be.

Nationally, the number of volunteer firefighters has dropped about 11% since mid-1980; in Lancaster County that number is closer to 44%. There are a multitude of reasons for the decrease. One factor is the time it takes from the volunteer's "normal" life. New minimum standards, new technologies and an ever increasing array of hazards require more time for training. Today's economy means more time has to be spent raising funds to support the volunteer department and more time is needed by two-income households to support their homes. The days of a stay-at-home parent to run things so the other can dash off for an emergency is essentially a thing of the past. Additionally, as the active generations age and retire there seems to be fewer young people with a strong sense of community to replace them.

As we lose trained volunteer firefighters, we not only lose a person, we lose their knowledge and experience, their position of authority and leadership within their department and the investment we made in training. Recruiting a new member may immediately replace a name on a roster but it takes years to replace the training and experience lost. We have studied our own service to find the reasons why our members do what they do. We have studied data to find the point at which most volunteers become less active and eventually completely inactive. We have researched why our volunteers joined in the first place, their motivation to stay and ultimately why they leave. Through surveys, data analysis and other research we believe we have identified ways to reduce the losses and gain new members.

This project was undertaken to meet several specific needs within our county, each of which have secondary effects which include increased public safety, reduced insurance premiums for citizens, tax payer savings which include lower insurance premiums for the county, fewer workman's compensation claims, savings on lost and damaged equipment and numerous other benefits that go towards overall savings for the county and our citizenry.

Why the project was undertaken

Specifically, our project is designed to: 1) retain the volunteers we currently have, 2) increase the number of volunteer firefighters, 3) increase the level of training of all of our firefighters, 4) encourage increased participation by our volunteer firefighters, 5) increase the effectiveness of our fire rescue forces and 6) increase public knowledge and understanding of our service.

Our county already has a paid firefighting staff of ten. These firefighters were hired through a Staffing For Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant in a program first proposed by Chief Helms, the architect of this program. These firefighters, known as "The Ten", were hired to assist our volunteer firefighters during the day Monday through Friday when their numbers were at the lowest. However as time goes by and the numbers continue to dwindle, volunteer ranks on nights and weekends are beginning to suffer. We are coming to the point where we need to either add another ten firefighters, which salary alone would be over \$370,000 before any benefits, equipment or training, or try to boost our volunteer

Lancaster County – Volunteer Fire Rescue Recruitment & Retention Project

J. Mitchell Graham Submission

firefighting staffing. This project will run for four years initially. If it proves successful, we will hope to continue it for years to come.

Significance of the project to the community.

Our county has seen dramatic growth over the last decade and a half. While it is nice to be known as the fastest growing county in South Carolina, the distinction comes at a price. Our population is out growing our ability to meet its needs for fire and rescue services. Like most of the country we have always relied on volunteer firefighters. Having a relatively “free” resource is not a luxury, it’s actually a necessity. If we were to have to replace our volunteer forces with an all career force the cost would exceed \$41 million a year. Our volunteer forces actually save us that much and more, so keeping our volunteer service alive and well is of great significance to our community. Without volunteers to fight the fires, work the wrecks and perform the rescues, the tax burden on our citizens would be too much to bear and if we only supplied the services we could afford, homeowners insurance premiums would skyrocket, more property would be lost and citizens would needlessly suffer.

If we continue to neglect our volunteers the system will eventually collapse. We are looking at the possibility of having to transition to a 24/7 paid system as turnout of volunteers continues to decrease. To replace our system with an all paid staff would be in excess of \$41 million each year, (based on the National Volunteer Fire Council’s Benefits of Volunteers tool) which would more than double our county’s entire annual budget. Each trained volunteer effectively saves the community \$36,500 per year. Meeting the goals of this project will equate to a savings of \$21.6 million each year. Additionally, reduced work load, increased fireground safety and better morale for our volunteers and efficient service to our community are expected benefits.

How this relates in importance to the other problems in our community.

When talking with citizens and when hearing citizens speak out at meetings, public safety is always a topic of concern. By addressing the issue of declining volunteer firefighting resources with a well-designed plan of action, we intend to stem the tide of volunteer turnover and offset the losses by attracting and recruiting new people. If this plan is successful, resources that would have otherwise been used for additional career firefighters to supplement for the lack of volunteers can be spent on the other pressing needs of the county, such as law enforcement, emergency medical services and public works.

How much of the county’s population is benefited by the project and in what ways are different groups of citizens within the county better off than before.

It should be noted that our advertising efforts are not limited to just Lancaster County. Our radio and television advertisements are regional and reach into Chester, York, and Union counties in South Carolina. Our website has a link to South Carolina’s statewide recruitment website so that those that go to our site can follow that link to find out how to volunteer in their county.

Within our county every single citizen is potentially positively impacted in some form or fashion. By increasing our volunteer ranks we increase our ability to serve our citizens. Volunteer firefighters do more than save lives and property, they save the county money. It may be through lowering ISO rates which in turn lower insurance premiums or it may be via the savings from not having to hire additional career firefighters to offset increased call volume.

Lancaster County – Volunteer Fire Rescue Recruitment & Retention Project

J. Mitchell Graham Submission

The degree of success attained and major objectives achieved.

Our number one goal with this project is to stop the loss of volunteer firefighters. In the first two quarters of the project, before it could really get its feet off the ground, we lost 35 additional firefighters. In the third quarter of the project we lost one due to a debilitating medical condition. Our second priority was to attract new recruits. Since the project began, we have acquired 24 new recruits. Our net is a loss of 11 but, the tide of loss has slowed, which is promising. Additionally, the retention activities are just getting started and the full measure of the program has yet to be implemented.

Unfortunately, a project such as this cannot be expected to produce immediate results. It takes time to implement and get rolling. The first two quarters were spent building the program, making commercials, building websites and writing the standard operating procedures needed to govern the program and educating our volunteers on the points of the program and what benefits they can expect. For only being three quarters into the program, we have met all of our expectations. Getting this project off the ground has not been easy and has required many long hours and late nights but we feel certain it will all be worth it.

What we have had to do to accomplish our objectives, challenges and community concerns.

First off we had to devise a plan that everyone could agree on. That in and of itself is an accomplishment. Our county has known for decades that we needed some sort of retention program for our volunteer firefighters and there have been a few attempts to put in place programs. Those attempts were fraught with disagreements on how and what they should be and what they should do. There are three groups that could have stopped this program in its tracks, the Fire Commission, the Chief's Association and the sentiment of the volunteer firefighters themselves expressed through their Chief's or Fire Commissioners.

Previous attempts at programs were on file in the Emergency Management office. Records dating back over twenty years demonstrated the efforts and where they ultimately failed. Reviewing these records it was clear that each attempt played favor to one group or another. In one attempt, Chiefs were awarded higher than anyone else, in another it was based on training and yet another it was based on length of service and still another hinted at some departments being treated specially. Our goal was to take all of those and combine them into a singular plan which recognized all parties in a fair and equitable way.

We built spreadsheets that included every department and every member. We included everyone's level of training, date hired, call response, whether or not the members were licensed to operate apparatus, whether or not they served as officers and if they were active members in their station or not. This was a monumental task and took three people nearly three weeks to accomplish. These spreadsheets took into account the times of calls, types of calls, average time for each type of call, average response of members to each type of call, each station's average member participation and so on. These spreadsheets grew and were replicated and changed to try to find a way to fairly balance an unfair and unbalanced system. As we worked through them and tweaked them we saved them with names like Tuesday, Jello, and Beta until we finally had working models.

In our county there are 18 volunteer departments and each runs a different number of calls and some run more fires than others while some run more medical calls than others. The imbalance comes when you compare a department that runs 700 calls a year to another that runs only 70 and the members of one department average 100 – 150 responses to the other department's average member response of 65 to

Lancaster County – Volunteer Fire Rescue Recruitment & Retention Project

J. Mitchell Graham Submission

70 per year. Additionally there is the matter of the department which has an average time on scene of one hour while another averages on 15 minutes. Simply giving each member a set amount of money for a call isn't fair for numerous reasons but mostly because each call isn't the same. We had to, and we did develop a fair and impartial way to divide and reward each member for his or her participation. With this in hand we convinced all of the immediate groups that we had a system that would work.

The next problem was that we needed to hire someone to run the program. The points system we created and the other task that had to be done to insure the program would succeed could not be accomplished by already overloaded staff. Since we had recently hired ten firefighters on a previous SAFER grant there was quite a bit of push back to hiring another staff member. Some suggested we use those we had just hired to do the job but that wasn't possible for numerous reasons, not the least of which being that they were being paid with federal grant money to be firefighters. Once we showed the necessity of hiring a Recruitment and Retention Coordinator not only for running the program but as a requirement for applying for another SAFER grant, we finally prevailed. The other hurdle we had seemed miniscule compared to the need to hire more staff. We had to get our Fire commission to agree to once again increase the minimum required training for new members to Firefighter II. While we prepared for a struggle, the measure was quickly passed and we were now prepared to apply for funding for our project.

With the competitive SAFER grant applied for and awarded, a host of new challenges presented themselves. One of these was the selection of a Coordinator. None of the first round of applicants met the minimum qualifications. We began another search and placed the position open again and with time running out we finally found the perfect fit for the position. Unfortunately our search for the perfect candidate had put us a month behind on the project.

Again, there was a host of challenges over the first three months including the FEMA project specialist herself. As we tried to get contracts for radio, commercials, website, and video production completed and finalized our FEMA project specialist who oversees our project wanted to review our contracts. We had negotiated a special price for the website which cut the monthly rate we would pay by \$50 a month. The FEMA project specialist, after holding the contracts for a week, suggested we renegotiate our webhosting contract, which we did, resulting in the loss of the \$50 a month savings. With a deadline for video production less than a 10 days away FEMA finally allowed us to sign the contracts.

Another challenge was the logistics of getting nearly 100 volunteer firefighters, props, and video crews where they needed to be when they needed to be there. We had to coordinate with the airport for use of a drone within 100 yards of the runway where our river rescue scenes took place. We had to coordinate with local citizens to use their property to set up camera crews and stage emergency resources. We also had to coordinate with Lancaster Fire Department for staff to assist with equipment and personnel. During the video production we had to change plans, improvise and overcome due to many obstacles including a fire and actual river rescue of an injured rescuer as well as 48 degree river water. In the end, it was all worth it.

The nature and extent of our county's efforts to alleviate the problem.

In 1999 funding was requested from County Council for a \$100,000 volunteer incentive program (VIP) which was denied, however approval was given to an accidental death and disability policy for all volunteer firefighters. In 2003, a retention committee for the Fire Commission developed a \$130,000 VIP which was not funded. In 2009, EAP services were reduced and length of service award plaques

Lancaster County – Volunteer Fire Rescue Recruitment & Retention Project

J. Mitchell Graham Submission

discontinued to pay for a \$30 gift card for volunteer firefighters. In 2010 we began a local High School Firefighter Program which results in FFII certification upon the student's successful completion. In 2012, a SAFER grant was applied for and awarded to hire 10 career firefighters to work weekdays to supplement volunteer response. In 2013, we were not allowed by Council to apply for a SAFER grant and a promised \$175,000 retention program was never funded.

While appreciated for the most part, some firefighters felt patronized by the \$30 gift cards since you had to do nothing to get them. The complaints were that while some responded to 200 calls and attended hundreds of hours of training others responded to just 10 calls and attended less than 30 hours of training and yet they both got the same "thank you" card. This was actually constructive in the sense that it made the case for insisting that the new program award everyone for what they actually do not just for holding the title of Firefighter. Finally, we were allowed to apply for a SAFER grant to fund this project in 2015.

Financing

When Chief Helms first approached Fire Service Director Morris Russel with the idea, financing became the first hurdle to overcome as soon as it was agreed upon as a feasible project to attempt. We contacted our finance department to determine the value of a Mil. At the time the value of a Mil was \$259,350. We estimated that would increase over the next three years to at least \$270,000 so we chose that as our maximum annual cost for the project. We felt that if the program, if it works would be more palatable for our County Council if we could keep the cost at or below the value of a Mil.

This is when we began building spreadsheets to determine how much we would need to reward our volunteers. With those estimates as well as many discussions with video production companies, newspapers, television stations, radio stations, billboard companies, advertising agencies and others, we began developing a four year project budget. The director had discussions with County Council members as well as others including those in the finance department and determined that our best bet to fund the program was going to be through a FEMA grant. With permission from County Council and the groundwork completed, project description, incentive points system defined and budget determined, we ready to apply for a SAFER grant.

Our budget includes the following:

- Recruitment and Retention Coordinator: \$57,057 the first year and with pay raises \$253,805 over the course of four years,
- Print Media for recruitment and retention \$10,500 for the first year and a total of \$38,500 over the course of four years,
- Electronic Media/Website \$6,000 for the first year and \$11,200 over the course of four years,
- Broadcast Media \$52,800 the first year and \$90,800 over the course of four years, tuition assistance \$22,000 the first year and \$116,000 over the course of four years,
- Awards and Recognition \$8,000 the first year and \$35,600 over the course of four years, and;
- Incentive Points System \$98,000 the first year and \$521,000 over the course of four years.

The total budget for the full four year project is \$1,048,905. The final year of the four year project cost \$269,996. This project was funded 100% by a successful Staffing For Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant.

Lancaster County – Volunteer Fire Rescue Recruitment & Retention Project

J. Mitchell Graham Submission

Unresolved Problems and Other Goals Left to Tackle

Our program is still in its infancy so there are sure to be additional bumps in the road, but our first goal yet to reach is 100 new firefighters. We are less than a quarter of the way into the four years of this project but we are a quarter of the way to our first benchmark of 100 new recruits. Another benchmark we have yet to reach is cutting our annual loss rate to 15% with the ultimate goal of a loss rate of less than 10%. At this time we are holding at a loss rate of 12% so far for the year but we are only half way through the year.

What makes our project unique.

The incentive points system we developed is based on several factors and designed to encourage training, participation, and increased call response while rewarding those that actually respond to the calls and attend the training. Other programs we are aware of throughout the state award an annual stipend or pay volunteer firefighters by the call regardless of training or qualifications. Numerous studies have shown that type of compensation actually tends to discourage firefighter self-improvement. Under our program, the more the firefighter trains, the more responsibilities the firefighter takes on and the more calls they respond to, the more incentive points they are awarded. The cash value of the incentives are divided between each station based on average training of members, average participation of their membership and, to a degree, the number and types of calls responded to by the department. The key to this is, the better trained the members and the higher their percentage of response is, the larger the “pot” of money they have to split between members. This encourages more training and more response. We do not know of any other program that has a similar system in place.

Under our program, points will be accumulated based on level of training, training attended, length of service, holding a position of responsibility, being licensed to operate apparatus and call response. Points will begin accumulating as new recruits become trained and begin responding to calls. At the end of a one year period, the points will be assessed for each volunteer firefighter. Each volunteer firefighter will then be given options on how to trade in his or her points.

We have developed a catalog of non-uniform clothing from which volunteers can use as they redeem points. We have extensive experience developing equipment catalogs. Also in the catalog, the requested option to trade points for a trip to the South Carolina Firefighter’s Association annual Fire Rescue conference, offering training opportunities not available anywhere else in the state. This trip would include lodging and meals based on the Federal per diem rate. This is training not currently covered by our operating budget. Another option the firefighter would have is the exchange of points for a gift card. This points system, with the exchange for merchandise, was preferred over nominal stipends as most of our firefighters explicitly say they don’t volunteer to get paid. This differs from any other program we are aware of. We are the only fire service in the state that we are aware of that has developed their own equipment catalog and incentive points catalog.

The budget for this Incentive Points Program is \$98,000.00 for the first year, \$120,000.00 for the second year, \$140,000.00 for the third and \$163,000.00 for the fourth and final year of the grant. The budget was planned to grow annually as new members come in and existing members increase their level of participation. If this program proves successful, we would hope to be able to continue it after the performance period of the grant.

Lancaster County – Volunteer Fire Rescue Recruitment & Retention Project

J. Mitchell Graham Submission

Innovations Required

The development of the algorithms we use to determine how we divide up the total funds available between departments and the algorithms used to determine the amount of points each member gets are one of a kind and our program is dependent upon them to operate. Literally hundreds of hours went into their development.

The concept of scoring each type of call by time and ranking each call differently and developing a method to fairly dispersing funds by removing the inequity between departments that run 700 calls a year and 70 calls was, we believe, truly innovative.

The entire program is one of a kind. We looked across the country and studied programs from coast to coast to try to find what worked and what didn't. We tried to take the best of the best and combine them all together to make our own unique program and we believe we did just that.

Creativity and Imagination

There is not a single person responsible for the current project; only a single person that took the ideas of many and folded them together to build this project.

In 2010, Heath Springs Fire Chief, Patrick Helms, who also works for Lancaster County Emergency Management, had noted that in his department some members were dedicated hard workers that gave their all, some did what was necessary while others just did enough to get by. Chief Helms directed Firefighter Tracy Benton, to review run reports and training records for three previous years and asked that she build a report on member activity within their department. Once the data was compiled and reviewed, Chief Helms and Firefighter Benton began discussing how to encourage participation and training while rewarding firefighters commensurate to their actual level of performance. Firefighter Benton suggested a points system and catalog similar to the equipment catalog Chief Helms had built for the Fire Service. Her idea was that firefighters would earn points by what they did and trade the points for hats, coats, t-shirts, jackets, flashlights etc.

Working for Emergency Management and side-by-side with the Fire Service, Chief Helms took the opportunity to compare his department's personnel and turnover rate with the rest of the county's fire departments. He noted that the problems he saw in his department were countywide. He began an undertaking to gather information about other services in other counties and eventually other states. He contacted John D'Alessandro, recruitment and retention coordinator with the Fireman's Association of New York, to discuss how the state of New York was dealing with the problem. Chief Helms spoke with firefighters and Chiefs in Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia asking about recruitment and retention programs. He studied volunteer retention, not just in the fire service but in other organizations such as the International Federation Red Cross and Red Crescent as well as the American Red Cross. He looked at historical organizations that had enlisted hundreds and thousands of people into their ranks as well as characteristics of those groups leadership. He researched altruistic behavior to try and better understand the psychology of the volunteer and read many technical reviews and reports on volunteer recruitment and retention.

Lancaster County – Volunteer Fire Rescue Recruitment & Retention Project

J. Mitchell Graham Submission

Finally, while at a South Carolina Fire Marshal's conference, Chief Helms spent an evening writing out a two part plan which he presented to Lancaster County Fire Marshal Stephen Blackwelder the next evening. With input from Blackwelder, Helms tweaked the plan and split it into two joint plans. Over the next few evenings the two of them worked to find pitfalls and solutions for these plans designed to restore our faltering volunteer service until they were comfortable with a final version.

When they returned from the Fire Marshal conference they met with now former Lancaster County Emergency Management/Fire Service Director Morris Russell and laid out the plans. Recognizing the possibilities, Director Russell had them develop the plans further and presented those plans to Administrator Steve Willis who agreed that we should pursue the projects and seek initial funding through the Staffing For Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant. With County Council's permission, Helms and Blackwelder collaborated to submit the grant applications which were eventually awarded.

Is there fire in you?

SHARE    ...

Ads designed to attract volunteer firefighters

By Greg Summers

Friday, April 15, 2016 at 2:00 am (Updated: April 15, 2:00 am)

Using a \$1 million federal grant, Lancaster County is launching a massive multimedia campaign to address its alarming shortage of volunteer firefighters.

Dubbed “Is There Fire in You?” the Lancaster County Fire Rescue campaign launches April 22 on social media, the Internet (www.JOINLCFR.org), television, radio, print media and signs.

The effort is funded through a \$1 million-plus grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Called a Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant, the four-year program is designed to attract new firefighters and hang on to the ones who are already volunteering.

“The bottom line is saving taxpayer money,” said Darren Player, director of Lancaster County Emergency Management and Fire Rescue.

In South Carolina, volunteer firefighters make up most of the fire service. Of the state’s 17,000-plus firefighters, 11,000 are volunteers, but officials say double that number are needed. Lancaster County has fewer than 300 volunteer firefighters and first responders, down from 600 three decades ago.

Patrick Helms, the county’s emergency management planner, said the county’s volunteer firefighters are a tight-knit, dedicated bunch. Several who serve on the fire commission are vacationing this week together in Florida.

“And do you know what they’re doing? They’re down there looking at firetrucks for the county’s next purchase. They’re taking their own vacation time to look at firetrucks,” Helms said. “That’s how blessed we are.”

About the program

Program coordinator Nathan Wall said the new marketing effort is fourfold.

The media blitz focuses on recruiting new firefighters by educating the community about what the county fire service has to offer.

For several months, volunteer firefighters have been working with a professional production company to shoot footage for 36 half-minute commercials for CN2 and local cable television channels.

The first commercial is scheduled to air next week.

“Everything starts April 22,” Wall said, “and we’re out to build the brotherhood.”

A fire rescue newsletter “The Trash Line” is now being published. It got its name from a trash line, the small bumper pump on the front of many firetrucks.

“One thing we’ve learned is because of work schedules and family responsibilities, the firefighter on the street doesn’t always get the message,” Helms said. “The point is to try to keep them in the loop.”

The county has adopted a recognition system that will reward firefighters. They will accumulate points based on level of training, length of service, active membership, leadership and call response.

This system was based on surveys from the volunteers at each county department, as well as those who left the fire service. In the past four years, 184 volunteers have left in Lancaster County, and just 147 new ones have joined.

“What they’ve told us is that most don’t want money, but if they can get a shirt, cooler or jacket, it means more to them,” Helms said. “It’s sort of like redeeming GreenBax stamps with merchandise from a catalog. It’s something tangible.”

Lancaster County Fire Rescue will also offer tuition assistance at accredited regional colleges, universities and tech schools for all volunteer firefighters who meet specific eligibility requirements.

“We want to help everybody, but we want to help the working volunteer impact his community through educational opportunities,” Wall said.

Helms said University of South Carolina Lancaster officials worked closely with County Fire Rescue to put the tuition assistance program together.

“What we’re doing is navigating uncharted waters. FEMA on one shore, the state on the other, and we’re trying to steer through it,” Helms said. “This is a different beast for a lot of reasons. Normally when we get a grant, it’s for something specific, say 14 sets of turnout gear or 25 pairs of gloves. This is nothing like that.”

The final component of the recruitment and retention program is a “Hometown Heroes” element that recognizes volunteer firefighters, as well as departments for their community service. This includes a “County Firefighter of the Year” award.

“This is what we said we wanted, and it’s where we want to go,” Helms said.

Contact Greg Summers at (803) 283-1156

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Photo Supplied

This image, taken from a new promotional commercial, show the versatility that today's firefighters must have. They handle diverse situations far beyond burning buildings and train for many different rescue scenarios.



Photo Supplied



Photo Supplied

The recruitment commercial includes these firefighters cutting open a vehicle during a mock rescue.



Photo Supplied

A scene from the commercials includes Rich Hill Fire Chief Leonard Sims.



Photo Supplied

A team of firefighters speeding across the water on a mock rescue mission for the commercial.



Photo Supplied

A team from Lancaster County Fire Rescue practices swift-water rescue techniques at a class in Charlotte last weekend.