

THINKING & TALKING ABOUT: RECRUITING AND RETAINING WOMEN

Are you looking to recruit and retain a more qualified, diverse, inclusive and safety-conscious workforce, and you haven't had success in recruiting women? Here are some things to consider when recruiting women for your department:

- First of all, women are not so different from men in terms of what entices them to become firefighters or even what makes good firefighters. There is a range of abilities and interests among women as well as men, and lumping them all together—or stereotyping—does everyone a disservice. Still, there are good reasons to hire women and a targeted recruitment can be useful.
- Emphasize the reason you're recruiting women. It's not just about numbers. Women add value to your department. A variety of life experiences and approaches to problem solving, caring, compassion, safety, training and service will make you more adaptive and effective.
- Identify and remove barriers to hiring women. Are station facilities available to accommodate both genders? Watch your language. When women hear only about "firemen" and "the guys," they may feel unwelcome and excluded.
- Develop, implement and enforce a zero tolerance policy regarding harassment. The chief and command staff need to commit in policy and practice, and make it clear throughout the ranks that it will be enforced. No one wants to work in a hostile environment, and the 'boys will be boys' excuse is an expensive ticket to court.
- Community outreach is key to recruitment success. Map your community to identify organizations and contacts who will help with recruitment. Develop a PR strategy and a targeted message. If you don't have women in your department, reach out to a neighboring department.
- Use your existing workforce as recruiters. Even if they are all men, they certainly know women who might be interested and could be successful as firefighters. 'Word of mouth' is a significant tool in successful recruitment.
- "First and only can be lonely!" Very few people are comfortable or confident when they're treated as an outsider. Hiring a token woman or asking one woman to be your poster child for recruitment is a recipe for failure. The pressure on her to be perfect and to represent all women is not fair to her or to the organization.
- If you have no women in your department, consider opening lateral transfers first. Their previous experience can give them a boost in knowing the job and being accepted in your department.
- Monitor, measure and celebrate how your department is becoming a better place for everyone. And keep trying. Change in workforce demographics doesn't happen overnight.