

Department Profile: Perryville Volunteer Fire Department

Fish Fries. BBQ Plates. Casino Nights. Raffles. Silent Auctions. Pancake Dinners. You name it, volunteer fire departments all across Texas try any and every kind of fundraiser possible to bring in the kind of money it takes to operate a fire department – even one with no paid staff.

Most rural areas in Texas have all-volunteer fire departments that rely both on the willingness of community members to serve, and area residents and business owners to support them. Funding sources are often limited and many of these VFDs get by on anywhere from \$3,000 to about \$50,000 annually.

Some are contracted with a county or city, and some are an Emergency Service District (ESD), which is its own taxing entity. Either way, the costs associated with operations – including equipment, vehicles, fuel, gas, maintenance, fire gear, PPE, and training – are massive. And that's without the expense of salaries and benefits.

Perryville VFD, located about 10 miles SE of Winnsboro, Texas, in the northeastern part of the state, recently started a Go Fund Me account to help the tiny department replenish its already limited funds spent on an engine repair. The department's leader, Fire Chief Daniel Alexander, said increased call volume in turn increases expenses for fuel, equipment, gear, PPE and more.

"A volunteer department is nine times out of 10 stretched very thin when it comes to funding," he said. "Most departments absolutely rely on donations and fundraisers just to keep the trucks rolling."

He added that Wood County pays a portion of the department's annual costs and Texas A&M Forest Service generously provides aid with grants for equipment and training.

"But the vast majority of operating expenses – sometimes up to 80 percent of the annual overall budget – fall solely on the volunteer department," he said.

Why the Go Fund Me?

Chief Alexander said a recent engine repair nearly depleted the department's entire reserve fund and now they are building up their operating fund again.

On the page, it said, "We are not looking to use this as a fund raiser but a means to keep providing emergency services to our community."

Alexander clarified that his department would normally have just enough operating funds, but the unexpected expenses to repair their engine took their account down to almost nothing.

The chief has some experience with how volunteer fire departments work.

Perryville Volunteer Fire Department was established in 1984. Alexander grew up in the department.

"My father was a founding member of the VFD, so I was raised in the fire service from the time I was in diapers," he said. "And my children are the same way."

He was a junior member for six years and has been a member for the past 21. In that time, he was the Training Coordinator (two years), Captain (four years), Assistant Chief (two years) and he's been Fire Chief for the past eight.

The chief said Perryville has 10 members who are, as he put it, "very dedicated and maintaining a very high call attendance."

With just those 10 dedicated volunteers, Perryville responds annually to 340 to 400 calls for service - an average of at least one call per day, sometimes more - putting additional strain on its already stretched thin volunteers who have paying jobs.

While new volunteers are also needed, extra help can put pressure on already thin resources. Alexander said the cost to equip volunteers comes from extremely tight budgets, even with the help of the Texas A&M Forest Service grants.

The higher call volume also strains their fleet.

“Some of our apparatus is 30 years old,” he said. “At some point, they need to be replaced, but our budget won’t allow it, so we continue to put Band-aids on old wounds.”

He continued, “The community needs to know all of the struggles of the volunteer fire department. The best way to do this is to show up at your local volunteer fire department, sit through a meeting, or even fill out an application and join the membership and help us protect our neighbors and our community.”

Chief Alexander said new volunteers are always appreciated. They are also desperately needed.

“Without volunteers - and new volunteers at that - there is no volunteer fire department,” he said. “If there's no volunteer fire department for rural America, there is no fire protection. People need to understand this.”

Perryville VFD has nine volunteers on the roster. Some of the folks in the photos are no longer with the department, but Chief Alexander wanted to share the pics he had with us. The current members are:

Daniel Alexander
Scott Kruszewski
Brandi Alexander
Cody Jordan
Chris Corbin
Colton McGuire
Jayden Alexander
Macee Alexander
Carter McGuire