

Member Spotlight - Chief Chandra Elliott

Ables-Springs Volunteer Fire Department

We caught up with Fire Chief Chandra Elliott from Ables Springs Volunteer Fire Department at the North Texas Firemen's and Fire Marshal's Association District meeting on April 8. She is one of the few female chiefs in Texas and has five other women on the volunteer roster.

She said there was a time when Ables Springs VFD only had six volunteers total. They now have 19 members. What changed?

"Morale and the way we do things is different," she said. "We try to have a good time; we do game night. It's more family oriented."

Her own children, ages nine and 13, are often at the station and can be seen serving dinner when the department has fundraisers and other events. She noted that her husband isn't a volunteer, but he is a certified mechanic, so she asks him for help maintaining and fixing vehicles.

Chandra said another important piece of the puzzle is that her officers are always encouraging each other and their crew.

"We support each other and have great camaraderie," she said. "I hope we keep doing what's right."

Chief Elliott said she leads a young department.

"My oldest member is 63; he's a retired Dallas firefighter. He's now our assistant chief," she said. "My two youngest members are 19."

She added that both took their national registry earlier that day to become EMTs and she was waiting to hear if they passed the test.

Chandra became the chief this past December; the Ables Springs volunteers voted her into the position. She'd spent about a year as the assistant chief. Prior to that she was the captain.

Being a firefighter is something she's wanted to do for many years beginning when she was in the purchasing department in Mesquite. She was involved in helping the city purchase fire trucks and when they arrived, the department invited her to take a ride in the new rig.

She finally made her dream happen in 2019 when she was 38. Just four years later, she found herself in the top spot in her department.

With volunteerism on the decline in general, we asked Chief Elliott how she went from six volunteers to nearly 20 in such a short time span.

She thought for a moment.

“It’s been somewhat organic,” she said.

Her department hasn’t made a big public push for volunteers. They increased their presence on social media, and they do annual fundraisers, but much of the success is word of mouth.

“We talk to people,” she said. “When you just worked a call and helped someone’s family, you might think about asking that person to become part of the team.”

She said it’s often a gut feeling – coupled with common sense.

“You have a conversation, and it feels like a good fit,” Chandra said. “We ask, ‘Would you like to be a part of this? You can do the same thing.’ There is something amazing at that moment.”

Ables Springs, a small community in northeastern Kaufman County, has a population of about 5,000. It’s roughly 43 miles east of Dallas. The nearest “big” town is Terrell.

“We like our country town,” she said. “But new houses are popping up all the time.”

The majority of calls are medical, she said. Often, she sees head-on collisions on the main two-lane road where the speed limit is 55.

“But people still do 80 mph,” she said.

Ables Springs also works a lot of grass fires and provides mutual aid to other departments.

“We are an ESD, which also includes Elmo VFD, Terrell VFD and College Mound VFD,” she said.

Chandra added that Ables Springs also helps volunteer departments in other local counties whenever possible.

Every member of Ables Springs is a volunteer but they have a stipend system in place.

“We do things a little different from other departments,” Chandra said. “We do a per call rate. If 10 people show up or five people, the funds are dispersed percentage wise.”

That money comes from the ESD, which is a taxing mechanism. Money donated by local residents and businesses is often used for special, extra things.

“I used some of that funding to purchase large fans for the station because there was no airflow,” she said. “I also used a little to provide some holiday fun for the volunteers – we rented a party room at the movie theater, had good food and did some bowling.”

Chandra added that she and her crew do whatever they can to save on costs, such as fixing and installing things.

“If you ask a firefighter to fix things or help around the station, you find that they want to get more involved. They want to be useful,” she said.

Before we left the district meeting in Ennis, Chandra said she heard that her young firefighters passed their test and are now officially EMTs. We high fived.

“We now have seven EMTs, one EMR and one in EMT school,” she said.

The pride in her smile was evident. She is a fire chief who truly cares about her crew and her community.

“I do this for the community,” she said. “We know these folks. We cry with them when something bad happens. I wouldn’t do this for any other reason.”

Ables Springs Volunteer Fire Department Roster April 2023:

Chandra Elliott, Chief/EMT

Ron Harris, Asst. Chief/Training Coordinator

Cash Britton, Lieutenant/EMT

Scott Plummer, Lieutenant/EMR

Sabrina Britton, FF

Bryan Drawdy, FF

Hayley Drawdy, FF

Roger Goldberg, FF

Clayton Hill, FF/EMT

Hannah Hunt, FF/EMT

Robert Irwin, FF/Retired Chief

Savannah Johnson, FF/EMT

Cason Lane, FF

Rigo Lemus, FF

Bryce Owen, FF/EMT

Alex Rogers, FF/EMT

Raymond Rogers, FF

Luis Segundo, FF

Angel Suarez, FF