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# Building Diversity at West Allis Fire Department

By Jenny Kosek

When West Allis Fire Department (WAFD) Deputy Chief (DC) Mike Wright joined the department in 2008, he wasn't setting out to make history. He just wanted to be a firefighter.

"I had worked some other jobs after graduating high school, and had an uncle who was a captain with the Milwaukee Fire Department. I knew those other jobs weren't what I wanted to do, so with a little push from my uncle, I applied to join the West Allis Fire Department," recalled DC Wright.

With this decision, DC Wright became the first black firefighter to break the previously all-white ranks of the department.

As West Allis and the country become more rich and diverse, fire departments are working harder than ever to attract and retain new recruits that represent the racial and cultural make-up of the communities they serve. From 2008–2012, DC Wright remained the only minority in the West Allis Fire Department. From 2012 onward, the department has strengthened its diversity, and now approximately 13 of the



105 members of the department are minorities, including six women.

"We may be the most diverse department in Milwaukee County," noted DC Wright. "We've made progress, but have a long way to go."

Like many organizations in the public and private sector, fire departments work constantly to proactively recruit new members to the profession. Throughout the year, West Allis Fire Department staff visit job fairs and schools to educate young people about the opportunities available in fire and emergency medical services (EMS). Recently, the West Allis Fire Department partnered with the Milwaukee Area Technical College to launch

an internship program for college students. Students gain hands-on experience in the fire department, and those who demonstrate the commitment and skill required to be a professional firefighter or paramedic may even be offered a position with WAFD.

Still, WAFD and other fire departments struggle to attract minorities to the profession. This lack of diversity impacts emergency services organizations in surprising ways.

DC Wright recalled a call he responded to early in his career. When he arrived at the scene, he found an elderly African American woman suffering from a medical episode. The woman, surrounded by white first responders, was crying and extremely agitated. When she saw DC Wright, she immediately calmed down.

"In the simplest terms, she saw someone who looked more like her, and she felt more at ease," Wright observed. "She said she had never seen a Black firefighter before."





The benefits to patients and those served by diverse fire departments goes beyond this simple connection. “EMS personnel bring their own backgrounds and experiences to their approach to patient care,” said DC Wright. “With more diversity in our staff, we’re better able to understand different perspectives and provide a level of care that meets the needs of all of those we serve.”

But building a diverse staff is still a challenge for most departments. “Historically, firefighters came from family lines,” said West Allis Fire Department Chief, Mason Pooler. “Someone’s grandfather was a firefighter, then their dad, then that person joined the profession. We’re seeing that less, and are working harder to create first-generation firefighters,” said Pooler.

Wright and Pooler agree that challenges in enticing first-generation minority members to the department are complex ones to overcome. Some of these young people may be coming from difficult socioeconomic backgrounds and lack a familial support system to motivate them to stay on course to becoming a firefighter. They may have incidents in their past that they think exclude them from the profession. Others may be wary of the physical demands of emergency services, or intimidated by what they perceive as rigid regimentation within these organizations. Lacking family ties to firefighting and emergency services, many young people are not aware of the rewarding career paths available in this line of work.

The West Allis Fire Department encourages young adults who have an interest in learning more about fire or EMS as a profession to contact the department to arrange a tour or ride-along. Seeing the camaraderie, skill, and professionalism of the department first-hand can often be life changing for these young people.

“It is so rewarding to know you make a difference with your work,” said DC Wright. “You can help people through what may be the worst experience of their life, and know that you helped make it better for them.”

