



1 2

Local Heroes: Chester County Firefighters

LOCAL FIREFIGHTERS RISK THEIR LIVES TO KEEP OUR COMMUNITIES SAFE

Shannon Montgomery

AMERICA'S FIRE DEPARTMENTS ARE IN CRISIS. Fire companies and departments across the country are experiencing a major decline in membership.

Nowhere is this crisis more evident than in Pennsylvania, which still relies on a model of primarily volunteer firefighters that dates back to the 1700s, when Benjamin Franklin founded the first volunteer fire department in Philadelphia. The National Volunteer Fire Council reports that Pennsylvania has an estimated 36,000 to 38,000 firefighters today, compared with 360,000 in 1975.

This year, we're shining a spotlight on Chester County's firefighters. Faced with declining numbers of volunteers and dramatic growth in service calls, these brave men and women rise to the occasion and keep our homes and neighborhoods safe.

WEST CHESTER FIRE DEPARTMENT

The West Chester Fire Department — comprised of the First West Chester, Good Will and Fame Fire Companies — is one of the few remaining all-volunteer fire departments in the region, a proud tradition dating back to 1799. The department's 150 active members, along with many more contributing members, respond to over 1,200 calls for service a year across their 27-square-mile coverage area, encompassing six municipalities.

Chief Steve Pelna is currently in his 27th year of volunteer fire service. He remembers how he got started as a teen: "A friend in high

school was part of the local fire company. He asked me to come with him one time, and the fire service has had a hold on me ever since."

When asked how the department has managed to stay all-volunteer for over 200 years, Pelna attributes this largely to their location. Many students at West Chester University volunteer, and the department has a state-of-the-art training facility in West Goshen. "We've been very fortunate that we truly haven't seen the volunteer [crisis] up until the last two years," Pelna says, who adds the department is constantly looking for new ways to recruit members.

Pelna is very proud of his members. "We have many repeat generations of firefighters — grandfathers and fathers passing it on to their sons and daughters," he says. "It's great to see." He also praises the department's female firefighters, about 10% of the department — compared with about 8% nationally.

"The biggest thing any first responder sees is a tremendous amount of tragedy," Pelna says. "But every once in a while, we get to see amazing feats of humanity — delivering a baby outside of a hospital, bringing someone back to life from cardiac arrest." These moments make it all worthwhile.

GOSHEN FIRE COMPANY

The Goshen Fire Company started in 1950 in a small garage in East Goshen with a single fire truck. Today, the company's two stations, housing 15 pieces of fire equipment, respond to over 4,000 calls per year. The company is comprised of about 55 volunteer firefighters and 24 full- and part-time career firefighters.

Gerry DiNunzio has been a volunteer firefighter since 1987. Like many others, he got started because of his family: "My dad was a fireman, so it was a natural transition," he explains. He currently

serves as President of the Chester County Fire Chiefs Association and was Deputy Chief of the Goshen Fire Company for six years.

"Firefighting is very rewarding," DiNunzio says. "Being able to give back to the community — the ability to help people and see their reactions" is what keeps him coming back year after year. It's clear that serving the community is important to him — as well as volunteering with the fire company, DiNunzio has been an officer with the West Chester Police Department since 2004.

LONGWOOD FIRE COMPANY

The Longwood Fire Company was established in 1921 by Pierre du Pont, not surprisingly to protect his gardens, now Longwood Gardens. The fire company has been in its current location in Kennett Square since 1954 and has expanded to serve the surrounding area, including East Marlborough, Pennsbury and Pocopson Township. In the last 25 years, the company has quadrupled in size to over 60 members.

Chief A.J. McCarthy has been with the Longwood Fire Company since 1987, starting as a junior member when he was a teenager and moving up the ranks to become the volunteer fire chief in 2011. In 2017, he was asked to work full time, and so he retired from the West Chester Police Department — where he'd served as a patrolman for 13 years — and became the company's first career fire chief.

For McCarthy, fighting fires also runs in the family — his grandfather, father and uncles were all firefighters. He recalls growing up surrounded by family and friends working as first responders. "I always had a strong interest in fire service, since I was a young kid," he says. "Growing up, I was always around a police car or fire truck."

McCarthy admits that Longwood is "not immune to the volunteer crisis," but is proud of the steps being taken to increase their numbers. This year the Kennett Area Fire and Emergency Services Regional Commission, which oversees three fire companies serving six municipalities, funded a \$250,000 volunteer incentive program for the next two years.

PHOENIXVILLE FIRE DEPARTMENT

The Phoenixville Fire Department, founded in 1874, serves over 18,000 residents in the roughly four-square-mile borough, a much denser population than most of Chester County. "There's more of an urban feel in Phoenixville, meaning there's a possibility of a major fire event happening," says Chief Eamon Brazunas, who came on board in 2022.

Fortunately, the department opened a state-of-the-art facility in August — the Paradise Street station with living quarters for up to 10 and six drive-through bays. "This was a major investment — we're getting arguably one of the better stations in the region, if not the state," Brazunas says.

Though new to the Phoenixville Fire Department, Brazunas is no stranger to firefighting. He started volunteering with the Berwyn Fire Company in 1998, where he still volunteers, and was Radnor Fire Company's full-time Executive Director for nearly 14 years.

Phoenixville's department consists of 36 volunteer firefighters, 30 part-time staff and three full-timers: Chief Brazunas and two captains. While the department is always recruiting volunteers, Brazunas and the borough leadership recognize that increasing paid staff is key to preventing gaps in coverage. "At the end of the day, people need to come to grips with the fact that we need to finance fire and emergency services."

Brazunas encourages volunteering locally. "If you're looking to get involved in your community and do something meaningful, there's no better way to do it," he says. "There is no higher calling."

GET INVOLVED

Pennsylvania has more volunteer fire departments than anywhere else in America. Of the state's 2,448 fire companies, 2,354 are all volunteer.

A major reason for the volunteer crisis is the time commitment. In many families, both parents work full-time and simply don't have time to volunteer. "It's not like volunteering with any other organization. It has to be part of your life," Longwood's McCarthy explains. "You're going to spend at least 20 hours a week training, answering calls and maintaining equipment."

Yet volunteering with your local fire company is extremely rewarding. "It gives you a sense of community," West Chester's Pelna explains. "The fire department becomes a second family."

Goshen's DiNunzio agrees. "Most people do it to give back to the community," he says. "It's also exciting and a unique level of training not many folks have."

Most important, it's an integral part of any community and necessary to keep us all safe. "When you call 911, you're looking for someone to come," McCarthy explains. "If we don't get enough staffing, you'll pick up the phone, and no one will come."

If you're interested in getting involved with your local fire department, call or email them today. Find them at ChesCo.org/3549/Find-Your-Fire-Company. ♦

Chester County Hero Fund

When first responders are injured or lose their life in the line of duty, their families are often left in debt and without support.

Established in 2001, the Chester County Hero Fund provides financial assistance to surviving spouses, children and families of first responders — including firefighters, emergency medical technicians, paramedics and police officers — who are seriously injured or die in the line of duty.

The fund is supported by contributions from donors and support from fundraisers like the Chester County Balloon Festival and the annual Ride for Heroes. To contribute, visit ChesterCountyHeroFund.com.

1. Phoenixville Fire Department PHOTO BY REGINA JELSKI
2. Goshen Fire Company