

Capacity at Risk: The Growing Crisis Facing Rural North Dakota Fire Departments

Ryan Melin, North Dakota Forest Service Fire Management Officer

Alison Vetter, North Dakota Dept. of Emergency Services Strategic Communications Chief

Executive Summary

Many North Dakota fire departments are confronting a critical, system-level crisis driven by declining recruitment, high volunteer turnover, increasing emergency call volumes, inadequate funding mechanisms, and rising societal expectations. These pressures have produced persistent staffing shortages, delayed or limited mutual aid capacity, and ongoing financial instability due to heavy reliance on property taxes, fire insurance premium refunds, and local fundraising. Collectively, these conditions undermine the long-term sustainability, reliability, and effectiveness of fire and rescue services statewide—particularly in rural communities.

This white paper examines the core drivers of the fire service capacity crisis through three interconnected lenses: people, funding, and large/complex incident response. It identifies systemic weaknesses and underscores the need for coordinated legislative action to ensure sustainable, equitable fire protection services across North Dakota.

Introduction: A System Under Strain

Fire departments provide foundational public safety services, including emergency response, fire suppression, rescue operations, hazardous materials mitigation, and increasingly, emergency medical assistance. In North Dakota, the majority of these services—especially in rural areas—are delivered by volunteer fire departments.

While volunteerism has long been a defining strength of North Dakota’s fire service culture, demographic shifts, economic pressures, and evolving service expectations have exposed significant structural vulnerabilities. Departments are increasingly expected to do more with fewer personnel, limited funding, and inconsistent governance frameworks. Without targeted assistance, these pressures threaten both the long-term viability of local fire protection and the safety of the communities they serve.



1. People: Organizational Structure and Workforce Challenges

1.1 Department Models and Organizational Structure

North Dakota fire departments operate under a wide range of organizational models including municipal departments, rural fire protection districts, and independent volunteer organizations. This lack of consistency has resulted in uneven governance, administrative capacity, and accountability across the state.

In many rural communities, departments rely entirely on volunteers who must balance emergency response with full-time employment and family responsibilities. Traditional volunteer-based models—once effective in smaller communities—are increasingly misaligned with modern service demands including higher call volumes, increasing number of complex incidents, and expanded training requirements. These challenges are compounded by aging rural populations and declining employer support.

As a result:

- Leadership positions are increasingly difficult to fill and sustain
- Succession planning is often absent
- Administrative and compliance responsibilities fall on a small number of overextended individuals
- Many departments have limited capacity for long-term strategic planning

1.2 Recruitment, Retention, and Volunteer Turnover

Volunteer recruitment has declined significantly, while turnover has increased.

Contributing factors include:

- Aging demographics and declining rural populations
- Increased frequency and complexity of responses
- Time-intensive training requirements
- Limited employer support for volunteer responders
- Insufficient funding to provide personal protective equipment (PPE), maintain or replace equipment, and support training
- Limited incentives to volunteer

"The people. The people part stresses me out the most. I got the trucks."

"If you want 5 firefighters you need to look for 20. If I bring on 6 and keep 2, I am happy."



These challenges disproportionately affect rural departments where smaller populations constrain the volunteer pool, response areas are geographically expansive, and high-stress or traumatic incidents often involve individuals personally known to responders.

1.3 Training Gaps and the Absence of Minimum Standards

North Dakota currently lacks mandatory minimum training standards for firefighters. While some departments pursue nationally recognized certifications, others lack the resources or capacity to do so consistently.

The absence of statewide minimum training requirements results in:

- Inconsistent responder preparedness
- Increased safety risks to firefighters and the public
- Unequal levels of service between communities
- Challenges integrating mutual aid resources during complex incidents

Without a standardized baseline, departments struggle to balance responder safety, operational effectiveness, and volunteer availability.

2. Funding

Insufficient, unpredictable funding undermines staffing, training, equipment readiness, and long-term planning. Current funding mechanisms introduce instability and inequity, particularly in communities with limited tax bases.

2.1 Funding as a Capacity Enabler

Department Operations

Current funding structures lack stable, dedicated revenue streams to support essential operational costs such as utilities, insurance, fuel, maintenance, and administrative



functions. This instability limits long-term planning, member retention, and investment in capacity-building initiatives.

Equipment and Apparatus

Fire apparatus and specialized equipment are costly, with replacement cycles frequently extending well beyond recommended service life. Departments often rely on grants or community fundraising for major purchases, leading to deferred replacements and increased operational risk.

Personal Protective Equipment

Modern firefighting PPE is critical to responder safety but expensive to purchase and maintain. Inconsistent funding results in:

- Delayed replacement of expired or damaged gear
- Elevated health and safety risks for firefighters

“Insurance premiums back to the departments were a huge win for the fire service. That doesn’t cure the funding source though. That’s not enough money to go around and not enough for the smaller departments to operate on.”

“We just got a bid for a new pumper for \$1.7 million. In 2005 the same truck was \$350K.”

“One new business could put me over the 3% growth cap.”

2.2 Training as a Capacity Multiplier

Training enhances operational effectiveness, responder safety, and mutual aid interoperability. However, training requirements also demand significant time and resources, often discouraging volunteer participation.

Strategic approaches to strengthening training capacity include:

- Regional training programs
- State-supported training delivery models
- Online and hybrid learning options
- Shared instructors and training facilities

Expanding access to standardized, affordable training strengthens capacity across all departments.



3. Large and Complex Incident Response

Large, complex incident responses place a significant burden on fire departments—particularly those in rural communities. These departments are responsible for protecting vast geographic areas with limited staffing, extended response times, and minimal access to specialized resources. Rural fire departments often rely on small crews of volunteer responders and mutual aid that may be delayed by long travel distances. Incidents frequently occur in remote locations with limited water supply and tend to be prolonged events, further increasing operational challenges. These conditions strain personnel, complicate command and control, and slow the ability to scale resources when time is critical. Despite these constraints, rural fire departments are expected to manage high-risk, complex emergencies, making enhanced coordination, training, and support not optional, but essential.

3.1 Mutual Aid and Extended Aid Systems

Mutual aid is essential in a state characterized by large geographic distances and limited local staffing. While agreements exist, their effectiveness is constrained by:

- Limited geographic scope often only including neighboring fire departments
- Insufficient capacity for large-scale or prolonged incidents
- Variability in training and equipment
- Inconsistent Incident Command System implementation
- Unclear or inadequate cost-recovery mechanisms

“Incident Commander doesn’t know who’s on the scene, lose span of control, accountability goes out the window.”

“If there is a call they will come, but they can’t backfill for my coverage.”

“When you start moving resources beyond mutual aid the question always becomes who’s going to pay for it?”

Clear statutory authority, standardized expectations, coordinated planning, and reliable cost-recovery frameworks are necessary to ensure mutual and extended aid systems function effectively.



Conclusion: A Call for Coordinated Action

North Dakota's fire service capacity crisis is not the result of a single failure, but of interconnected challenges involving people, funding, and an increased call volume to large and complex incidents. If left unaddressed, these issues will continue to erode emergency response capabilities, disproportionately affecting rural communities and placing both responders and residents at risk.

The Need for Legislative Support

The challenges facing fire departments are systemic and require coordinated action

- Recruitment, Retention, and Surge Capacity
 - Provide workforce development incentives
 - Support access to health and life insurance benefits for volunteer firefighters
 - Relieve administrative burden on volunteer fire chiefs
- Training
 - Consider the establishment of training standards
 - Strengthen training capacity including all hazards coverage
 - Expanding access to affordable training opportunities
- Mutual Aid
 - Encourage regional and statewide mutual aid responses
 - Including the creation of regional or statewide mutual aid authorities
 - Strengthen incident command capacity at local level
 - Bolster state-level response capacity

The challenges facing North Dakota fire departments are systemic, not isolated. Addressing them requires coordinated legislative leadership, state-level support, and regional collaborations. Strategic investment now will help preserve North Dakota's volunteer fire service tradition while ensuring safe, reliable, and equitable fire protection for all communities.

