

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:  
Wednesday September 13, 2017

CONTACT: Brian Helmick, Interim Fire  
Chief, East Contra Costa Fire Protection District  
(925) 584-8468

## East Contra Costa Fire Protection District



### “Statement on the Utilization of Volunteers”

**Brentwood** - As work continues to rebuild East Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ECCFPD), some of the jurisdiction's citizens recommend the utilization of volunteer firefighters (AKA Paid on call- POC or Reserves) as the answer to the District's staffing challenges. As the Fire Chief, I understand why some would believe this is a reasonable solution. However, from the District's experiences with these programs and the cost to maintain them in reality, I need to explain why utilizing volunteers as the District's baseline of service is not a viable option.

There are some citizens that have also stated that the District had many good volunteers and they let them all go. It's also important to note, that in 2002 when ECCFPD consolidated Oakley, Bethel Island and East Diablo Fire Districts, many of the volunteer (POC) firefighters were hired to career positions in the District. Although I am the current Fire Chief of ECCFPD, I was one of the POC firefighters that got hired in 2002. Today, currently ten (10) of the District's active thirty-five (35) firefighters were hired from POC positions within the District. In addition, there are many of the POC firefighters of 2002 that are now career (or retired) firefighters in other areas or just retired in general.

Another aspect that needs to be explained is that on the surface, volunteer firefighters appears to be a cost-effective solution to increase staffing. One of the misunderstandings around the term "volunteer firefighter" is that many believe that means that the Firefighters are free to the District. This is not true. Even if an employee is "volunteer", there is cost associated to: conduct a hiring process, entry level and continuing education training, and to issue personal protective equipment that requires annual testing. There are also costs associated with workers compensation, executive level oversight for the program, and retention. These items compound depending on the number of members in the program. Furthermore, to hire volunteer firefighters it is the same hiring process required when we hire a career firefighter. These processes include opening up a candidate search, accepting applications, two levels of interviews, background checks, psychological checks, medical checks and if all is well, we will make a candidate an offer and begin training.

One more component that needs to be discussed is that the fire district would not work under the old model because East Contra Costa County is no longer a rural area. The District is now urban with more homes and buildings in the pipeline. The 249 square miles the District has to cover is populated and growth is continuing. Today's population and traffic within the jurisdiction makes responding to calls a challenge. With the community now an urban area, this means there are more medical calls, vehicle crashes and other calls, which require an immediate response from a 24/7 staffed stations with professionally trained firefighters.

In 2012, the District made the effort to re-start a reserve program at the request of the public. It was determined it would cost the fire district roughly \$15-20k per volunteer who then must receive 240 hours of initial fire training (60 hours of medical training, 100 hours of driving emergency apparatus training), and 240 hours of annual refresh/updates. Additional costs include reporting pay for each call and on duty pay while actually working. Ultimately, the District received less than 20 applicants with only 2 or 3 being qualified and willing to serve in front-line duty positions, which was not enough to get the program running. The District would require approximately 50-60 trained and equipped volunteers to provide staffing for 1 additional station.

The last component I would like to address is that the District started to realize that we were just training firefighters to get hired elsewhere. Today, volunteer positions are the first step in beginning a fire career. Many begin working with a District in hopes of getting hired on in a paid position—or they use it on a resume to gain employment elsewhere. In 2010, the District was spending a lot of time, energy, and money bringing in reserve firefighters to serve the District. In 2010, it became apparent the District was duplicating services that the community college fire science programs offered. The reality became that the District had become a training ground and once jobs opened up throughout the county and state employees left because they were looking for career positions with higher pay than the District could offer.

As we continue to build ECCFPD, we need to be creative and look for economical solutions to enhance services throughout the District. With that said, the District needs to invest in creating a solid foundation that invests in 24/7, 365 a day career firefighting services. While we do this, my plan as the Fire Chief is to work with both the High School ROP Fire Science and Community College Fire Science Programs to invest in future firefighters as they work on completing their internships. This will provide the District with helping hands to support our full time staff as we invest into the next generation of the fire service. While we do so we might just discover the future Fire Chief of the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District.

I thank you in advance for your continued support, as ECCFPD is your Fire Department.

You can visit us on the Districts website, [www.eccfpd.org](http://www.eccfpd.org) or through our social media pages on Facebook (East Contra Costa Fire Protection District), Instagram (@east\_contra\_costa\_fire) , Twitter (@eccfpd) and our YouTube channel (East Contra Costa Fire Protection District) for more information on the Fire District.

**ABOUT THE EAST CONTRA COSTA FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT:** The East Contra Costa Fire Protection District spans 249 square miles and our firefighter/EMTs serve more than 110,000 residents in the Cities of Brentwood and Oakley, the Town of Discovery Bay, the communities of Byron, Bethel Island and Knightsen, the Marsh Creek/Morgan Territory area, and all other areas within unincorporated Contra Costa County to the east of Antioch and to the southeast of Clayton