

How to rebuild a volunteer fire department after neglect

Jan. 30, 2013 [Mary Rose Roberts](#) | *Fire Chief*



How do you rebuild a volunteer fire department, especially one that literally is falling apart at the foundation? It takes determination and community spirit, as seen in the efforts of Cpt. Jason Clatt and the fire personnel at the [Longton \(Kan.\) Volunteer Fire Department](#).

The Longton department protects about 360 people, with a few privately owned businesses as well as a post office and a K-12 school. The fire department needed a total overhaul when Clatt became involved in 2009. After many years of inactivity, few knew how to run a department. There also was a lack of documentation or records.

At the time, the department had fewer than 10 active volunteers, one functional engine and one out-of-date engine. The turnout gear was donated from the Kansas Forestry Service out of Manhattan, Kan. To make matters worse, the building used as the fire station was deteriorating, due to age and lack of upgrades or upkeep. The useable engine was housed in the old city hall, which was dilapidated and full of mold and could only be used to house the engine; there was no space to train or for an office.

In 2012, the city deemed the fire building as unsafe and eventually tore it down, Clatt said.

Longton chief officers met with other area fire leadership to learn about how to rebuild the department, including the administrative side. For equipment purchases, this past summer the department held several fundraisers, including one where firefighters "spent three miserably hot days selling snow cones at the fair as well as having a pancake breakfast," Clatt said. It let the department buy a Halligan bar and fire ax.

"That may not sound like much, but to us it was a large purchase and badly needed," he said.

The city can't afford a new structure to house the department or provide gear due to shrinking taxes and a tight budget. The department applied for federal grants to help. This year they received an [AFG FIRE Grant](#) to outfit six firefighters with turnout gear and air packs, as well as funding to be Firefighter I-certified.

"Many of our volunteers have purchased PPE and items for themselves as well as paid for their own training in the past couple of years," he said. "Six may not seem like a lot, but that supplies the majority of our volunteers."

However, the fire department still does not have a station. Volunteers carry their equipment in totes in their personal vehicles, and records are kept in boxes at the chief's home.

"We hold our meetings at the city hall, which is in a small, one-room building, and our functioning engine is housed in the city's maintenance shop," Clatt said. "Our goal is to be able to have our own small station where we can house our engine, equipment and training props, as well as a functional office to be able to run our department."

Clatt realizes the department isn't the only one suffering economically. But he hopes they can continue to find funding sources that can finance a new fire station.

"Unfortunately for our department, it seems that we have hit a wall that we do not seem to be able to overcome," he said. "I believe that we are a strong department, and through our struggles we have come to understand one another. We will continue to be there for our small community."