

NY FIRE DEPARTMENT IGNITES FIRES IN THE BELLY TO RECRUIT VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS



A campaign seeking to rouse the youthful residents of New York City to join volunteer fire departments is gaining in popularity. The Fireman's Association of the State of New York has hired a Syracuse based marketing agency to make two commercials in an effort to enlist more volunteer firefighters. Whilst saying there were many benefits to being a firefighter, John D'Alessandro, FASNY Volunteer Program Coordinator acknowledged, "Yes, it does take some time, yes, it does take some training, but it is one of the most rewarding experiences you'll ever have." The campaign has been commenced to address the dwindling number of volunteer firefighters. "About ten years ago there were probably between 100 and 110,000 volunteer firefighters in New York State, now there's somewhere between 80 and 85,000," said D'Alessandro. The campaign is designed to turn around a downward trend, that is seeing smaller number men and women join volunteer fire departments. The goal is to recruit 15,000 additional volunteer firefighters in four years from the receipt of the grant. "There has been a noticeable decline" of late, says John D'Alessandro, deputy volunteer programs coordinator for FASNY in Albany. "We decided we would be proactive in addressing this before it reached crisis proportions," Mr. D'Alessandro says. "We have our work cut out for us, but we feel we're up to the task." The campaign encourages youngsters by asking them, "Is there a fire in you." So if you go exactly by the ad's dictates, next time a cop asks, "O.K., buddy, where's the fire?" you immediately, with head held high and puffed out chest reply, "Why, within me, officer." The campaign theme revives memories of ads from Gatorade that ask, "Is it in you?" — and "Fire in the belly" phrases we learnt in school, not to mention the Cole Porter lyric from "Night and Day" who speaks about "a hungry yearning burning inside of me." The campaign features two volunteer firefighters, who have volunteered their services reacting to an online video casting call. Whilst urging the viewers to "Become a volunteer firefighter today," they also attempt to refute the reasons people generally give for their disinclination towards joining volunteer fire departments. The campaign will have widespread exposure, as it is scheduled to run on television, online and in movie theaters; radio spots and various websites, including Facebook and Twitter. The campaign has a budget of \$2.1 million coming from a grant of \$4.2 million from the federal Department of Homeland Security under a program called Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response — a name that gives the program the acronym Safer. It is scheduled to run for three years. Mr. D'Alessandro says that receiving the Safer grant was the turning point and that they were using all the money for recruitment and retention activities. He says that the campaign was tested and found to be viable. "We validated a lot of things we believe we knew," Mr. D'Alessandro says, that "people say, 'I don't have the time,' 'I don't have the training' and 'It's not me; I'm not the guy running to the problem.'" So part of the program is geared to addressing these excuses or people perceived drawbacks, so "part of the campaign is broadening the understanding of what it takes" to be a volunteer firefighter, he adds. "There's a saying, 'There's a job for everyone.'" "We have people running into buildings with hoses," Mr. D'Alessandro says, "and we could also use you to bring water and food out to those fighting the fire or for cleaning the trucks, helping with fund-raising, doing the bookkeeping." "And you can gear what you do to the time you have available," he adds. The commercial addresses these concerns through actual volunteers themselves. A narrator's voice says, whilst showing Jessie Roland-Bystrak of East Aurora, N.Y., a recent college graduate, on a campus, "I never thought I could be brave enough. I'm not trained to do that kind of stuff. But I decided to take the first step." In the other commercial, with Jeff Burkhart of Oriskany, N.Y., is shown echoing similar feelings. A male narrator says, with visuals of Burkhart driving a car, "I'm not trained to do that kind of stuff. I never thought I had it in me. I didn't think I had the time. But then I took the first step." The goal is to demonstrate that "everybody's got it in them, anybody could do this," he adds, and tell would-be volunteers this: "Yes, we understand the concerns, the hurdles to overcome. On the other side is amazing things you get if you volunteer." "Just take a few minutes; go down to your local fire department, we all train once a week. You may find that those few minutes are well spent and could be a life changing moment for you," said D' Alessandro.