

Vallejo fire chief: New programs planned to increase, maintain diversity

By Irma Widjojo

POSTED: 07/01/2012 01:04:28 AM PDT

New hiring and recruiting programs planned by the Vallejo Fire Department will focus on the community, especially the younger generation.

Vallejo Fire Chief Paige Meyer said these programs include a reserve program and outreach effort through local schools.

Meyer said the existing Vallejo Fire Explorer Academy already gives exposure to young people, 14 to 21, to the duties and responsibilities of a firefighter.

But, he agrees that there should be more promotion of the fire service in local high schools.

The Vallejo Fire Department has recently partnered with Firefighter's ABC's to join its Firefighter Diversity Recruitment Council, along with 125 other fire departments across the country. The Gilroy-based company offers tools and resources for fire departments to increase diversity, as well as to reach local community members.

Russell Hayden, the company's CEO, also has a personal investment in Vallejo.

Hayden was born and raised in Vallejo, but moved away in the middle of high school. He said he was never introduced to the fire service as he was growing up.

"There's a lack of exposure in the fire services in general," Hayden said. "It starts in the government ... a lot of firefighters don't cultivate the habit to go out and encourage young men and women."

By joining the council, the fire departments can offer Firefighter's ABC's resources to local high school students.

Hayden said the high schools will have to voluntarily agree to join the program. However, Vallejo public high school students can contact the Vallejo Fire Department themselves about joining the Firefighter's ABC's online internship.

Hayden also added that it is up to the fire department to be proactive in creating a diverse workplace.

"Joining the council, and if the schools joined in, will not guarantee anything," Hayden said. "It is a very good tool, but they need to use all the tools that they can."

Hayden also stressed that the fire service should open its doors to everyone, including at-risk and under achieving youth from diverse backgrounds.

Meyer said that the future reserve program's goal is to be a continuation of the Explorer program.

Meyer added that the reserve program will be only for those at least 18, and aspire to be firefighters. The program will also reduce hiring costs when developed.

"It'll allow us to recruit people in our community with diverse backgrounds, gender and ethnicity, and mentor them," Meyer said. "It's like the Explorer program but for adults. It will focus on Vallejo first. It'll give them an opportunity to learn to become firefighters, and serve their community."

Vallejo is not the first fire department with such a program. Fairfield Fire Department started a similar reserve program in 2001, Fairfield Fire Chief Vince Webster said.

Since then, the program has provided the department with firefighters.

"It is a good way to have a pool of future full-time firefighters available," Webster said. "And we get a lot of community people."

Like Vallejo, Fairfield is also constantly trying to increase the diversity in its force.

"The area that we are now trying to target is entry level," Webster said. "Trying to get them started early and focus on the ethnically diverse areas."

Meyer said he is positive that these steps will not only make for a more diverse department, but will also strengthen its relationship with the community.

"(The programs) are in their planning process," Meyer said. "But they pave the way for us to make a difference, and we're excited about it."

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