



Abington Senior High School Recruitment Programs



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Abington Township Fire Department's Relationship with Abington Senior High School a Plus for Recruitment & Retention Efforts



Recruitment and retention are key goals for any volunteer fire department – but coming up with new ways to bring in new members and then keep them is not always easy. One way in which the Abington Township Fire Department (ATFD) has been able to do this is through a successful ongoing partnership with Abington Senior High School.

Through the ATFD's relationship with the high school, it has been able to develop and maintain a presence in the lives of the community's young people. The department has been afforded access to the student community through its involvement in a number of school-wide events. Having such access has been critical to recruitment efforts.

But the relationship between the ATFD and the high school did not develop overnight. Rather, it was something that evolved over a period of about five years. The constants have been having the right people come together at the right places and times.

How It Began

The ATFD first began working with Abington Senior High School students in 2002 when a junior volunteer firefighter decided to start a Volunteer Firefighters Club at the school as part of his senior project. High school teacher Gary Wiley, a volunteer firefighter for a neighboring community, was approached to be the adviser to this fledgling club.

The ATFD became involved when the club decided to begin providing fire prevention and safety lessons to elementary schools. To ensure that club members were providing accurate information to younger students, ATFD personnel accompanied the students on their outings. In addition, the ATFD provided input when the club became involved in two high profile projects – updating the school's emergency plan and creating emergency kits that could be used in the event of a disaster at the school.

Coordinating Events

The ATFD's participation in school events came next. One of the first events the ATFD collaborated with the Volunteer Firefighters Club on was the coordination of a mock vehicle crash, which takes place annually the week prior to the senior prom to illustrate the potential consequences of careless driving. Two other events followed, including Student Involvement Day, which is a chance for students to learn about the many clubs and extra-curricular activities available at the high school; and the 24-Hour Relay Challenge, which is a community event with an anti-drug and anti-alcohol message. At both events, the ATFD sets up "hands-on" activities for visitors to engage in, such as using a fire hose to knock a tennis ball off a traffic cone, and dressing up in firefighting gear to navigate through a dark, smoke-filled tent.

"One success led to another," said David Schramm, Fire Services Administrator for the ATFD. "Because there was an awareness about our department, it was just a natural evolution to become more involved as we went forward."

"These activities allow students to see what their peers can do as junior firefighters. In addition, young firefighters get the chance to share what they know with their peers," said Mr. Wiley. "The kids become the teachers."

One other program that has grown out of the ATFD's relationship with the high school is Service Learning Day. This annual event is held in the spring and is organized by Abington Senior High School Service Learning Facilitator Mary Rodgers.

During this event, students can sign up to spend a day with a non-profit organization, community group, or other agency that benefits the community. Those who opt to learn more about the ATFD spend a day at the department's training facility where they get to put on firefighting gear, operate hoses in a "cold" smoke-filled environment, and learn about the process of becoming a volunteer.

"For the kids who are curious, it gives them an opportunity to explore without committing," said Ms. Rodgers. "They don't have to walk into the fire station alone and introduce themselves. It's completely un-intimidating."

The first year the ATFD invited students out there was a huge turn-out. For safety reasons, the number of students was later limited to 30.

"Of the 30 who visit, usually one or two wind up deciding to become volunteers," said Jeffrey Glynn, ATFD Community Service Specialist. The ATFD also follows up with those who attend Service Learning Day to assess their interest in joining their local fire company. The fire department plans to gather feedback from students in future years by asking them to fill out the new Customer Satisfaction Survey brochures.

Why It Works

Several factors have contributed to the ATFD's success. Having the right people come together has been one of the most important.

As the Volunteer Firefighters Club adviser, Mr. Wiley said that his job is made much easier by the fact that there is someone designated within the ATFD to handle requests or questions – Mr. Glynn, who serves as a liaison between the school district and the ATFD's five fire companies.

"We've been involved for so many years that we know all the players and can, therefore, help direct the school district when it comes to resources – whether it's finding the right person to talk to about a project or arranging for one of the companies to come out and participate in an event," said Mr. Glynn.

Similarly, when the ATFD wants to explore ways in which it can reach out to students, the department can rely on Mr. Wiley and Ms. Rodgers for guidance and support.

"We have become more than speakers that kids see once a year to learn about fire safety or volunteering for the fire department," said Mr. Schramm. "The secret to this whole thing has been having staff members who are committed to having programs on site and who have the ability to interact with students on a daily basis."

Another plus is that Mr. Wiley is a volunteer firefighter as well as an instructor who students respect and admire.

"To have a teacher on board who is behind the group, who's fully invested is awesome," said Ms. Rodgers.

Along with Mr. Wiley, the ATFD members who have served as student mentors have done so in a spirit of partnership, treating the young people as equals and giving them a sense of ownership over the projects they were involved in.

"When students are looked at as partners, it changes everything," Ms. Rodgers said.

Several high-profile projects allowed the students to feel they were doing something important for the school and community. The following projects resulted in changes in the students' environment and community and were also key to raising interest in the group and in the ATFD:

- Improving the school's emergency plan
- Creating emergency kits
- Developing refrigerator magnets listing emergency numbers

"They felt it was worth it to stay after school if they were walking out of a club meeting with a sense of accomplishment," said Mr. Wiley. "It's about more than fire safety. It's about looking at the community and its needs and what we can do to make it a safer place to live."

The high-profile projects also helped heighten the club's visibility among students and demonstrated that the club was not just about fighting fires. Ms. Rodgers noted that after the projects were completed, the Volunteer Firefighters Club became a "program of attraction" as other students saw what the club was able to accomplish. Those who might not have otherwise been interested in the club began to see it in a different light.

"The kids gained a certain respectability and were affirmed as part of the team here," said Ms. Rodgers. "They crossed the line from being just students and became part of the (disaster preparedness or emergency action) team with adults and were treated professionally."

Another ingredient to the success of the partnership has been the group's ability to keep goals manageable. Ms. Rodgers pointed out that when the Volunteer Firefighters Club helped determine what would go in the emergency kits at the school, it was a project that was relatively simple to complete.

"The adults helped set the goals and then the students organized activities to help reach those goals," she said. "You have to keep students engaged. You can't just talk about what you want to do – you have to have action."

"Once the goals are reached, a sense of momentum is established, and that's why it's important to keep going," added Mr. Wiley. "You can't let too much time go by without a specific goal or objective, or students start to lose interest."

Successful Formula

The combination of dedicated adults, motivated students and public events that heightened awareness of the club and the ATFD have made the relationship between the fire department and the high school a mutually beneficial one that will hopefully last for years to come.

"Both Mr. Wiley and Ms. Rodgers are familiar with the operation of the school and have opportunities to interact with students. They serve as resources to students who are looking for more information," said Mr. Schramm. "People with their experience, knowledge, and enthusiasm are critical to the foundation upon which a successful partnership can be built."



Mock Crash



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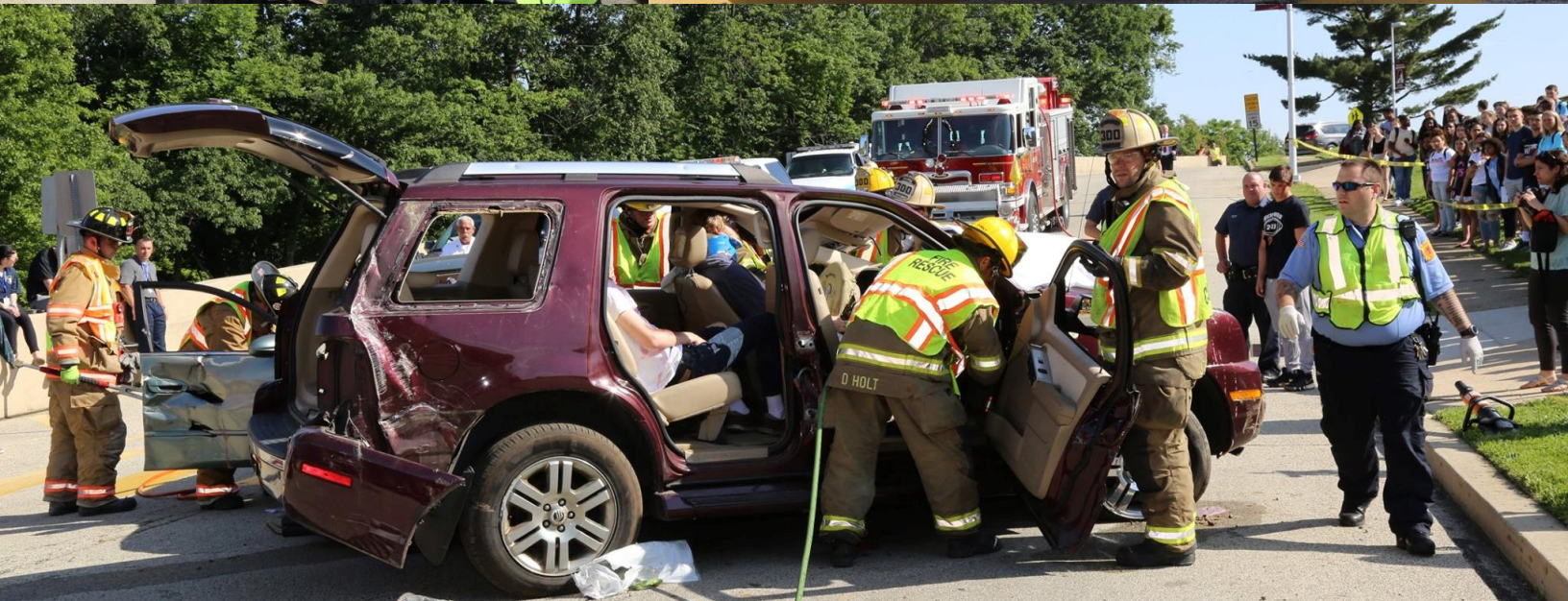


A Mock Crash Teaches Real Lessons to Abington Senior High School Students



ATFD firefighters and other first responders worked with Abington Senior High School students and teachers in June to simulate the very real dangers of driving while distracted or under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The event is timed to raise awareness before prom.

The “victims” of this accident were acting. No cars wrecked on campus that day. The injuries and blood were the result of acting and makeup. But this was as close to the real thing as anyone wanted to get.





Service Learning Day



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Abington Township Fire Department (ATFD) Teaches Students the Importance of Firefighting, Volunteerism Through Hands-On Experience



ATFD's Annual Service Learning Day allowed Abington Senior High School students to see what it is like to be a first responder.

The Abington Township Fire Department (ATFD) gives Abington Senior High School students the opportunity to play the role of a volunteer firefighter through insightful and informative demonstrations during its annual Service Learning Day program. The most recent Service Learning Day was held June 3, 2016.

The event is aimed at teaching students the importance of community involvement. It also provides a chance for the ATFD to recruit young people who will help continue the legacy of the five volunteer fire companies that comprise the ATFD (Abington, McKinley, Weldon, Edge Hill and Roslyn).

The students who visited the ATFD's training facility this year learned what the five volunteer fire companies do for the community. They had the opportunity to use fire extinguishers to put out controlled fires. Students suited up with helmets, boots, jackets and other firefighting gear before heading into the department's training facility that was filled with non-toxic smoke.

Abington Senior High School teacher Chris O'Donnell said Service Learning Day is a chance for students to get out of the classroom and into the community to complete hands-on activities that they can apply in the real world. As an ATFD volunteer, students will learn important skills, including discipline, teamwork and determination.

"Sometimes, there is the feeling that 'I'm just a high school student, what can I do?,' and then you see kids who say, 'I am a high school student, look what I am doing.' Those are the students who are making a difference right here in Abington," O'Donnell added.

Year after year, students always report that Service Learning Day gives them a better understanding of what firefighters do to protect those in need. Some learn something about themselves as well.

ATFD Community Service Specialist Jeffrey Glynn explained that the goal of Service Learning Day is to demonstrate to students the role of volunteers and how they can get involved with the ATFD.

"If we are able to spark the interest of a few students and encourage them to volunteer, we have been successful," Glynn added.

Service Learning Day





Student Government Day



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Abington Senior High School's Student Government Day Brings Seniors to ATFD Training Center



Abington Senior High School students visited the Abington Township Fire Department (ATFD) Training Facility on the annual Student Government Day tour in May.

Roslyn Fire Company firefighter and fire instructor Jeff Glynn talked to the visitors, all seniors, about the history and operations of ATFD and its five fire companies. Glynn then invited them to climb through the Special Operations Training Prop that allows firefighters to practice rescues from confined or collapsed spaces. McKinley Fire Company Chief Chris Bors and Firefighter Rick Gerhard showed them specialized fire apparatus, tools, and gear. And Abington Fire Company Firefighter Robert Woodard walked them through the live-fire burn building – a concrete structure that allows firefighters to practice fire-suppression techniques. At the final stop on the tour, Abington Township Fire Marshal Ken Clark described for the students the highly technical tools on the Montgomery County Special Service HazMat truck and the various functions this equipment provides.

Student Government Day is designed to show students studying government how various departments of their township function by seeing facilities first hand and talking to the people who work there. At the ATFD, some students were surprised to learn that fire and rescue service in their township is provided by 220 volunteers.

Woodard, the Abington Fire Company firefighter, joined the fire department when he was sixteen. The ATFD has a junior firefighter program that allows teens to get involved and prepare for a full membership at age eighteen. Now twenty-six, and a fifth-generation firefighter, Woodard shared two hopes for Student Government Day just before the students arrived.

He definitely got his first hope – that any students who didn't realize ATFD was an all-volunteer operation would leave knowing, "Every time someone calls 911, firefighters leave their jobs, leave their families, leave whatever they are doing to answer that call for help," he said.

Woodard may have also realized his second wish that one or more of the students would be inspired to volunteer

Student Government Day

