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Recruitment campaign nets hundreds of new Chester County firefighters

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Paul Mattes has joined the ranks as a new firefighter and EMT. He is a Glenmoore resident.
SUBMITTED PHOTO

GLENMOORE — A three-year, grant-funded effort to recruit volunteer firefighters for Chester County's 45 fire companies and 32 ambulance companies yielded over 300 prospective new volunteer submissions.

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Of those who responded are now volunteer firefighters or EMTs, while others are still in the process, said Neil Vaughn, Past President for the Chester County Fire Chiefs Association, which received a $381,000 FEMA grant to get out the message that more volunteers are urgently needed.

The association's comprehensive campaign, which came at no cost to Chester County taxpayers, included direct mail, social media, television commercials, social media, yard signs, community events, news stories, and the www.helpfightfire.com website. All carried the elemental message that became the effort's slogan: Volunteer Today. Chester County Lives Depend On It. "We were able to get the message out, and now new volunteers are helping their neighbors across the county," Vaughn said.

Among those now answering the call: Glenmoore resident Paul Mattes.

Mattes had always wanted to help his neighbors and long believed becoming a volunteer firefighter was the best way he could that.

A Google sales executive, husband to Margie and dad to daughters Taylor and Haley, Mattes had promised himself for years that he would sign up just as soon as his life slowed down. Then one day he had a realization: His very busy life was not ever slowing down. "I decided I just needed to do it anyway," he said.

On a January evening in 2018, he walked into the Ludwigs Corner Fire Company and has never looked back.

"The thing that I love is the teamwork and the people that I get to volunteer with," Mattes said. "We are a 100 percent volunteer organization. Everyone is giving of their time and energy to do this."

He also loves the huge variety of the ways he helps people with this one volunteer profession. "It's so much more than just pointing a hose at a fire," he said. Mattes, who is 56, has worked on building fires, motor vehicle accidents and, as an EMT, assisted numerous sick and injured people. He's investigated carbon monoxide levels. His company did actually get a cat down from a roof, and he's helped get a dog up from out of a sewer pipe.

"Outside of my family, it's been the most rewarding thing I've ever done. It's incredibly fulfilling, exciting, and exhilarating," he said. "I can't believe I get to do this, quite honestly."

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Ludwigs Corner and Chester County's other 44 volunteer fire and EMS companies need many more people like Mattes to volunteer, said Vaughn, the Chester County Fire Chiefs Association's Past President.

Like the vast majority of Pennsylvania counties, Chester County relies largely on volunteer firefighters to protect its residents. But the volunteer roles in Pennsylvania have dropped precipitously since the 1970s. The essential work falls on fewer and fewer people. The recruitment campaign has been successful, but Chester County fire companies cannot rest on this success.

"We are always going to need volunteers," Vaughn said. The need for volunteers in all roles is also great, Vaughn said. People who take on administrative work, for example, are greatly appreciated, because that allows others to focus solely on firefighting , EMS or other emergency response facets.

Absolutely no experience or prior knowledge of firefighting or emergency medical response is required, Vaughn stressed – fire companies provide training.

That's another thing Mattes loves. "I never stop learning, and to be a really good firefighter, you have to keep learning," he said.

One of the most surprising lessons Mattes has learned is how easy it's been to fit firefighting into his busy life, especially once fire school is finished.

No one is expected to respond to every emergency, he notes. Firefighters and EMTs go on vacation. They go to family events.

"We have drills one evening a week," he said. "I just watch a little less TV."

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