



A Publication of South Whatcom Fire Authority

Serving the communities of Sudden Valley • Geneva • Yew Street Road • Lake Samish • Chuckanut

Seasonal Safety

- Turn off all light strings and decorations before leaving home or going to bed.
- Choose decorations that are flame resistant or flame retardant.
- More than one-third of home decoration fires are started by candles. Blow out lit candles when you leave the room or go to bed.

SOUTH WHATCOM FIRE AUTHORITY

Administrative Office:
7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Monday-Friday
2050 Lake Whatcom
Boulevard
360-676-8080
Website: swrfa.org

MISSION STATEMENT

Dedicated to maintaining a state of readiness to protect our communities through provisions of effective and efficient fire and emergency life safety services.

More Women Joining the Ranks of SWFA

By Amy Anderson



Nicole Rojas, Patty McDermott, Amy Anderson, Sarah Morell (top), Annie Leete (bottom), Bianca Benavides, Jen Squire and Whitney Olson

As a woman recently accepted into the South Whatcom Fire Authority (SWFA), I find that the culture here is a positive one that embraces contributions of a diverse work force. Nationally, the fire service continues to face a significant gender gap. Firefighters in the United States number 1.1 million, but only 7% are women, according to the National Fire Protection Association.

SWFA currently has 16% female firefighters and emergency medical technicians in career, part-time and volunteer roles. What is this organization doing differently to have double the national average of female presence on its front line?

Fire Chief Rod Topel says it's the culture of South Whatcom Fire Authority that differs from its counterparts in the fire service.

"We are better equipped culturally to accept female firefighters," Topel said. "We have an organization that's prepared to allow people to thrive. I know there are other organizations that bring in females. Sometimes, I think they leave because they don't receive the internal support."

Despite more women serving in the fire service in recent years, growth and inclusion of women in the ranks has been extremely slow and lags behind the growth of women in other male-dominated fields. The long-time male-dominated culture of the fire service may lead to barriers for the success of women in the fire service. Male firefighters with negative attitudes toward women being in the fire service can be a barrier for

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A Message from Fire Chief Rod Topel: Looking Ahead to the New Year



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Fire Chief Rod Topel

As the year winds down, we at the South Whatcom Fire Authority (SWFA) are preparing for 2021, and, similar to the general population, we are excited to be finishing 2020 and moving forward to a new year with fresh potential and opportunity. It has been a challenging year adapting to the requirements placed on us in response to the pandemic, but through that adversity I was able to witness the resilience of our firefighters and support personnel. I am very proud of our committed staff of career and volunteer members for their unwavering desire to operate our organization at the professional level for which we have come to be recognized. They continue to show up both prepared and positively engaged to complete the work we need accomplished. Their consistency deserves my gratitude, and I am sharing this publicly to highlight how special I find each person within our department.

As next year peeks over the horizon, we are continuing our priorities to maintain a consistent and credible staffed response. We continue to partner with our adjacent agencies to assist us when we experience concurrent alarms or staffing shortages. I recommended, and it was approved, to hire more career members this past October to bring a total of career

(full-time) staff to 10 shift-dedicated personnel, excluding executive staff officers and our maintenance captain position. What does that translate to? This equals just two to three career staff members working a 24-hour shift on any day to staff a minimum of two stations, requiring six total persons. It is easy to see that our volunteer program is still vitally necessary to maintain our staffing and response.

While our volunteer program continues to be one of the most competitive and sought after within the county, we also have become one of the best programs for placing our volunteers into full-time career jobs. This success creates continued turnover, which has necessitated review of the career-volunteer proportions needed to reach that desired consistent response. I have recommended a long-term staffing model that would increase full-time staffing positions to be closer to 50% of our required staffing on any given day, rather than our current 33%. This recommendation cannot be implemented until a long-term secured funding solution is agreed to and presented to you, our citizens. Our Commission is currently working on understanding what that yet may look like.

Our elected board of fire commissioners recently passed the 2021 budget at its November meeting, which continues funding of the existing career staff members as well as an additional career staff member that will be hired March 1. The 2021 budget does not contain new initiatives, nor does it cut any program or service level goals. The most significant increases to the budget remain the hiring of additional staff and costs associated with regulatory requirements such as our biennial audit and 2021 elections.

The anticipation is that 2021 will be a better and more productive year for us, and we will hope to see many of you at community events once again. I am hopeful we will resume hosting public events such as our popular pancake feeds. Our organization and firefighters miss our opportunity to be a host and show how welcome our community is coming into our home just as those who need us welcome us to enter theirs. It is with this renewed hope that I wish all a very healthy and safe holiday season and a gratifying new year ahead.



More Women Joining the Ranks of SWFA *continued...*

women joining a department and create difficulty in developing a positive work culture.

My personal experience leads me to believe that South Whatcom Fire Authority has evolved and broken through these barriers. Women are becoming less afraid to apply to the fire service, and the women who are applying have the necessary attributes to make it through the hiring process and move on to a career in the fire service.

Research has found that male firefighters often viewed their female colleagues as more skilled at de-escalating tense situations, calming emergency medical patients and assessing on-the-job risks, said Jennifer Taylor, director of the Center for Firefighter Injury Research and Safety Trends at Drexel University's Dornsife School of Public Health. All in all, having women join the fire department is positive change. Chief Topel agrees. He believes that women have a greater ability to bring calmness inside the stations.

Many who join the ranks as a volunteer firefighter (both women and men) at South Whatcom Fire Authority do so to achieve a career within that field. A volunteer applicant goes through a formal hiring process similar to a career firefighter.

The applicant must first pass a written exam demonstrating the capacity to learn and retain the necessary knowledge needed to become a firefighter and an emergency medical technician (EMT).

The next step in the application process is a physical abilities test. The applicant is required to have the physical capability of performing the tasks asked of a firefighter. This is a competitive hiring process. The applicant is interviewed and scored by a panel of SWFA fire department members.

Successful applicants undergo approximately 400 hours training in fire and emergency response. Chief Topel believes that women from SWFA have a faster career track to department jobs.

"They already have themselves together when they get here," he says. "It doesn't take them long to get hired by a career department."

Full-time firefighter Whitney Olson joined SWFA four years ago as a volunteer. She holds an acting officer role and is highly respected amongst her peers. She was one of two active female firefighters when she was hired by SWFA in 2016.

"I feel supported and encouraged by Chief Topel," Olson says. "He truly wants us all to succeed. The department is training focused and the atmosphere is always supportive."

Olson is elated to see a recent shift in the number of females being hired by SWFA. Several times this year women have composed an entire engine company and ambulance crew.

"I was honored to be on the first all-women engine crew earlier this year," adds Jen Squire. "We love our brothers, but we do have a lot of fun on our 'girl shifts.' I don't think I have ever seen Chief Topel smile as much as he did all day long that day!"

Olson and Squire both say they have heard positive feedback from patients and bystanders when a female crew responds to a call.

The latest SWFA recruitment class that started in August continues the trend with five females out of a total of 15 new members who are joining the department.

The culture at South Whatcom Fire Authority provides a supportive atmosphere for all individuals to flourish in the fire service.

"I am so proud to be a member of this department, and grateful that this department strives to improve and sets the goal of excellence, which includes its openness with improving its membership of females," says Patty McDermott. "Each member brings in their own strengths, and with men and women the diversity of strengths is greater, creating an overall stronger team."

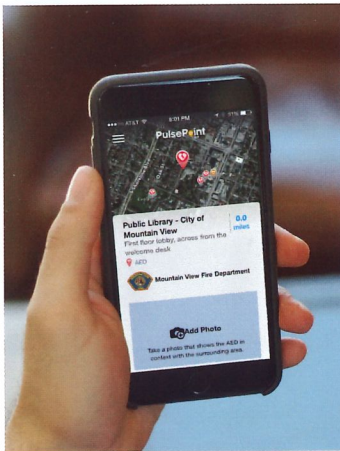




Be Visible

HELP US FIND YOU!

Save valuable time when first responders are coming to assist you. House numbers should be at least 4" tall, easily visible, and a contrasting color to your residence. Turn on your outside lights if it is dusk or dark.



Help save a life with PulsePoint

SWFA Banquet Honors Members Via Livestream

Typically, in normal years, the Fire Authority recognizes years of service and achievement in March with a banquet honoring its members. As we all know, this was not a typical year for large social gatherings. After waiting multiple months in hopes of being able to hold a large gathering, SWFA finally came to realize that would not happen. On Sept. 11, SWFA held a virtual awards ceremony to honor its members. The awards ceremony was attended by on-duty crews that were required to be socially distanced and could momentarily take their masks off for pictures and live streamed and recorded for members to watch remotely.



40 Years of Service: Jim Morell



Chief's Company Award: Jen Squire

Awards were provided for years of service in which the most notable recognition was for Jim Morell's 40 years of service. We also recognized Adam Lent as the 2019 Firefighter of the Year, an award that is peer voted; Gabe Travers received an award for outstanding civic engagement; and Nicole Rojas and Jen Squire received recognition from the chiefs as members of the 2019 Chief's Company.

Not pictured but receiving awards of note were Pete Stelling Rookie of the year; Lt. Nick Ackerman and Driver/Engineer Andrew Miller as members of the Chiefs' Company award recipients.



Firefighter of the Year: Adam Lent



Outstanding Civic Engagement: Gabe Travers



Chief's Company Award: Nicole Rojas

PulsePoint is an app that can be downloaded onto your phone and will alert you when an individual needs CPR as well as the closest AED unit.

How it works:

Using your phone's GPS, it alerts those who sign up when a request for CPR is made to 911, the location of the closest AED, and the location of the patient. It is important to note that it only releases information for incidents that are located in a publicly accessible location or business. It does not provide information to private residences.

If you are trained in CPR, please consider downloading the PulsePoint app.

Visit www.pulsepoint.org/pulsepoint-aed to learn more.



Two New Career Firefighters Joins SWFA's Ranks

Two new full-time firefighters joined the Fire Authority on Oct. 1, Tyler Hanon (pictured left) and Cameron McVicker (pictured right). Hanon was a part-time firefighter employee with SWFA, and McVicker was a volunteer firefighter with SWFA prior to hire.



WELCOME NEW RECRUITS!



(L-R) Nick Shirkey, Colin Ridgley, Sean Hecker, Patrick Spillsbury, Oscar Sigl, Amy Anderson, Hana Beaman, Caitrin McKenna, Patricia McDermott, Elizabeth Bronder, Ian Travitzky



NEW FIRE AUTHORITY WEBSITE LAUNCHES

We are pleased to have launched a new website to better serve the citizens within the South Whatcom Fire Authority. The website, found at swrfa.org, features regularly updated announcements, an events calendar and pages devoted to hiring information for careers or volunteering with SWFA. Residents of the fire district can also reserve meeting rooms or sign up for CPR classes via an online registration form. (Please note, these services are suspended for the time being due to Covid regulations.) The public can also start the records request process online via the website.



When the Fire Authority first formed in 2009, the original website was created by SWFA staff members using open source platforms. While meeting the original need, the website quickly proved it was not able to keep up with the growth of the organization in both function and public accessibility.

In April of this year, the SWFA solicited for a request for qualifications from more than 30 Whatcom County website design firms. Three firms returned the RFQ and the Commission awarded the contract work to local business Accent 45, accent45.com, and its principal owner Michelle Andreas.

We want to thank Michelle for her work building the new website to make it more functional for the Fire Authority as well as the community we serve.

We encourage you to visit the new website at swrfa.org.

SWFA connects with the community via virtual Halloween events

The SWFA firefighters value and thrive on community interactions and events. In the course of a typical year, firefighters at SWFA hold pancake feeds in Geneva and Sudden Valley, participate in the Chuckanut Chili cook off, and host an amazingly popular haunted path on Halloween.

That's the typical year; this year has been anything but typical due to the pandemic. In efforts to adapt and reengage with the communities we serve, the SWFA firefighters association offered two community interactive events, a scavenger hunt and a pumpkin carving contest.

Hannah Egland, a Sudden Valley resident, had this to say about the scavenger hunt: "My boys and I had a lot of fun following all the clues. It gave us an opportunity to explore areas of Sudden Valley we hadn't yet discovered and learn cool tidbits about our community. We're looking forward to going back to some of the trails to explore some more. And, of course, the boys enjoyed the goody bag we picked up at the fire station after completing the hunt."

Gabe Travers, who helped organize the events, said "We're excited to be able to have provided some fun alternatives for Halloween activities, and we are looking forward to creative ideas as we keep trucking along through these challenging times."





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- SWFA Virtually Connects with the Community for Halloween

And more!



South Whatcom Fire Authority
2050 Lake Whatcom Blvd
Bellingham, WA 98229

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From left: Sarah, Josh and Jim Morell have a combined 85 years of service to the South Whatcom Fire Authority. Jim retired from the fire service this year.

Fire Service Family

The Morell family, Jim, Josh and Sarah, has a combined 85 years of service to our fire department dating back to Whatcom Fire District 2. Jim Morell began volunteering with WCFD 2, Geneva Station, in January 1980. He retired both as a 40-year firefighter/paramedic with the City of Bellingham and a volunteer for SWFA this year. His son Josh began volunteering in 1996 and Josh's wife Sarah has been volunteering since 2001.

"If you have ever had Jim as a medic or have learned from him, you would know that he truly loved his job and loved teaching others to do their job well in the fire service," Sarah Morell said. "We have all loved serving our community through the years."



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For more information or to make comments, email info@swrfa.org or call the office at 360-676-8080.