

Establishing a Youth Program

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Serving the community and helping others is why many volunteer with emergency service organizations. There is nothing more rewarding than being involved in the local fire department or EMS organization; from teaching fire prevention to saving a life, there is a role for everyone – even for young people! Youth programs within emergency services promote character education and leadership as well as create a foundation for the future of the organization. If your organization has considered forming a youth program, or even if you already have active enrollment, this article will provide the resources needed to begin program development appropriately.

First, ensure that you and your organization know and understand all applicable federal, state, and local codes and ordinances with regard to child labor and/or education. Rules and regulations vary greatly from state to state and it goes without saying that the program must follow the laws in your state and locale explicitly. (*For information pertinent to your state labor laws visit, http://www.dol.gov/esa/contacts/state_of.htm*) From this standpoint, begin to develop the By-Laws of the program. The By-Laws should also include the number of adult leaders needed to operate the program as well as the maximum number of youth participants to be accepted in to the program at any one time. Also establish guidelines for the maximum amount of time per week a young person may volunteer both during the school year and during vacations or breaks. (*For your state education department visit <http://www.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/index.html?src=gu>*).

Secondly, contact your insurance agent and inform them of the program so that they can determine if the organizations current policy coverage is adequate. It is *imperative* that the organization provide some type of Accident & Health policy to protect the youth members. Please check your individual state's laws to see to what extent you may provide such coverage. That being said, in order to reduce the probability of a loss, we recommend that youth members be prohibited from performing the following tasks:

- Driving FD or EMS Vehicles or Ambulances
- Riding on FD Vehicles or Ambulances which are using lights and sirens
- Operating hydraulic equipment
- Entering a burning building
- Entering any environment which is IDLH (*inherent danger to life and/or health*)
- Performing ventilation duties on a burning building
- Operating near electrical equipment exposures
- Operating cutting tools including saws and acetylene cutting units
- Operating pumps of any fire vehicle while that vehicle is operating at an incident
- Ascending any ladder in excess of 24 feet in height
- Presence at station or incident scene during school hours or after 9:30 PM on an evening before a school day.
- Substituting for trained personnel
- Operating anywhere within a collapse zone of a building
- Operating without adequate supervision

Next, the program should require written approval by a parent or guardian. Approval should declare that the parents are aware of the inherent dangers and risks involved with the organizations activities and that youth membership may be terminated at any time the parent withdraws approval. Once permission has been granted, all youth members should receive a program orientation and be issued personal protective equipment appropriate for their activity level. *For assistance with parental permission forms, contact ESIP's Loss Control Department at 1-800-822-3747 ext. 176.*

Lastly, the youth members should only operate as a group with adequate and appropriate leadership. Neither training nor any other function of the group should ever be done individually.

Another option to fire departments and EMS organizations that wish to implement a youth program is to establish an Explorer Post in association with the Boy Scouts of America (BSA). The Explorer program follows all rules and regulations associated with BSA. Duties of the youth members must be approved by the local Boy Scout Council. In order to establish an Explorer Program, the fire department must contact the BSA local council and open a dialogue with them. The fire department must agree to recruit adult volunteer leaders, develop a list of program ideas that include career, citizenship, social, service, outdoor, and fitness activities as well as provide meeting facilities. The youth group would also be provided insurance coverage through the local Learning for Life (LFL) office. *(For more information and ideas regarding Explorer programs, visit <http://www.learning-for-life.org/exploring/fire/index.html>)*

Youth programs allow young people a first hand opportunity to provide voluntary assistance to their community. Developing a well managed, structured program will teach the spiritual rewards associated with volunteerism and enhance your organizations recruiting efforts. Investing in young people is yet one more way emergency services can establish a positive role within the communities in which they serve.