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Fire Department launches recruitment for volunteer public educator team

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LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

Shelburne and District Fire Department is launching a new Volunteer Public Fire and Life Safety Educator program to expand community outreach while easing the growing demands on its frontline firefighters.

Chief Dave Pratt said that the initiative will create a dedicated team of trained volunteers whose primary role is to deliver fire and life safety education at community events, schools, and local gatherings, to better reach and communicate directly with the community they serve.

?We want to create a public education team,? he said. ?We can train them so that they don't need any pre knowledge. They'll be able to talk about smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms, and you know anything about the fire department. I think that will give us more opportunities to be out in the community.?

These volunteers will focus on general fire department information and safety practices. They will work with all ages, from children to seniors.

Currently, public education is handled by firefighters who also respond to emergencies. With calls and training demands increasing, staff are finding it harder to consistently fulfill requests for tours, presentations, and event appearances.

?We are a paid per-call, volunteer department, so obviously we train, and we respond to emergencies, and we try to facilitate any requests for public education or media,? Pratt said. ?With all the demands on staff, it's my personal opinion that it's becoming increasingly more and more difficult to provide the hours that we're asking of our staff.?

The new team is designed to reduce that burden, ensuring education continues even when crews are dispatched to emergencies.

Recent events, such as a ?touch-a-truck? day where trucks had to leave midway for a call, have highlighted the need for a group that can stay on site and continue engaging with the public.

The model is based on a similar program in Niagara-on-the-Lake, where a 10-member team each commits about 40 hours per year.

?Niagara on the Lake started the same idea in the fall of 2024, and after talking to their chief, they've had much success,? Pratt said. ?They take their team, and as the events come, they put it out to the group, and then fill the holes as necessary, with the goal that everybody gets to actively participate.?

That structure has been considered successful enough that Shelburne is adopting it directly: a target of 10 volunteers, each contributing roughly 40 hours annually, balancing meaningful involvement with flexibility for family and work.

Training for the role is substantial but structured.

Volunteers will be asked to complete a 30-hour online course through the Office of the Fire Marshal to achieve NFPA certification as a Public Fire and Life Safety Educator.

That will be followed by in-person sessions at the fire hall, covering the department's operations, service area, and hands-on work with smoke and CO alarms, along with common questions that arise during presentations.

Pratt said that almost everyone has been impacted by tragedy, and a role like this can be an opportunity to make a direct impact on community safety.

?I think everybody has been touched by some type of tragedy in their lives,? he said. ?If you get into this program, it will not only give you the knowledge, but you'll be able to then teach the skills and abilities of fire safety. Then, if you're able to change somebody's behaviour and make everything safer, then you've achieved the ultimate goal of the program.?

The department currently handles two to three education events a month, with activity peaking around Fire Prevention Week in October, Emergency Preparedness Week, and the local fair.

With the new team, the goal is to double or triple that presence, including more proactive school visits across Shelburne and the surrounding municipalities it serves.

Applications are open until May 31, with the department aiming to select and train the team over the summer so volunteers can be active by Labour Day and this fall's open house and fair.

To apply, submit a resume and cover letter to sdfd@shelburne.ca or mail to the Shelburne and District Fire Department, 114 O'Flynn Street, Shelburne.