

# Fire districts are looking for a few good volunteers

By ARLA SHEPHARD  
MASON COUNTY LIFE

North Mason Regional Fire Authority and other local fire districts are looking for people interested in embarking on a new career path.

Through funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response grant, or SAFER, North Mason Regional Fire has been training individuals to become volunteer firefighters and emergency responders.

Since the four-year \$435,100 grant was approved in 2013, the fire authority has shepherded 23 volunteers through the extensive process, placing them at districts throughout Mason County.

Now, North Mason Regional Fire Authority is seeking at least 15 more students this year and another 15 students next year to undergo the training.

"We're approaching people who are looking for a new technical career or people who want to help their neighbors," said Tina Miller, the fire authority's SAFER volunteer coordinator. "The goal is to get more people trained and affect response times in Mason County."

Volunteering through the SAFER program requires a substantial time commitment and dedication, including four months of training through the county's fire recruit academy, additional training and an EMT class that consists of at least 160 hours of work.

In addition to in-class EMT time, volunteers must also take CPR and Basic Life Skills training and an incident management online training course, as well as complete practical assignments outside of class time.

Once classes are complete, a volunteer must then pass national and state registration exams.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF NORTH MASON REGIONAL FIRE AUTHORITY  
North Mason Regional Fire Authority community volunteer Davin Miller is undergoing extrication training at Belfair Auto Wrecking Yard. The fire authority is looking for more volunteers for fire districts throughout Mason County.

The SAFER grant pays for a volunteer's bunker gear, uniforms and schooling at the recruit academy and EMT school.

After training is complete, volunteers then receive a monthly stipend, usually between \$200 and \$500, to complete a student resident volunteer program at a local fire district.

Currently, 12 SAFER

volunteers are in the program at North Mason, seven volunteer at Mason County Fire District No. 3 in Grapeview, three volunteer at District No. 11 in Shelton and one volunteers at District No. 4 in the Arcadia area of Shelton.

Miller coordinates the SAFER program in all of those districts, as well as Union's District No. 6.



North Mason Regional Fire Authority SAFER volunteer Ashlee Jones, left, practices putting on gear with Central Mason Fire & EMS volunteer Olivia Espinoza during recruit academy at Station 41 in Shelton.

"All of these districts have similar needs that we have," she said. "The majority of our SAFER volunteers have gone through EMT school and completed firefighter training."

Full-time employment opportunities are dependent on each district and station, and SAFER volunteers are not guaranteed employment after their program.

However, at North Mason, more than half of all career firefighters and paramedics have been hired from the fire authority's student resident volunteer program.

"The program allows volunteers to get the networking they need and to get the fundamentals down," Miller said. "The opportunity has to open up here, but there are tons of opportunities in Seattle, Silverdale and other places. In Mason County, they get more hands-on experience during training than in other counties because we're smaller here."

After training, volun-

teers receive EMT and firefighting certification, which can land them jobs with private ambulance companies, hospitals and others in the field, Miller added.

"People who apply should be wanting to help out their community because they care, but the bonus is they get the technical skills," she said. "I would compare it to a technical school, because it is approximately a two-year program."

At one point, Miller coordinated 36 SAFER volunteers, but the fire authority has struggled to retain its volunteers.

"The problem we're continuing to face is that life happens," she said. "Someone gets involved in the process and they decide to move or something along those lines happens. We're hoping we put the word

out to the community that these are skills they learn that can stay with them."

The current volunteers range anywhere from recent high school graduates to middle-aged people in search of a new career path, Miller said.

The fire authority is working harder to prepare individuals for the training, to ensure that more volunteers stick through the whole process.

"A lot of times when people come in they have no clue of what the situation is like or no clue of what the training is like," Miller said. "We want to give them more of an idea. Some people learn they don't like studying or can't work in a team. Strong team-building skills are important."

The minimum requirements to apply for the SAFER program are that applicants must be at least 18 years old, have a high school diploma or GED, be a U.S. citizen or have a work visa, possess a valid driver's license and pass a background check, physical exam and functional capacity test.

"This is a really great opportunity for those looking to challenge themselves academically and physically while helping others," Miller said.

For more information, visit [www.northmasonrfa.com](http://www.northmasonrfa.com) or call 275-6711. ■

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