



Kragt, D. (2019). [\*Career firefighters' transition into retirement: A mixed methods study at the South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service\*](#). Business School, University of Western Australia: Perth, Western Australia

## Background

This is the third of three reports based on a study of the challenges career firefighters' face in relation to retirement:

- The first report provided a review of an academic and practitioner literature on retirement.
- The second report details the findings of a mixed methods study into firefighters' retirement at the Department of Fire and Emergency Services in Western Australia.
- The third report (summarises below) provides recs for addressing retirement issues based on an analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Funding from South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service (SA MFS) and the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) in Western Australia.

## Overview of findings

Key finds:

- Firefighters at SA MFS feel they retire too late due to lack of retirement planning and preparation, particularly in financial and social domains.
- Paradox that retirement is seen as both good and desirable, and something to avoid and fear.
- Disconnect between ideas about retirement and experiences of actual retirement.
- A shift in identity is a generational challenge. Specifically, the role of a firefighter was found to be central to the self-definition of retirees, but pre-retirees have identities based on activities outside of the job and so, are not solely tethered to their role as a firefighter.
- A shift in reasons for retirement - Pre-retirees frequently discussed lack of job satisfaction as a factor that would prompt their retirement. This is expected to be a future trend, more pronounced in the younger generations
- Retired firefighters experience feelings of being rejected after having dedicated their life to the service. Many struggled with social isolation and a diminishing sense of self-worth after retirement, which may lead to mental health issues.
- Overall, study findings suggest that retirement involves a complex web of interconnected issues, where unaddressed challenges in one life domain will have a detrimental effect on other domains.

## Recommendations

Encourage timely retirement planning:



Firefighters feel they delay their retirement and retire in poor physical health which impacts health and wellbeing in retirement. Need to address underlying factors, fear and unrealistic expectations of retirement, and lack of planning and preparation.

Timely retirement planning would direct attention to retirement-related information and resources, which would prompt thinking about retirement. Not enough info on financial *and non-financial* aspects of retirement.

Need different info variety of communication channels, such as retirement seminars, newsletters and a retirement section on the internal employee portal.

Start early and stage info, participants agreed that 45 years was an appropriate age to start planning and preparing for one's retirement. Information should target firefighters at different career stages.

#### Involvement of retired firefighters

Ideas from participants for continuing contact

- Establish a firefighters' museum and a restoration workshop and involve retirees as volunteers (successful examples of such museums in different states).
- Involve retirees in the process of retirement planning and preparation among current employees. Research suggests that role modelling through sharing of personal examples and stories can encourage retirement planning and lead to better retirement outcomes.
- Study participants felt their agency should consider facilitating a formal mentoring network for retired firefighters and those nearing retirement. Retired firefighters could be invited to share their experience in the retirement workshops or via a video recording. Retirees could also become involved in broader support roles, such as peer supporters with appropriate mental health training.

Need to give info and resources (such as Employee Assistance Program) to retired firefighters, at least in the initial 2-year post retirement period. Contact with retirees should be maintained to ensure their retirement transition has been successful. Welfare check-ins may be used to identify those who may be struggling with mental illnesses or concerns, family breakdowns or social isolation.

#### Institute a retirement (wellness) officer position

A 'retirement wellness officer' would collate, publish and disseminate information about retirement among currently employed firefighters, including clarifying organisational retirement policies and process or seeking financial planning advice. Also they would act as a point of contact for retirees of the agency, responding to their requests for assistance, as well as organising retirement events, maintaining a retirees' database and coordinating other activities, such as the firefighters' museum and workshop, or social walking/cycling groups.

#### Offer gradual retirement pathways



A gradual reduction of work hours or moving into non-operational roles would help to reduce the abruptness of retirement and prepare firefighters for retirement.

The transition into non-operational roles may also contribute to further delaying one's retirement and yet, non-operational roles remain an important option for firefighters who are unable to perform operational duties but still want to contribute to the organisation.

The rules and procedures for job sharing need to be clarified and promoted, since this is a viable option to older employees.