



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS

Organizing Manual

Best Practices for IAFF Locals





IAFF Organizing Manual

1. Research Your Recognition and Collective Bargaining Laws
2. Build Your Organizing Committee
3. Identify Issues to Organize Around
4. Create a Strategy to Win
5. Communicating a Vision of Your Union
6. The Stop Light Method: Using Your Duty Roster as a Roadmap
7. Opposition from Management
8. Preparing for an Election
9. Building Power on the Job – the Organizing Model

Why Organize?

“Improvements in working conditions for fire fighters have never just ‘happened’ — and they will not ‘happen’ in the future. We must continue to work, as we have in the past, for conditions and salaries to which we are entitled.”

— Fred W. Baer, IAFF President (1919-1946)



Research Your Employer Recognition and Collective Bargaining Laws

Unlike the private sector, gaining union recognition in the public sector for fire fighters is a mix of state laws and processes.

These state-to-state paths to employer recognition are so different they can even differ in the same state based on the population of your jurisdiction. In fact, there are some states and jurisdictions where there is no recognition process and, in some cases, it is illegal for fire fighters to engage in collective bargaining.

Understanding what your process is will help dispel confusion, rumor and myth from the very beginning.

As you begin to organize your union, the first step is to consider the following:

1. What is the process for gaining recognition in your state/municipality/county?
2. Do you have collective bargaining rights?
3. Are there civil service protections in place?
4. Are you an at-will employee?

The IAFF can assist with the legal process for gaining employer recognition and engaging in collective bargaining in your jurisdiction.

Regardless of what your process is, or if you even have collective bargaining rights, the basic union organizing principles in this manual apply to most situations.



Build Your Organizing Committee

Your Organizing Committee will be the nucleus of your efforts to organize your union. Depending on the climate in your fire department, it may be necessary to conduct this step in private. Remember, every IAFF local that exists today was at one point just an Organizing Committee. As fire fighters, we know how critical leadership is to any effort. The leadership offered by the Organizing Committee should provide direction and inspiration for other fire fighters who want to get involved.

- Your committee should ideally be made up of 10-15 percent of the fire department.
- Those who serve on this committee must be well respected by their co-workers. An individual who does not have a good work record or who is not respected within the department is not a good candidate for the committee. The loudest, most opinionated voice is not always the right voice for this job.
- The Organizing Committee must also be representative of your fire department demographics in terms of rank, assignment, age, race, gender, ethnicity, etc. Your potential members must be able to see themselves represented as you build your union.
- Organizing Committee members should have the ability to answer questions about the IAFF, the organizing process and the collective bargaining process (if applicable).
- Those who serve on this committee must understand that organizing is labor intensive and time consuming.
- Target existing networks within the department to identify potential leaders to serve on the Organizing Committee
 - Potential Existing Networks:
 - Senior members of the department
 - Department “hard chargers” who are involved with training
 - Departmental sports teams
 - Betting pools (the person allowed to handle the money is already viewed as trustworthy)
 - Fantasy sports leagues
 - Floaters
 - Ethnic and other existing fraternal organizations
- Consider recruiting connectors, experts and persuaders (see chart below)

Informal Leaders	Description	Characteristics to Look For
Connectors	Individual(s) who knows everyone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often refer to people they know or mention multiple names in conversation • Their names may come up often in conversation with different individuals • Member of diverse groups that often may not socialize (ie., bikers and techies) • Everyone knows who they are but not very well (but viewed with trust)
Experts	Individual(s) who knows everything about a specific topic and who are willing to share this information freely and enthusiastically.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enthusiastic and well versed in their interest/activity of choice • Admired by others for their demonstrated devotion to an interest/activity • Open to sharing information/resources, less interested in power/politics
Persuaders	Individual(s) who are well respected and have charisma.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to make people relax and feel comfortable immediately • Expressive with an ability to convey persuasive emotion in conversation • Someone who easily becomes in synch with others regardless of how long or well they know them

What does the Organizing Committee do?

- Provides leadership
- Meets regularly to discuss organizing efforts and make decisions together
- Serves as the face of your union efforts
- Determines when to take the organizing campaign public
- Answers questions about your union and the recognition process
- Identifies issues important to fire fighters and connects them to your union efforts
- Conducts station visits and communicates a positive vision of your union
- Ensures union cards are signed



Identify Issues to Organize Around

The Organizing Committee must identify tangible issues that are important to fire fighters and be able demonstrate how organizing an IAFF local will lead to positive changes around those issues. Your Organizing Committee should develop uniform talking points about your identified issues. As Organizing Committee members begin to meet with fire fighters to discuss your organizing drive, it is important that everyone has the same information and there is a unified message.

Issues should be:

- Important to most of your fire fighters
- Impactful enough to move fire fighters to action
- Make a difference if successful
- Winnable
- Easy to understand and communicate
- Reflective of our values as union supporters and fire fighters
- Anything for which your fire department or jurisdiction has lost credibility

Examples of issues:

- Wages
- Benefits
 - Fundraisers or support for personnel who have been negatively impacted by health care or other benefit issues
- Staffing and service delivery
- Fair promotional processes
- Fair grievance procedures
- Job security
- Health and safety
 - Second set of turnout gear
 - Turnout gear washers
 - Hood exchange programs



Create A Strategy to Win

Once you have your Organizing Committee in place and have identified issues to organize around, your Organizing Committee will need to create a strategy to win.

Points to consider for creating your strategy:

- Understand your process for employer recognition and collective bargaining (if applicable)
- Develop uniform talking points on your recognition process (if applicable)
- Provide uniform talking points on the issues you are organizing around
- Understand of the dynamics of your fire administration and jurisdiction's leadership (city/county manager, elected officials) and how they will respond to organizing efforts.

Use the SMART process for developing your strategy to win:

- **Specific:** Tasks should be specific and concise (we need this done on this day at this time)
- **Measurable:** Must be able to track the progress of a task
- **Assignable:** Task must be assigned to a specific Organizing Committee member
- **Realistic:** Task must be within the capacity of the Organizing Committee to accomplish
- **Time-Based:** Task must be assigned a completion date

By using the SMART process, you will be able to create an organizing calendar, assign tasks to Organizing Committee members, track your progress with identifiable benchmarks and move your campaign along in a timely fashion.

Developing Uniform Talking Points

As you create your strategy to win, the Organizing Committee must agree on uniform talking points that showcase the value of union membership in the IAFF. Obviously, committee members must be able to address a wide array of topics that will inevitably be raised. However, there must be a consistent message that is communicated to all fire fighters. This message should include:

- **Overall vision of your union.** While it is important to address the tangible benefits and current initiatives of your organizing efforts, the most critical piece of your uniform talking points is to provide a vision for what your fire department could look like with a union in place. This is where Organizing Committee members plant a flag and offer a positive, proactive, pro-fire fighter vision and mission for your union. Communicate to fire fighters that we can do more together through our union than we can as individual employees. Committee members must understand their own motivation, why they support the union and why they're doing this work. This message must be articulated in a compelling way. The overall vision of the local should be transformational in nature.

- **Local Focus.** Potential members may support IAFF initiatives, but inevitably the question arises, "Yeah, the IAFF does good work but what is the local here going to do?" The internal messaging should also address what your new union will do together to improve your job.
- **Current initiatives.** Committee members should be able to speak in detail about the current initiatives in which they are engaged. Tie these initiatives to the vision the union has for your workplace.
- **Tangible benefits offered through membership.** Committee members should share the economic value of IAFF membership. Compile a list of benefits and be able to answer detailed questions. Tie these products to the cost of dues and make the case that, from a consumer perspective, there is also an economic value in membership.
 - Examples:
 - Representation/legal protections
 - Insurance products offered through membership
 - Access to programs administered through the IAFF Foundation

Determining When to Go Public

Determining when to go public with your organizing efforts will be critical to your success. Going public too early may make the effort appear weak, unorganized or just a clique of complainers. This will be a strategic decision that is made deliberately and with a great deal of thought. Consider these points when determining to go public:

- Is your Organizing Committee in place?
- Is your Organizing Committee representative of your fire department demographics?
- Does your Organizing Committee comprise 10-15 percent of the fire department?
- What is the relationship/climate with management?

Once you make the decision to go public, engage in some type of action. This could include:

- A meeting with management to inform them of organizing efforts
- A letter to fire department members about the IAFF and your organizing efforts
- A presentation to your city council/county commission

The purpose of engaging in a public action is twofold. First, you demonstrate that you're committed to the organizing process and building an IAFF local. Second, you gain a measure of legal protection by being publicly pro-union.

Communicating Your Vision

As your organizing efforts progress, potential members will ask, “What will be different with a union?” Often, it is difficult for unorganized fire fighters to imagine a different or better version of their fire department. It is your job as a union organizer to communicate a vision of what your fire department can look like with a union. This vision must be communicated to fire fighters who are skeptical of union efforts or who have no union experience. Things we can do to communicate a vision of our union:

- Talk about shared values (examples: good pay and benefits, respect at work, fair promotional processes, fair grievance procedures, looking out for each other). Changes we want to make in our fire department should reflect those shared values.
- Talk about the fact that our list of shared values can only be accomplished by working together through our union.
- Connect with the personal experiences of our fellow fire fighters.

Systematic Personal Contact

Your efforts to organize your union will only be successful if they are based on systematic personal contact. This means that Organizing Committee members must make one-on-one or one-on-small group contact with every fire fighter. Ideally, these conversations will take place in fire stations once you have decided to take your organizing campaign public. The conversations you will have with your fellow fire fighters are critical to the success of the organizing campaign.

- In organizing campaigns where organizers engage in systematic personal contact with 60-70 percent of the workforce, the success rate is 78 percent.
- In organizing campaigns where organizers do not engage in systematic personal contact, the success rate is 41 percent.

Source: AFL-CIO

At a time that the Organizing Committee deems most appropriate, you will begin systematic fire station visits to meet with fire fighters.

As Organizing Committee members conduct station visits, each fire fighter’s potential for joining the union or signing a card will be assessed and tracked. For fire fighters who are not assessed as anti-union and who do not join or sign a card during initial station visits, there may be a need to follow up later.

While this method is labor intensive and time consuming, there is no other more effective method to organize and build your union.

Transactional Versus Transformational

The concept of transaction versus transformation addresses how the Organizing Committee communicates the vision of the union you’re trying to build.

Is the vision *transactional* or *transformational*?

A vision that is solely *transactional* places the union on the same footing as an insurance policy. While it is important to communicate the tangible economic benefits provided by the IAFF, such a narrow vision is not likely to create loyalty or build a group of union activists. Nobody is excited to pay their car insurance bill. As such, the IAFF should not be presented as solely a smart move for a savvy consumer.

A *transformational* message that provides a vision of your new union as a tool to address fire fighter concerns as the main talking point will attract and inspire more union supporters. A transformational message communicates the overall vision of your new union and says, “We can accomplish this together through our union.”

Ultimately, all Organizing Committee conversations with potential members will be a mix of transactional and transformational. We must demonstrate the economic value of union membership. However, our strongest foot forward should always be transformational.

TRANSACTIONAL ONLY	TRANSFORMATIONAL
The IAFF is presented as an insurance policy and is sold based on programs and benefits.	The Organizing Committee and the IAFF function as agents of positive change.
Potential members will view the IAFF as a third-party that fixes their problems.	Potential members know lifestyle changes will be because of union efforts and collective action.
Dues purchase a product.	Dues are investment in their future.
Creates customers.	Creates union activists.

How We Talk About Dues

Your employer may try to scare potential members by bringing up the cost of union dues. You and your fellow fire fighters will set the amount you will pay in dues. (A good benchmark is 1 percent of starting fire fighter pay). One of the best methods to address concerns about dues is to divide the proposed monthly dues by four and discuss the cost per week.

The weekly payment approach breaks the cost down into a more manageable amount. Contrast the cost of weekly dues and the tangible products provided through dues with the amount of money a fire fighter might spend each week on other items (a cup of coffee, a six pack of beer, for example). Dues should be represented as an investment in the fire fighter's future.



The Stop Light Method: Using Your Duty Roster as a Roadmap

Bringing new members into your local will be based on systematic personal contact. An effective way to make this task more manageable is by color coding your fire department's duty roster. We call this **the stop light method**. By color coding your fire department duty roster, you create a visual roadmap that illustrates areas where union membership is low. The color-coded duty roster will give you the ability to track assessments of non-members by apparatus assignment, shift, battalion and fire station.

Step 1: Highlight known union supporters and Organizing Committee members in green.

Step 2: Highlight all known anti-union personnel in red. These are personnel who have been vocally anti-union and actively oppose or criticize union efforts. The Organizing Committee may decide to engage with these personnel later; however, you do not want to activate an anti-union campaign by provoking known union-haters into action.

Step 3: Highlight remaining fire fighters in yellow. These are personnel whose views on your organizing efforts are unknown. As you begin your organizing efforts, you will focus on recruiting these personnel to union membership and support. It is likely most of your personnel will be highlighted in yellow.

Assessments Before the Station Visit

Once your duty roster is color coded through the stop light method, you will have a visual roadmap towards gaining support for your union. Your next step is to decide where to begin your station visits. Think about this decision strategically. You may decide to visit the fire station with personnel who have been assessed entirely yellow. Conversely, you may also decide to visit stations with a high density of union supporters and just a few personnel assessed as yellow to make your recruitment efforts easier. You may also decide to visit a station that has highly influential or popular fire fighters who, if they become a union supporter, will then bring other fire fighters into your union. Regardless, this must be a strategic decision and you should only make it after closely examining your assessed duty roster.

Examine your assessed duty roster to determine the following for each individual fire fighter before your visit:

- **Their relationship with current union supporters.** Do the personnel at the station you're visiting have a good relationship with a current union supporter? For instance, think about personnel who have side-jobs, go fishing or take family vacations together. Ask union supporters to assist in speaking with their friends. Consider providing the union supporter with your uniform talking points and have them speak to the non-member prior to your visit.
- **Known issues of concern or interests.** If there are known issues of concern or areas of interest among the fire fighters you're meeting with, be prepared to speak to those concerns and discuss how your union efforts can have a positive impact.

Fire Station Visits

Your Organizing Committee must meet fire fighters where they are at (not where we want them to be), both physically and regarding their existing view of union efforts.

Before the Visit:

- Know who is at the station (who is assigned and who might be detailed for the day.)
- Know the fire department schedule for the day. Check the departmental activity calendar to make sure you are not scheduling a visit during a drill, EMT continuing education, public education events or other obligations.
- If possible, notify the company officer you will be coming.

Items to Bring:

- Membership applications and union recognition cards
- IAFF organizing folders
- Any locally produced organizing material



During the Visit:

- **Listen.** Although your Organizing Committee members are ultimately there to ask fire fighters to join the union or sign a card, the station visit should not be a one-way conversation.
- Don't spend a lot of time telling war stories or talking about yourself.
- **Don't lie.** If you don't know the answer, say, "I don't know, but I will find out for you."
- **Don't argue.** You can be firm in your support for the union, but do not engage in an argument. This is NOT productive and can alienate union supporters and potential supporters alike.
- **Identify supporters and potential leaders.** During your station visits, identify informal leaders within the fire department who are union supporters. Identify tasks that supporters can do to assist with organizing efforts.
- **Make the ask.** At the close of every meeting, ask the fire fighters to do something. This could be to join your union or sign a recognition card. Even if you feel the meeting did not go well, still make the ask.

Suggested Station Visit Agenda

It is important that Organizing Committee members are not just winging it when fire station visits begin. Organizing Committee members must be able to communicate their vision and value of the IAFF while also listening to the concerns of their fellow fire fighters. Remember, this conversation isn't a sales pitch. The items included in the suggested agenda may not happen in this exact order, but all points should be covered during the conversation.

- I **Getting to the Kitchen Table** (or wherever the fire fighters gather). So much happens at the fire station kitchen table; it is one of the best places to meet. There's typically enough seating, everyone can see and hear, the fire fighters are generally more comfortable talking and opening up and you're not standing up making a presentation. Of course, you can meet anywhere in the fire station where fire fighters feel most comfortable.
- II **Introductions and Why You're Here.** In larger departments, you may not know everyone on the job. It's important to communicate who you are and why you're there. A good example is, "Hi everyone. I'm Joe. I'm the engineer at Engine 7 on B-Shift. I'm a member of the union Organizing Committee and we're doing station visits to talk about why we've decided to form a union. We wanted to provide you with some information, but it's also really important to us to hear your concerns and thoughts on issues in the fire department."
- III **Listening.** Although you're there discuss your union organizing efforts and gain support, it is just as important to listen to what your fellow fire fighters have to say. Be watching and listening for:
 - a. Issues important to fire fighters
 - b. Concerns fire fighters have about the organizing process
 - c. Potential leaders and supporters
 - d. Union-haters
 - e. Identifying union-haters

Don't become defensive if non-members (or members for that matter) criticize the union or disagree with you on issues.

- IV **Communicating the Vision.** Once you have listened to fire fighters' concerns, you can communicate your vision of the union. If possible, you should attach that vision to the concerns expressed in the visit. This is where you explain that through collective action fire fighters can have a positive impact on their jobs.
- V **Make the Ask.** Always close the meeting with asking fire fighters to engage in an action. This could be signing a recognition card, joining your new local, signing a petition or providing you with information on other fire fighters who might be interested in joining or supporting the union. Always make the ask, even if you think the visit did not go well.

After the Visit:

- Immediately follow up on any questions or concerns asked by fire fighters that you were unable to answer. Ideally, you should provide this answer before their shift is over, even if you must call them in the morning prior to shift change.
- Reassess the duty roster to reflect information gathered during the visit. Change any new supporters from yellow to green. Change any anti-union personnel from yellow to red.
- Take detailed notes to report back to the Organizing Committee. Obviously, you will report on any new members who have joined or signed a recognition card. It is equally as important to make notes on personnel who did not join or sign a card. What questions did they ask? What topic seemed to peak their interest? Were they engaged in the meeting at all? These notes help you create individualized talking points to revisit later with those particular fire fighters. Here is sample information from a station visit you should record:
 - Name, rank, station assignment.
 - Areas of concern within the department
 - Areas of concern in relation to the IAFF
 - If the fire fighter asked a question you were not immediately able to answer, what was it? Note the follow up date for the answer you provided.
- Input your new personnel into your database as soon as possible.
- Enter new members into the IAFF database as soon as possible.

Opposition From Management

As you build your union and your momentum grows, you may likely face opposition from management. This could be your fire chief, city/county manager or even local elected officials. These same individuals may even say they support the rights of workers to organize (in other places), but they just don't see the need for a union in your fire department. Unions fundamentally shift the balance of power and your fire chief and jurisdiction management and elected officials will oppose your union on that basis. Here are some things you may hear from management:

- “Our fire department is a family. We don't need an outsider coming between us.”
- “We have an open-door policy. You can always talk to me about your concerns.”
- “We don't need some union coming in here and telling us how to run our department.”
- “We know we messed up. Give us a second chance and we'll make it right next time.”

Sometimes management will use scare tactics:

- Threatening to fire or demote union supporters
- Threatening to transfer union supporters to undesirable station assignments
- Not promoting union supporters

It is illegal for management to retaliate against fire fighters for union activity. If you believe this is happening to you or other union supporters, you should document all occurrences (including witnesses) and contact your IAFF district vice president for guidance.

When your Organizing Committee is prepared and can communicate with fire fighters what to expect from management, the opposition can become less intimidating. By predicting what management may do during your campaign, you inoculate fire fighters to these tactics.

- **Take credit for positive changes.** One tactic management might take is to fix a few issues in the hopes they will gain credibility and curtail union interest. Don't let them. Point out that these changes occurred because fire fighters are organizing.
- **Set the agenda and stick to it.** If you don't make a plan and stick to it, then management is making a plan for you. Stick to the issues that are important to fire fighters.
- **Respond, if necessary, but don't react.** As fire fighters, we don't react to emergencies; we respond. There will be times that an action by management will need to be addressed. When you decide to do so, it should be thoughtful, not done in anger, and must support your overall strategy. Pre-plan any responses.
- **Don't let management third party your union.** Management may try to third party the IAFF. This means they will paint the IAFF as an outsider, hungry for dues money, and as an organization that doesn't care about you. The membership drives the decision made at all levels of the IAFF. At the local level, you and your fellow fire fighters are the union.



Preparing for an Election

If applicable, you may be filing for a formal recognition election. Nothing should be left to chance and you should keep union supporters informed and educated on the process. To be successful in an election, make sure you have done the following:

- Know your state or jurisdiction's process for gaining recognition. Pay attention to detail.
- Assess your fire department duty roster for the vote. Reach out to any fire fighters who are still assessed as a yellow.
- Enlist the assistance of your IAFF district vice president.

Building Power on the Job: The Organizing Model

Organizing doesn't stop just because you win an election or ratify your first contract. Once you win your union and you have your first contract, you will need to focus on building power for the long term. This includes developing new leaders, succession planning and organizing around issues that arise in your fire department. Staying organized and using the same principles laid out in this manual will help you push a pro-fire fighter agenda over the long term.





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