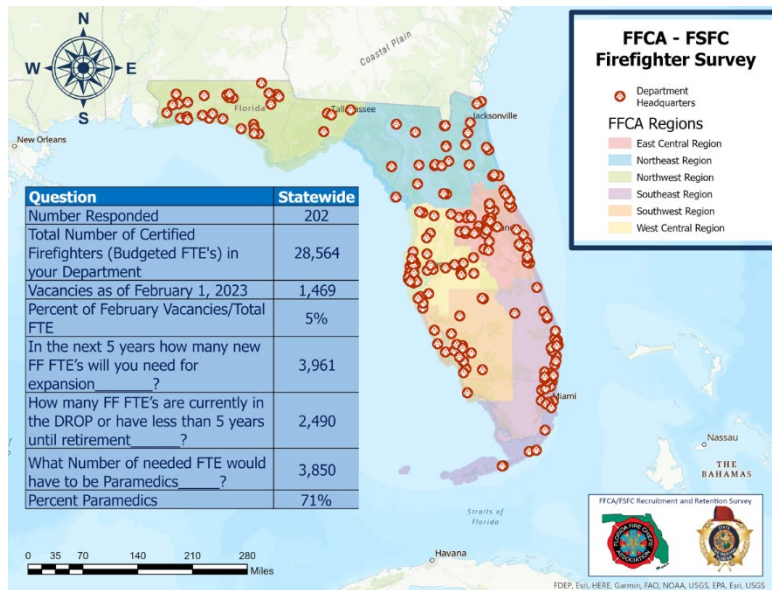


# White Paper on Recruitment & Retention in the Florida Fire Service

*By: Carlos Aviles, Keith Chapman, Mark Harper, Dr. Lindsay Judah, Harold Theus*



This work was completed by Florida Fire Chiefs' Association in partnership with the Florida State Fire Marshal's Office.

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## Abstract

The Florida Fire Service has concerns regarding Recruitment and Retention. There are business, leadership, and psychology best practices, which can be considered and implemented to efficiently address some of these challenges. There are opportunities to reinvent and revitalize many traditional approaches in the Florida Fire Service. This white paper is intended to spur change, collaboration, and crucial conversations.

*Keywords: Culture, Firefighter, Florida, Labor Force, Paramedic, Recruitment, Retention*

## Introduction

The American Fire Service is experiencing a dilemma, labor shortages. There are numerous articles and research papers which focus on Recruitment and Retention from the late 1980's to today. Recently, during a meeting in Spring of 2023, members of the North American Fire Training Directors (NAFTD) reported similar stories of a declining interest of individuals entering the fire service industry. The members represented career, combination, and volunteer fire agencies from Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Oregon, and Utah. NAFTD is primarily focused on educating future firefighters. Due to this focus area, the organization is uniquely positioned to be in contact with fire department representatives throughout their respective states. The consensus of the group was that many fire department agencies are unable to fill vacancies. There are fewer applicants to fill volunteer, combination, and career vacancies. One common theme which stood out to the group was that career firefighters may move from department to department, including lateral transfers, which is often associated with a wage and benefits competition amongst paid departments.

However, we know that many workers leave organizations or request a change in job responsibilities, such as “dropping their patch”, for reasons other than an increase in wage and benefits, such as job satisfaction, and more versatile training opportunities. An illustrative example is provided by *Harvard Business Review* article, titled, [\*Why People Really Quit Their Jobs\*](#), by Lori Goler, Janelle Gale, Brynn Harrington, and Adam Grant;

*“People leave jobs, and it’s up to managers to design jobs that are too good to leave. Great bosses set up shields — they protect their employees from toxicity. They also open doors to meaningful tasks and learning opportunities — they enable their people to be energized by their projects, to perform at their best, and to move forward professionally without taking steps backward at home. When you have a manager who cares about your happiness and your success, your career and your life, you end up with a better job, and it’s hard to imagine working anywhere else.”*

Additionally, as of April 2023, there are [Executive Fire Officer Applied Research Projects](#) (ARP) archived from 1989 to 2022, covering the topics of Recruitment and Retention. Specifically, 491 ARPs list Recruitment in the title, and 254 list Retention in the title. It is not practical to list every ARP in the supplemental resources of this document. However, it is noteworthy to share that these challenges are recurring, and though economic stability and labor force landscapes may drift, there’s one commonality; as of 2023, the fire service profession requires the inclusion, intentionality, and involvement of human beings. If we incorporate leadership, sound management, and psychology best practices, positive outcomes are probable.

As shared in the book, [\*When Breath Becomes Air\*](#) by Paul Kalanithi.

*“Science may provide the most useful way to organize empirical, reproducible data, but its power to do so is predicated on its inability to grasp the most central aspects of human life: hope, fear, love, hate, beauty, envy, honor, weakness, striving, suffering, virtue.”*

The demands for personnel support and psychological safety in the workplace cannot be understated. These concepts are readily available to grasp a more thorough understanding in many publications and podcasts today. It is not suggested that improving workplace culture is easy, but it must be emphasized that it is remarkably necessary in modern workplaces, specifically as it is related to Recruitment and Retention. As shared in [\*The Culture Code\*](#), by Daniel Coyle, there is an essential concept to “fill their cup”. In leadership, either formal or informal, we have an opportunity to fill their cup; to meet firefighters where they’re at and give them what they need. Belongingness and support are essential in the fire service industry. To further demonstrate this need of belongingness and how it's linked to retention, below is an excerpt from UCLA’s article titled [\*Retention and Sense of Belonging\*](#):

*“Progress for organizational change will ultimately be won or lost in the “trenches”. The “trenches” are those leader-to-manager and manager-to-employee, water-cooler conversations or meetings. When department leaders or management undermine the credibility of those trying to create a more inclusive culture, the organization suffers greatly.*

*The organization also suffers when employees disrupt the vision because of personal feelings, anxiety, animosity, or fear. To avoid these pitfalls, leadership must support and model inclusive practices to set the tone of respect and to help build the level of trust and accountability between the employer and employee. Clearly communicating the vision early and often can help lead to collective efficacy.”*

The State of Florida fire service industry has experienced challenges associated with Recruitment and Retention. The profession has historically attracted people who enjoy and appreciate the opportunity to serve in a noble industry. There are many causes that have attributed to the current labor shortages and retention challenges. Some of those causes are better opportunities, changes in demographic population, fire industry culture, generational ideologies, and values, increasing medical risks related to cancer, the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health, and social climate.

Firefighters now have several employment opportunities, especially those who hold paramedic certifications and advanced college degrees. Oftentimes, firefighters seek employment with larger departments which commonly provide more opportunities, such as increased benefits and compensation, specialty team participation, and upward mobility. Though there are instances in which firefighters seek employment with agencies regardless of size, which have positive reputations, resources and are known to be healthy workplaces. With an opportunistic labor market, in some cases individuals are leaving the fire service altogether, exacerbating a statewide shortage of Firefighter/EMTs and Paramedics. As shared by the *Society of Human Resource Management*, by K. Knight and M. O'Donnell in an article titled, [\*Viewpoint: Don't Underestimate the Importance of Exit Interviews\*](#):

*“To get an accurate picture of your recruitment process and its failings, you need to take an honest look at the above pitfalls [possibly lacks vision, intention, opportunity, expectations and discernment] and determine whether they apply to your workplace... Exit interviews can uncover a multitude of issues that help you improve your processes and procedures.”*



Additionally, F. Breitling, J. Dhar, R. Ebeling, and D. Lovich with the *Harvard Business Review* shared [6 Strategies to Boost Retention Through the Great Resignation](#).

*“With employees jumping ship in record numbers in the United States, companies are facing a talent crunch. One HR strategy they should embrace is to make themselves so attractive that employees won’t want to leave. These six measures can help accomplish that: (1) add monetary incentives for staying, (2) provide better career opportunities, (3) elevate the company’s purpose, (4) prioritize culture and connection, (5) take better care of employees and their families, and (6) embrace flexibility.”*

It is evident Recruitment and Retention are not challenges exclusive to the fire service industry, however a considerable factor for our Florida workforce is, the population has grown significantly. This has placed pressure on local agencies to expand and retool their service delivery systems. Specifically, in 2022, Florida was listed as the fastest growing state in America with a [population](#) of 22,247,251, an increase of 1.9% from 2021 to 2022. This growth equates to 955 residents moving to Florida each day. Furthermore, according to the *Office of Economic and Demographic Research*, the state will add another 317,000 residents in 2023. With no sign of slowing down, Florida will add the population equivalent to the *City of Orlando* each year (United States Census, 2022). One current workforce initiative created by CareerSource Florida is a Master Credentials List (MCL) with the intent to provide a statewide partnership for business and education communities to attract, expand and retain targeted, and high-value industry sustainment (CareerSource Florida, 2023).

Collaborative workgroups have gathered content throughout the country related to the [21<sup>st</sup> Century Fire and Emergency Services](#). The International City/County Management Association and Center for Public Excellence produced a white paper focused on eight initiatives, Re-Identification, Culture, Robust Use of Data, Health and Wellness, Partnerships, Sustainability, Technology, and Inclusiveness (CPSE, 2020). One initiative which addresses the realities of pressure placed on local agencies and continued expansion of service delivery needs is *Sustainability*. A selection of the initiatives listed in the document include:

- Reconsider and revamp current deployment methods.
- Develop sustainable pension model.
- Adopt and implement a community risk reduction strategy.
- Improve resource allocation by focusing on the outcomes trying to be achieved.
- Examine fixed costs associated with current delivery models and associated contracts.
- Explore public/private partnership opportunities.

*“The future of the fire and emergency services will rest upon those who are in it. If the fire and emergency services hope to sustain itself in the future, it must be willing to redesign itself and address the issues that are having a negative impact on the service today. Failure to address these issues will lead to what author Max Bazerman calls “predictable surprises.” Predictable surprises are those events or outcomes that catch us by surprise, yet both were predictable and preventable (CPSE, 2020).”*

## Approach

Members of the Florida Fire Chiefs’ Association (FFCA) and the Florida State Fire Marshal’s Office (SFMO) were discussing this issue and decided that a Recruitment and Retention Symposium would be beneficial in exploring the problem further. The team enlisted Keith Chapman, retired Fire Chief, and current President/CEO of Ten-8 Fire and Safety to be the lead facilitator of the multi-day/location event. In discussions leading up to the Recruitment and Retention Symposium, the team recognized that labor shortages were not unique to the fire service. Nonetheless, the team’s desire was to explore the problem as it relates specifically to the fire service; and then aim to provide ideas or guidelines that fire chiefs can take back and implement into their department’s recruitment and retention process. One intended takeaway was to identify agency-specific successful programs to help connect leaders and initiatives.

Two Recruitment and Retention Symposiums were carried out. One on May 26, 2022, at the Florida State Fire College in Ocala, Florida, and another on October 27, 2022, at the Hillsborough County Public Safety Operations Complex, in Hillsborough County, Florida. In total, 25 fire departments were represented at the two symposiums. The goal of the symposiums was to learn what challenges fire departments throughout Florida were experiencing as it relates to their workforce. The target audience for the first session included personnel who represented all aspects of the fire services with various years of service and ranks. At the second session, we attempted to focus more on firefighters with less than five years on job. Firefighters of less than five years were selected so that their relatively new experience and perspective could be heard and understood. Fire Chiefs who attended were grouped separately to learn about actions they had taken to address the staffing shortages in their respective communities. The symposium theme was to investigate why people were not entering the field and why they were leaving. More importantly, the purpose was to explore ideas and concepts for improvement.

Invitations were sent out via the Florida State Fire College A-List and shared by word of mouth. Over 70 participants attended one of the two symposium dates. These participants represented personnel from a variety of fire department sizes, from rural to metro regions, providing BLS and ALS services from transport and non-transport agencies. The groups were diverse and included personnel with administrative, EMS, firefighter, out of state, recruiter, special operations, and training experience. The attendees were separated into four breakout groups, each with a facilitator. Firefighters were placed into groups, and due to the interest in Recruitment and Retention, personnel throughout the rank of lieutenant to fire chief showed up to participate. These individuals participated in the three remaining breakout groups. Individuals in the breakout groups shared their beliefs and experiences regarding each topic. One session discussed problems and one session discussed solutions. After completing each session, the groups rejoined to discuss collectively, and each breakout group provided a brief of the topics discussed during the session. Many topics overlapped between the groups; however, solutions varied and lists of these takeaways are provided in this document. The symposium found that the firefighter group with less than five years often had the keenest insight and perspective on these topics.

In addition to hosting a multi-day/location Recruitment and Retention Symposium; the FFCA and the SFMO hosted a discussion forum at the 2022, Florida Fire Chiefs, Executive Development Conference, then began collecting data related to Florida's population trends, current and future fire department needs and proposed service delivery expansion. This inherently identified an area which may need to be explored further; intentionally forecasting agency needs based on personnel (FTE) count considering current needs and in five years, how many vacancies require a paramedic to fill, how many personnel are eligible to participate in a DROP program, how many personnel have expressed interest in participating in the DROP versus retiring as soon as their eligible, as well as planning for development, training and succession needs in advance.

Anticipating needs and mitigating situations expeditiously are areas we often excel at during emergency response and incident stabilization. It is essential that those intentional approaches carry over to administrative forecasting and strategic planning for Fire & Emergency Services long-term success.

Local, regional, and statewide, administrative forecasting and strategic planning in support of Fire & Emergency Services will require partnerships and collaboration. A successful example of such partnership and collaboration includes legislative actions focused on firefighter cancer benefits and improvement to the Special Risk Retirement class of the Florida Retirement System (FRS). In 2019, the Florida Legislature acknowledged the scientific evidence showing a correlation between firefighting and certain cancers when it passed Senate Bill 426, an act mandating employer-funded cancer benefits for firefighters. The act created F.S. §112.1816, under which an eligible firefighter diagnosed with certain types of cancer is automatically entitled to cancer-related benefits at no cost to the firefighter, enhanced retirement disability and death benefits, and duty-related death benefits (The Florida Bar, 2020).

The statute also includes.

*“The Division of State Fire Marshal within the Department of Financial Services shall adopt rules to establish employer cancer prevention best practices as it relates to personal protective equipment, decontamination, fire suppression apparatus, and fire stations.”*

To address this requirement, the SFMO initiated a series of listening sessions which included a collaboration of representatives from the Florida Fire Chiefs’ Association, Florida Forest Service, Bureau of Arson Investigations, Florida Professional Firefighters, and many local agencies. The listening sessions helped provide the format and language used to develop a Cancer Prevention Best Practices template which could be used in the rule development. Multiple workshops were conducted around the state to ensure employers were given the opportunity to provide comments on the legislation and the proposed rule language, including how to manage it as employers in the fire service. The final product from the rule development was titled the “Employer Cancer Prevention Best Practices – Self-Assessment Tool”, which is now referenced in Florida Administrative Code 69A-62.025.

In 2023, the Florida Professional Firefighters (FPF) spearheaded sweeping reforms for firefighter retirement benefits by supporting Senate Bill 7024 of the FRS. Leading public safety associations like the Florida Fire Chiefs’, Florida Police Chiefs, Florida Sheriffs, and the Florida Police Benevolent Association all joined together to strongly support the legislation. The FRS restored the age requirements for full retirement, increased health insurance subsidies, lengthened Deferred Retirement Option Plan (DROP) years, and increased DROP interest rates (Florida Politics, 2023).

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this document is to report the findings of the Recruitment and Retention Symposium multi-day/location event. As well as provide data collected from the survey participants throughout the State of Florida. Many detailed barriers of Recruitment and Retention are listed, along with possible solutions and best practices shared by participating agencies. Best practices are indicated below as “BP”, this reflects programs or processes that are currently implemented and have produced a positive impact on the department’s recruitment and retention efforts. The perspectives of the Firefighter Groups and Fire Chief Groups are listed in separate columns.

## Considerations

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce completed an unemployed pandemic survey, below are a couple data points which may be important to reflect on as they relate to what agencies focus on moving forward.

*“Younger respondents, aged 25-34, are prioritizing personal growth over searching for a job right now; 36% say they’re more focused on acquiring new skills, education, or training before re-entering the job market... And... About half (49%) are not willing to take jobs that do not offer the opportunity for remote work.”*

Deanna Mulligan poses thought-provoking insight in her book, [\*Hire Purpose: How Smart Companies Can Close the Skills Gap\*](#).

*“If a jobless future arrives someday, the fault won’t be rising technology or gaps in workforce skills, but shrinking creativity, inclusivity, empathy, and human agency.”*

Demography could play a role in workforce shortages for the next decade. A look at the [current demographics](#) for the United States demonstrates the changes we are currently experiencing in today’s workforce. For the vast part of the last century our workforce was made up primarily of Baby Boomers (1946-1964), the largest demographic in U.S. history. Behind them came Gen X (1965-1980), the smallest generation we have seen in the past century. As the Baby Boomers leave the workforce, most of the senior management positions are currently held by Gen X. However, historically small generations produce small generations. Millennials (1981-1996) are the largest generation we have seen since the Baby Boomers. They are also the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in U.S. history. Gen Z (1997-2012) are the kids of Gen X and as such are a smaller generation. In the realm of recruitment, this is the generation we should be targeting for employment today. Also, if social media outreach is utilized by your organization, be sure to [review trends](#) for various platforms, as the users’ trends for different social media platforms have changed from 2015 to 2022 (Pew, 2023).

According to (Kearney, 2022) the U.S. has seen a 20% decline in birth rates in the past 16 years. It stands to reason that the increased stress we have seen in the labor market is likely to continue for the next decade. This emphasizes the importance of retention within the fire and emergency service ranks today. Additional defining attributes of Gen Z are changes in their mental and physical health perceptions in the workplace. A recent survey conducted by [McKinsey & Company](#) revealed that 51% of Gen Z workers prefer independent work and their desired career fields are oriented toward technology (Kearney, 2022). [Stanford University study](#) on Gen Z.

Gen Z need the “WHY” more than any other generation before them. Why do we do this? Why is it important? Why do I need to know this? They value leadership, mentorship and thrive in a culture where questions are encouraged. Collectively there are opportunities to reinvent and revitalize many traditional approaches in the Florida Fire Service, specifically regarding Recruitment and Retention. This will require grit, intentionality, and consistent work. The more we know, the more data we have, the better we can effectuate change.



# Recruitment: Defining the Problems

## Firefighter Group

### *Fire Department Image*

- Lack of fire department outreach, minimal, if any social media used to promote the local fire department as being a career path.
- Should showcase “special teams” activities and other career related opportunities that may draw interest from potential candidates.
- Display community involvement, mentorship and public relations.
- Expectations vs. reality (fire calls vs. medical calls, station duties/responsibilities).

### *Entry Barriers*

- Culture in the firehouse.
- Not the easiest career path to explain.
- Work schedule and compensation.
- Time commitment and amount of training.
- Cost of training, entry level training.

### *Wages/Benefits*

- Pay and benefits, Kelly days.
- Lack of understanding of retirement plans, 401k vs. Pension.

## Fire Chief Group

### *Lack of Marketing the Profession*

- Insufficient or non-existent marketing plans to the local public highlighting department opportunities and activities.
- Lack of social media presence.
- Insufficient local presence and failure to capture home-grown candidates.

### *Wage/Compensation/Entry Barriers*

- Noncompetitive salary and benefits.
- Confusing and expensive certification process.
- Cumbersome application processes.
- Delays from application date to hiring.
- Physical assessment exams.

### *Work Ethic & Generational Diversity of Applicants*

- Core values, work ethic, character and general modes of operations seem to differ between generations. The traditions and historical culture of the fire service can clash at times with the younger generation creating low morale and division.

### *Reciprocity Marketing Out of State Candidates*

- Accepting certifications from experienced firefighters from out of state.

# Recruitment: Solutions and Best Practices

## Firefighter Group

### *Fire Academies and Orientation Training*

- Instructors and Field Training Officers should display a positive attitude towards profession and/or organization.
- Instructors and Field Training Officers should support and encourage a positive morale about profession and/or organization.
- Instructors and Field Training Officers should be interactive and accessible toward candidates and trainees.
- Desire for more hands-on, real-world training and less drill practice.

### *Marketing*

- Advertisement using interactive videos, (Chick-fil-a, BP) ex: Instagram, TikTok, YouTube
- High School recruitment, high quality program (Polk County Fire Rescue, BP)
- High resident target recruitment/academies (Monroe County Fire, BP)

### *Compensation and Benefits*

- Step plans provide security in future wages.
- Kelly day, adequate time off for work/life balance.
- Pay benefits explained, salaries including step plans, medical, retirement. Financial fitness.<sup>1</sup>

## Fire Chief Group

### *Administratively*

- Re-evaluate Mission and Vision of Organization.
- Narrow the scope of services.
- Union-Partnership.
- Provide a strong on-boarding and orientation process.

### *Marketing*

- Social Media, Coral Springs (BP)
- Community Outreach.
- Job Fairs.
- Fire Rescue information days.
- Identified Recruitment Teams and/or Recruiter, Brevard & Miami-Dade (BP)
- Cadet/Internship programs, ACFR and Coral Springs (BP)
- Mentorship programs.
- Civilian Ride-Along programs, potential on duty time for participation.
- Summer programs, Hillsborough County Fire Rescue (BP)
- Access to training and careers.
  - High School Program, Polk County Fire Rescue (BP)

### *Compensation and Benefits*

- Sign on bonus, ACFR & Polk County (neither report it being effective).
- Similar wages offered within regions.
- Sponsorship/Scholarships.
  - Hiring non-certified employees-provide training and certification.
- Home Buyer, State Housing Initiatives Partnership Program (SHIP).

<sup>1</sup> Per Deanna Mulligan in *Hire Purpose: How Smart Companies Can Close the Skills Gap*;

“...leaders at Guardian have grown increasingly concerned about the average American’s level of financial knowledge. Only one-third of adults can pass a basic financial knowledge and decision-making test. Less than half can define simply financial terms such as “interest” or “bankruptcy”. And only about one in ten have mapped out a five-year financial plan.”

# Retention: Defining the Problems

## Firefighter Group

### *Work Life/Working Conditions*

- Low Morale negatively affecting others.
- Lack of adequate training provided by department.
- Mandatory overtime assignments.
- Demanding call volume and types (non-emergency) of calls.
- Lack of positive recognition for the risks taken by firefighters.<sup>2</sup>
- Good labor representation from Union.
- Lack of employee involvement in equipment selection.
- Inconsistent policy enforcement.
- Lack of incentives for undesirable positions.
- Hypocrisy - no support or partially supporting programs (wellness, cancer, fitness)

### *Career Growth*

- Lack of clear path or reduced opportunities or departmentally supported.
  - Paramedic, Promotional Opportunity, Specialty teams
- Difficult or cumbersome promotional requirements

### *Personal*

- Family balance
- Desire to be close to home/family
- Longevity vs. instant gratification

## Fire Chief Group

### *Work Life/Working Conditions*

- Burnout-fatigue
- Mental Health of employees
- Compensation/benefits
  - FRS Changes (2011)
  - FRS vested requirement changes
  - 457 Plans changes
  - Chapter 175 changes
- Unfavorable culture
- Unfavorable leadership (all levels)
- COVID-PPE fatigue
- Unfavorable station living conditions
- Post-retirement Healthcare

### *Career Growth*

- Poor promotional testing process
- Lack of career mobility within the department

### *Personal*

- Don't feel valued
- Generational changes in expected performance and time commitments
- Flexibility time/off

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<sup>2</sup> In *Smarter, Faster, Better: The Secrets of Being Productive in Life and Business* by Charles Duhigg;

"In 2013, "a paradigm shift in the FBI's cultural mindset." One particular focus was encouraging junior agents to make independent decisions about which leads they should pursue, rather than waiting for orders from superiors. .. for those instances to be unlocked, management has to empower them. There has to be a system in place that makes you trust that you can choose the solution you think is best and that your bosses are committed to supporting you if you take a chance that might not pay. That's why agile has been embraced at the bureau."

# Retention: Solutions and Best Practices

## Firefighter Group

### *Work Life/Working Conditions*

- Soft Skill Training ex: Communication, Conflict Resolution, Leadership
- Multi-Company Training (Participating crews out-of-service)
- Clearly defined and consistent promotional requirements and testing
- Rotation of busy units to address burnout, Sunrise (BP)

### *Marketing*

- Employee recognition and employee value programs
- Recruitment Teams, ACFR (BP)
- Public relations-tell your story, improve support for resources/growth

### *Compensation/Benefits*

- Education incentive with time off/coverage for classes-Polk County/Hollywood (BP)
- Progression “within rank”, Polk County (BP)

### *Communication*

- From the Chief
  - Monthly information Vlog, ACFR (BP)
  - “Chat with the Chief”
- YouTube information

## Fire Chief Group

### *Work Life/Working Conditions*

- Increase staffing levels (floaters) to decrease mandatory assignments, Polk County (BP)
- Preschedule mandatory assignments in advance
- Provide mentorship at multiple ranks
- Provide specialty programs for additional training/development
- Officer Development, Cape Coral/Miami-Dade (BP)
  - Pride and ownership, celebrate who you are
  - Provide methods of communication
  - Give them the “why”
- Quality Equipment, facilities, and training
- Monitor workload, ex: Equal dispersant, Alternative models, and Rotations
- Promote mental and physical health
- Policy Enforcement/Consistency

### *Marketing*

- Recruit retirees from department with differing retirement plans, Clay (BP)
- Engage community for funding or to support funding
- [IAFF Fire Ops 101](#)
- Employee recognition opportunities

### *Compensation/Benefits*

- Initiate a step-plan compensation package
- Address compression in pay
- Provide creative payment incentives
- Expand Healthcare benefits
- Employee health clinic, ACFR/Brevard (BP)
- Sell back annual leave time, St. Augustine (BP)

### *Communication*

- Visible administration, seeing faces on calls and in stations
- Foster culture, Ambassador Program
- Provide the “Why”
- Providing clear expectations

## Focus Group Participants

### *Facilitator*

- Keith Chapman, Ten-8 Fire and Safety

### *State Support and Stakeholders*

- State Fire Marshal's Office (FL)
- Bureau of Fire Standards and Training (FL)
- Florida Department of Health, EMS Section Administrator
- Florida Department of Health, EMS Planning Section
- Florida Department of Health, Florida CARES Coordinator
- Gulf Coast State College
- Hillsborough Community College

### *Fire Chiefs, Deputy, District, and Division Chiefs, Engineers, Firefighters and Recruiters from*

- Alachua County Fire Rescue, Fire Chief Harold Theus - [hmt@alachuacounty.us](mailto:hmt@alachuacounty.us)
- Apopka Fire Department
- Cape Coral Fire Department
- Clay County Fire Rescue
- Coral Springs Fire Department
- Dunedin Fire Rescue
- Gainesville Fire Rescue
- Hillsborough County Fire Rescue
- Immokalee Fire Control District
- Jackson County Fire Rescue
- Largo Fire Rescue
- Marion County Fire Rescue
- Miami-Dade Fire Rescue
- Oldsmar Fire Rescue
- Orange City Fire Department
- Panama City Beach Fire Rescue
- Plant City Fire Rescue
- Polk County Fire Rescue
- San Carlos Park Fire Protection and Rescue Service District
- St. Augustine Fire Department, Fire Chief Carlos Aviles - [caviles@citystaug.com](mailto:caviles@citystaug.com)
- St. Lucie County Fire District
- St. Pete Beach Fire Rescue
- Temple Terrace FD
- Titusville Fire Department
- Winter Haven Fire Department



## Survey Method

A survey tool was developed by James Angle with the Bureau of Fire Standards and Training using ArcGIS. Along with the survey request (email) for this data gathering, participants were informed that they would receive the results and a white paper. The survey was available from February 1, 2023, to March 1, 2023. Prior to this timeframe, the Florida Fire Chiefs' Association regional participants were informed of the survey availability in hopes that word would be shared with local constituents, garnering added participation. Additionally, many agencies were contacted directly with a simple email or phone call requesting their participation. Fire Chiefs' Carlos Aviles and Harold Theus contact information were listed on the survey, barring any questions or comments from participants.

The survey tool included these questions:

Department Name, from a drop-down list.

Department Headquarters Location, address located using Esri.

Person Completing this Survey, *all remaining questions include a fill in text box*

Email address and Date Submitted.

1. Total number of certified firefighter (budgeted FTE's) in your department.
2. As of 2/1/23, Did/Do you have FF FTE vacancies? Yes or No, If Yes, fill in text box.
3. In the next 5 years how many new FF FTE's will you need \_\_\_\_? (an expansion to the existing workforce).
4. How many FF FTE's are currently in the DROP or have less than 5 years until retirement \_\_?
5. Considering questions 2 & 3 what number of needed FTE would have to be Paramedics \_\_?

Remarks: Thank you for completing our survey. If there is anything else, you would like us to know please enter it here.

## Survey Results

We received responses from 202 fire departments throughout the State of Florida. There are 37,665 firefighters certified in the State of Florida per the Bureau of Fire Standards and Training. The survey respondents included 28,564 current firefighter positions; this indicates 76% of Florida firefighters were represented in the ArcGIS survey.

Of the 462 registered fire departments in the State of Florida, 55% are career or mostly career fire departments (USFA, 2023). 45% of fire departments in the State of Florida are completely or mostly volunteer, roughly 208 fire departments, which may consist of a single fire station. The Bureau of Fire Standards and Training records indicate there are currently ~3,000 volunteer firefighters in the State of Florida.

1. Total number of certified firefighter (budgeted FTE's) in your department

Total number for all responses **28,564**

2. As of 2/1/2023, Did/Do you have FF FTE vacancies?

Total number for all responses **1,469 (5% of budgeted)**

3. In the next 5 years how many new FF FTE's will you need \_\_\_\_? (an expansion to the existing workforce)

Total number for all responses **3,961**

4. How many FF FTE's are currently in the DROP or have less than 5 years until retirement \_\_\_\_?

Total number for all responses **2,490 (50% represents the Southeast region)**

5. Considering questions 2 & 3 what number of needed FTE would have to be Paramedics \_\_\_\_?

Total number for all responses **3,850 (71% FTEs need to be a Paramedic)**

	Northwest	Northeast	East Central	West Central	Southwest	Southeast	Statewide
Respondents	31	29	42	38	20	42	202
Total number of certified firefighter (budgeted FTE's) in your department	1,415	4,397	4,375	5,477	2,206	10,694	28,564
As of 2/1/2023, Did/Do you have FF FTE vacancies?	75	283	192	338	92	489	1,469
In the next 5 years how many new FF FTE's will you need ____? (an expansion to the existing workforce)	360	681	764	752	424	980	3,961
How many FF FTE's are currently in the DROP or have less than 5 years until retirement ____?	138	335	277	362	144	1,234	2,490
Considering questions 2 & 3 what number of needed FTE would have to be Paramedics ____?	144	761	561	798	234	1,352	3,850

## Remarks from Survey Participants

“With minority staffing nationwide at between 8-18% depending on ethnicity, what “successful” recruitment activities have departments found? (I would define successful by the minority applicant remains with the agency five or more years.)”

“One of our biggest recruiting tools has been staying very involved with the local training programs. Many of our employees are instructors, which has been an incredibly consistent recruiting tool.”

“Planning to hire 30 this year due to the new station and attrition, but can only hire in groups of 10 due to training staff and logistical limitation. Also having difficulty finding qualified candidates who score well on testing and can pass the pre-employment screening. The department sends 6 employees to paramedic school each year.”

“We are a combination fire department, mostly volunteers. As most departments, volunteers are hard to come by these days. The City is going to have to decide how they intend on funding the department in the future. We are a small tourist town of 700 full-time residents.”

“100% volunteer with no indications of going paid anytime soon, but volunteer recruitment is also an issue.”

“Recruitment has been difficult over the past several years. Unfortunately, it seems hiring has turned into a version of cannibalism. Where departments are hiring each others firefighters.”

“We are also having discussions with our HR for opportunities to hire FF/EMT for 3<sup>rd</sup> on a rescue in lieu of only hiring a FF/PM. This will increase out diversity opportunities to reflect the community.”

“All new hires are required to complete Florida Certification as Paramedic within three years of employment.”

“The addition of 17 employees is for Kelly Day expansion.”

“We also have Paramedic requirements for Lieutenant (not for Engineer but has been discussed) so as we promote Paramedics to the Lieutenant rank those rescue Paramedic positions need to be filled.”

“There is a problem finding certified, qualified, and physically able people to become firefighter/paramedics.”

“We are a BLS 100% Volunteer Fire District. State requirements are too stringent for FF1. Bring back the FL State Volunteer Firefighter 40 hr basic course. Consider offering Property Tax Incentives for Volunteer Firefighters! State offered \$1,000 COVID incentive was not give to Volunteer Firefighters, Why Not?”

“We have a plan for 10 new stations at roughly 15 new employees per station”

“We are seeing a trend with younger employees; they desire more time off (family time) hard to get overtime filled. Requesting 24/72s in place of 24/48.”

“We have not been at full staffing in over three years.”

“Finding dual certified employees has been difficult. We have been hiring single certificate paramedics and paying for fire certification, or hiring FF/EMTs in paramedic school.”

“Recruiting paramedics is becoming a challenge and we need to explore more avenues to support paramedic programs across the state.”

“There are appx. 25 names on the department’s DROP Roster. We have seen an average of 2-3 additional retirements/resignations per year for the last 2-3 years.”

*\*This list does not include every remark provided.*

## General Observations

- The sample size of symposium participants is not considered statistically valid when considering the entire state of 37,665 firefighters in 2022, per Bureau of Fire Standards and Training. However, representation was included from each of the Florida Fire Chiefs' Association regions. Participants that were firefighters with five years or less in the fire service were considerably underrepresented. If future symposiums are coordinated, marketing will be focused on acquiring participation from these industry members.
- Florida's Fire Service remains progressive when compared to many parts of the United States. Florida Fire Chiefs' have responded to the various recruitment and retention challenges to the best of their ability. As a result, the Fire Chief responses during the symposiums produced many well-known and understood challenges and potential solutions. Additionally, Firefighters produced many observations and perspectives that will prompt need for more consideration.
- Several programs and policies were identified as best practice. Fire Chiefs are encouraged to reach out and obtain detailed information on these programs and policies to evaluate whether they would be viable options for implementation at their respective departments.
- A significant gap in effective resources and strategies has been identified pertaining to Firefighter recruitment efforts throughout the State of Florida. One idea that is currently being vetted is the creation of training and/or resources to identify best practices for firefighter recruitment. Topics of consideration would be branding, data analytics and effective use of social media, proper use and structure of video marketing, targeting specific audiences, the dos and don'ts of recruitment, etc.
- Many discussions heard in the symposium group sessions suggested there is a fair amount of disillusionment that plays a role in the retention challenges the fire service is facing. This disillusionment comes from two primary viewpoints. First, and most prominent, are the various marketing activities used by the fire service. Examples shared include fire department annual awards banquet and recruitment videos which commonly include only the most dramatic footage of extrications, rescues, working structure fires, and other less typical emergency responses. While these events occur daily across the State of Florida, it is not an accurate representation of the average day in the fire service at each individual agency. Community engagement and risk reduction, mundane station duties, medical - compared to fire call ratios, public assists, and other routine activities are not typically represented. This content can lead to a mismatch of expectation versus reality for the firefighter once hired. The second viewpoint stems from a lack of understanding or education related to inherent risks, overtime, pensions, shift schedules, and other aspects of the job. Unless the firefighter has family or close friends in the fire service, they learn about these things on the job, which can lead to job dissatisfaction and lack of engagement. While several potential solutions were discussed and documented as part of this initiative. Some departments have already started to address disillusionment in their recruitment videos. Examples are provided in the Supplemental Resources.

## Recommendations for Future Research

- Send out ArcGIS (or similar) survey annually to Florida fire and emergency services agencies, February 1 to March 1, ensure findings are shared with individual agencies, state support and stakeholders.
  - Consider adding additional questions to the survey based on remarks provided by previous survey and symposium participants. As well as include demographic information for agencies, request input from agencies with success testimonials on various initiatives and programs, ensure FTE vacancies and filled positions are determined either fully certified versus a trainee/cadet who is hired and in the process of becoming fully certified.

- Host annual symposium sessions and continue to gather information from the current workforce, to identify opportunities and trends, and report content to decision-makers.
- Collaborate with other states who express interest in this data collection model and connect with states which have alternative methods for acquiring current data and ensure content is shared with city/county administrators, state decision-makers and the United States Fire Administration.
- Maximize partnerships with officials at the Florida Department of Health for further data acquisition, trend determination and creative solutions. Such as the renewal survey information and license trends for EMS providers.

## Conclusion

Further research will be required to provide more conclusive and detailed findings. Program implementation, trials and efficacy should be tracked and shared by fire department agencies. Sharing conclusive outcomes with the Florida Fire Chiefs' Association may help document and archive best practices. The intent of this initial white paper is to share findings and establish a comprehensive, living document; continued data collection, and additional participant involvement throughout the State of Florida will be critical to this project's success (from the levels of Firefighter to Fire Chief). Within the next six-months a presentation will be developed to deliver the findings and strategies to a wider audience of fire service personnel as well as local and state government officials, with the hope of curbing some of the staffing challenges which are impacting the Florida Fire Service.

An article provided by the *Berrett-Koehler Publishers* titled, [\*What is Employee Experience \(Ex\) and How Should it Impact Your Staff Retention Strategies?\*](#) provides insight from a corporate lens. Although the Florida Fire Service may not be in business as a corporation, these takeaways likely apply to the necessity of fostering a culture of inclusivity.

*“Millennials say they would give up an average of \$7,600 in salary to work in a better corporate culture... Culture is all of the invisible forces that set the tone and mood of a workplace. Management style, corporate structure, and organizational goals and values are just a few examples. Creating a positive culture should be the centerpiece of staff retention strategies... In its simplest terms, employee experience refers to how happy and satisfied employees are with their work. When people don't feel valued, or they don't find purpose in their work, employee engagement and retention efforts will almost always fall flat. By fostering a corporate culture that helps employees grow and find value in their work, businesses can boost engagement... By modernizing the physical workspace to reflect these realities, businesses can bolster collaboration and teamwork. When it comes to retaining today's top talent, the solution is to offer culture, technology, and workspaces that reflect their values and preferences.”*

The input from our personnel matters and is often insightful. It is important to visit firefighters and learn about their concerns and potential solutions. Florida Fire Service leaders (and aspiring leaders) who actively participate in modeling behavior which is deliberate in action and inclusive of all personnel who are sworn to serve and protect our local communities will prove invaluable to overcoming the recruitment and retention challenges faced today.



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## Current Recruitment Videos

[Alachua County Fire Rescue](#) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXgpfdz-UeI&t=4s>

[Boca Raton Fire Rescue](#) - [https://youtu.be/lkTIK\\_RR-Uc](https://youtu.be/lkTIK_RR-Uc)

[North Collier Fire Rescue](#) - <https://youtu.be/e2G2KUy3P-8>

[Osceola Fire Rescue & EMS](#) - <https://vimeo.com/452899447>

[St. Petersburg Fire Rescue](#) - <https://youtu.be/4i73q7JtALk>

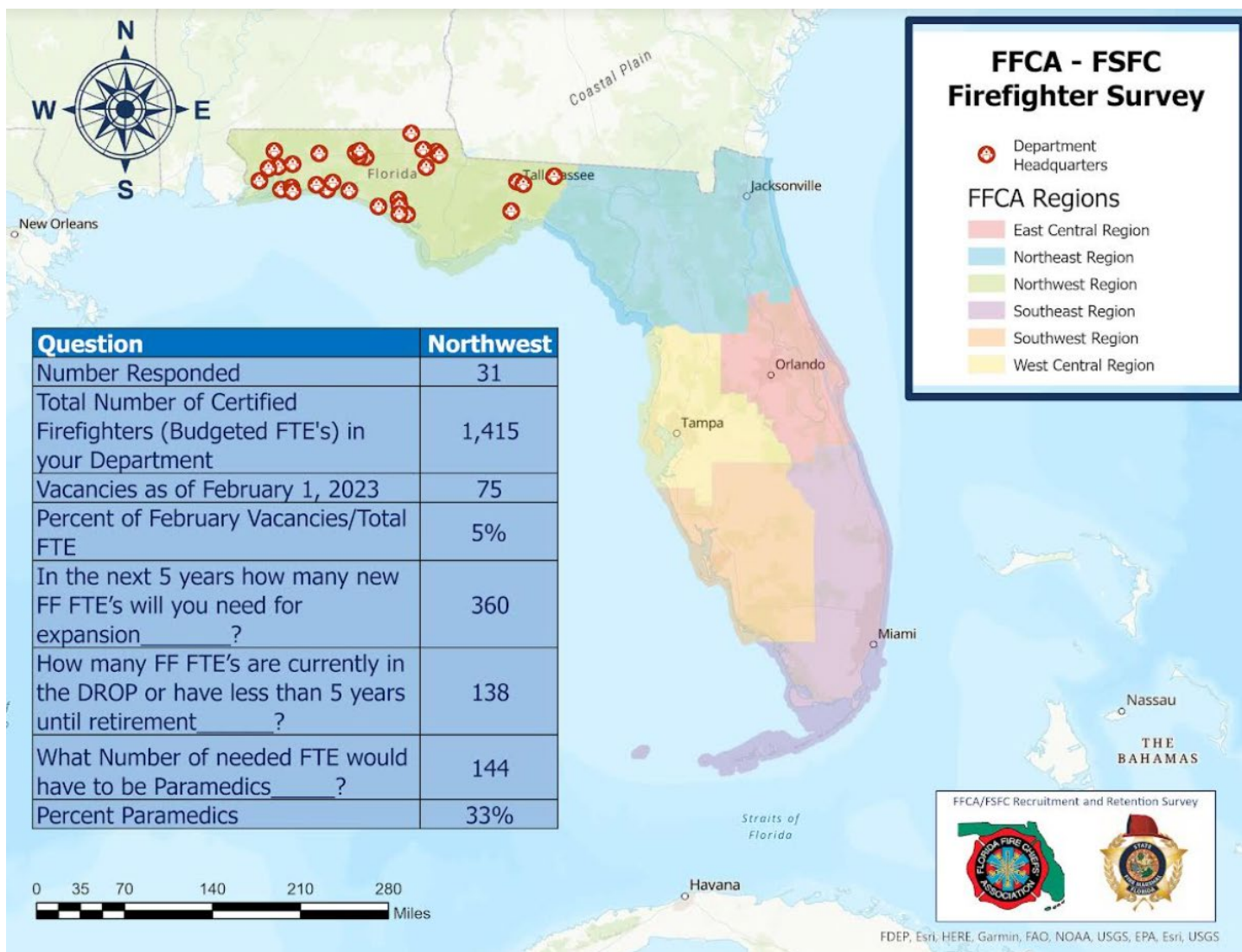
## Agencies and Organizations with Best Practices (from breakout groups)

- Alachua County FR (Cadet/Internship, Employee Health Clinic, Monthly Information/Vlog, Recruitment Teams)
- Brevard County FR (Employee Health Clinic, Recruitment Teams)
- Cape Coral FD (Officer Development)
- Clay County FR (Retiree Recruitment)
- Coral Springs FD (Social Media, Cadet Internship)
- Hillsborough County FR (Summer Programs)
- Hollywood FR (Education Incentive, coverage for classes)
- Miami-Dade FR (Officer Development, Recruitment Teams)
- Monroe County FR (Resident Focused)
- Polk County FR (Education Incentive, coverage for classes, Progression, Floaters, High School Program)
- Sunrise FR (Rotation of Busy Units, address burnout)
- St. Augustine FD (Sell back annual leave, Good to Great Trip, Takeover Tuesday)

## Appendix

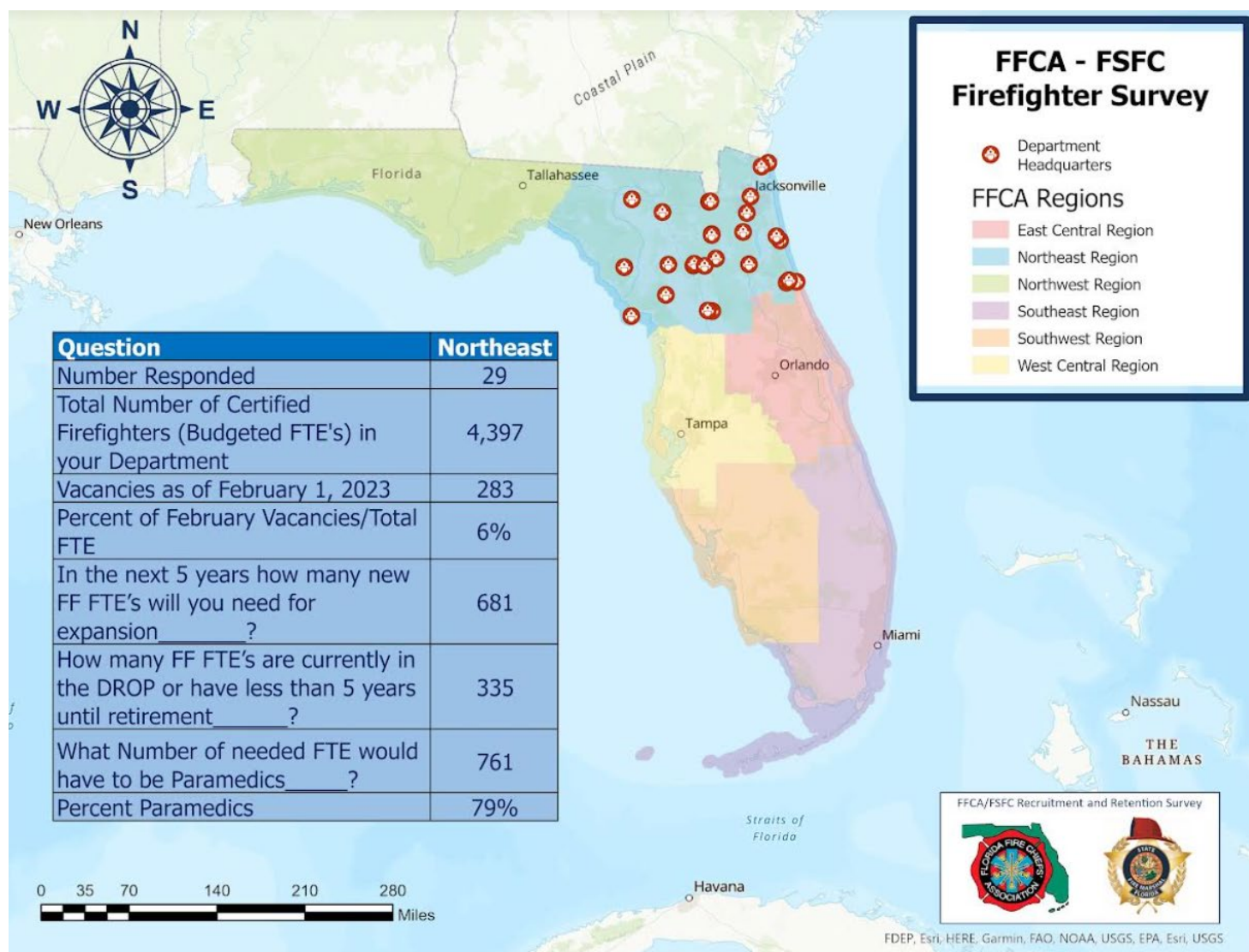
Maps with Results from the ArcGIS Survey for each of the six Florida Fire Chiefs' Association Regions

### Northwest Region



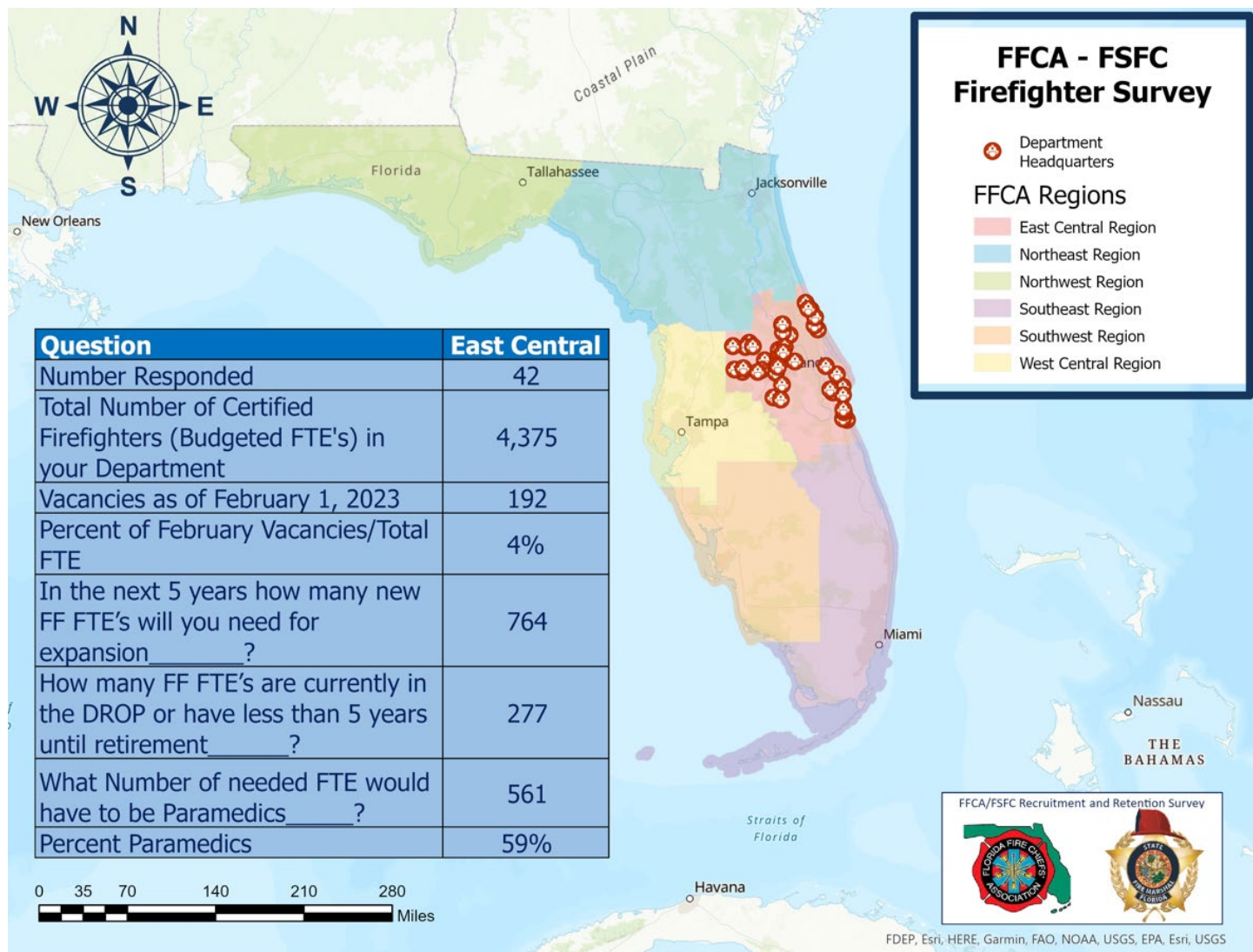


## Northeast Region

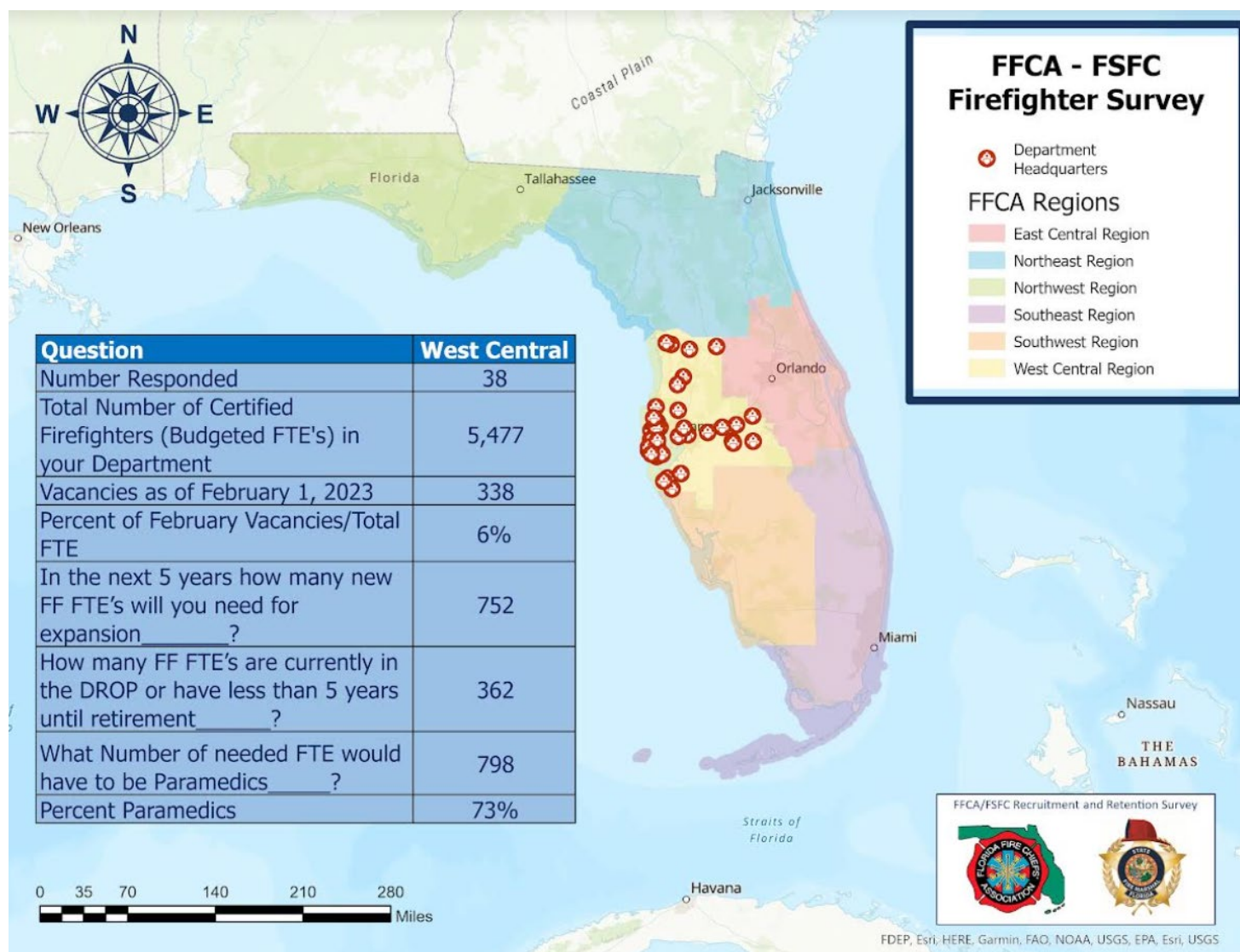




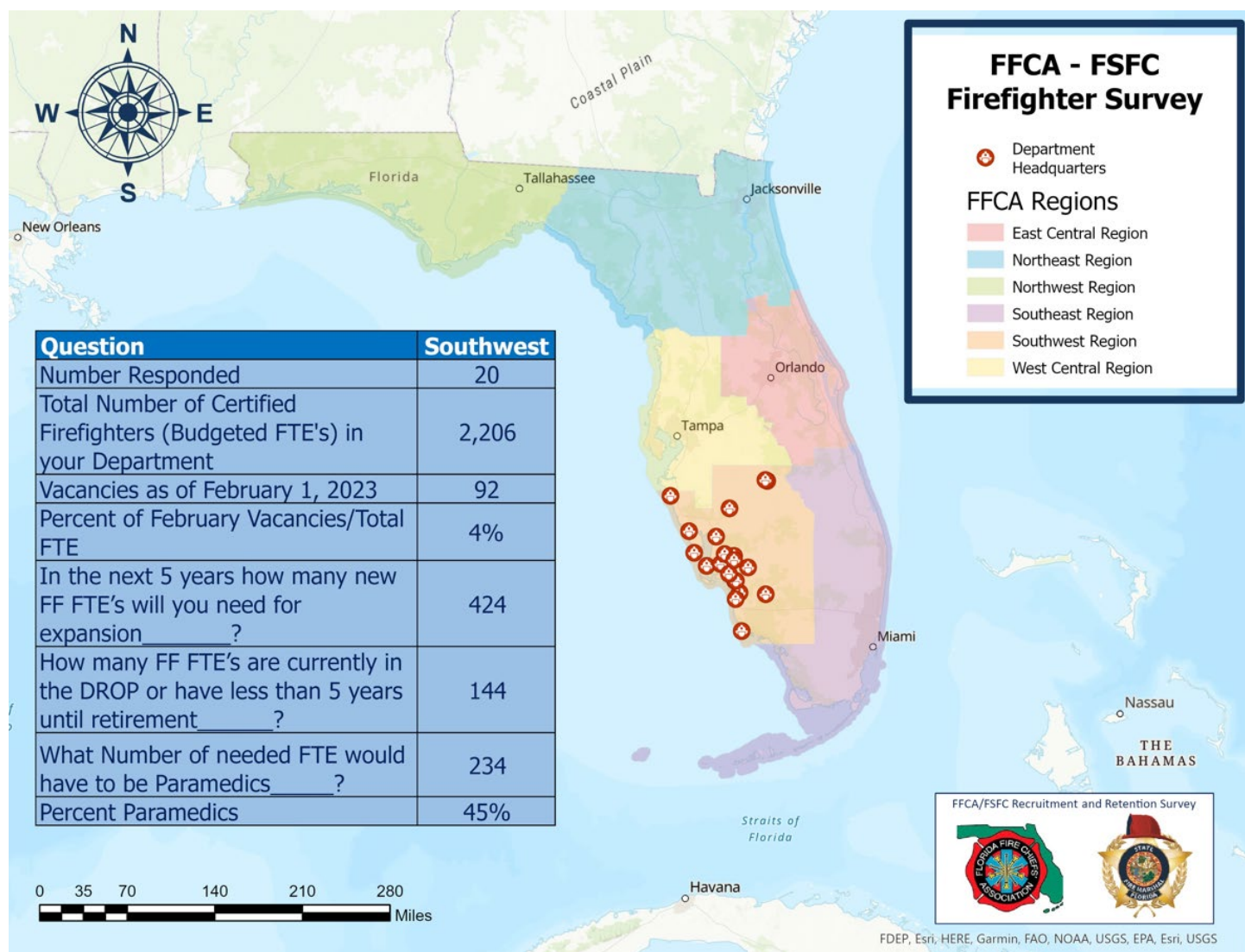
## East Central Region



## West Central Region

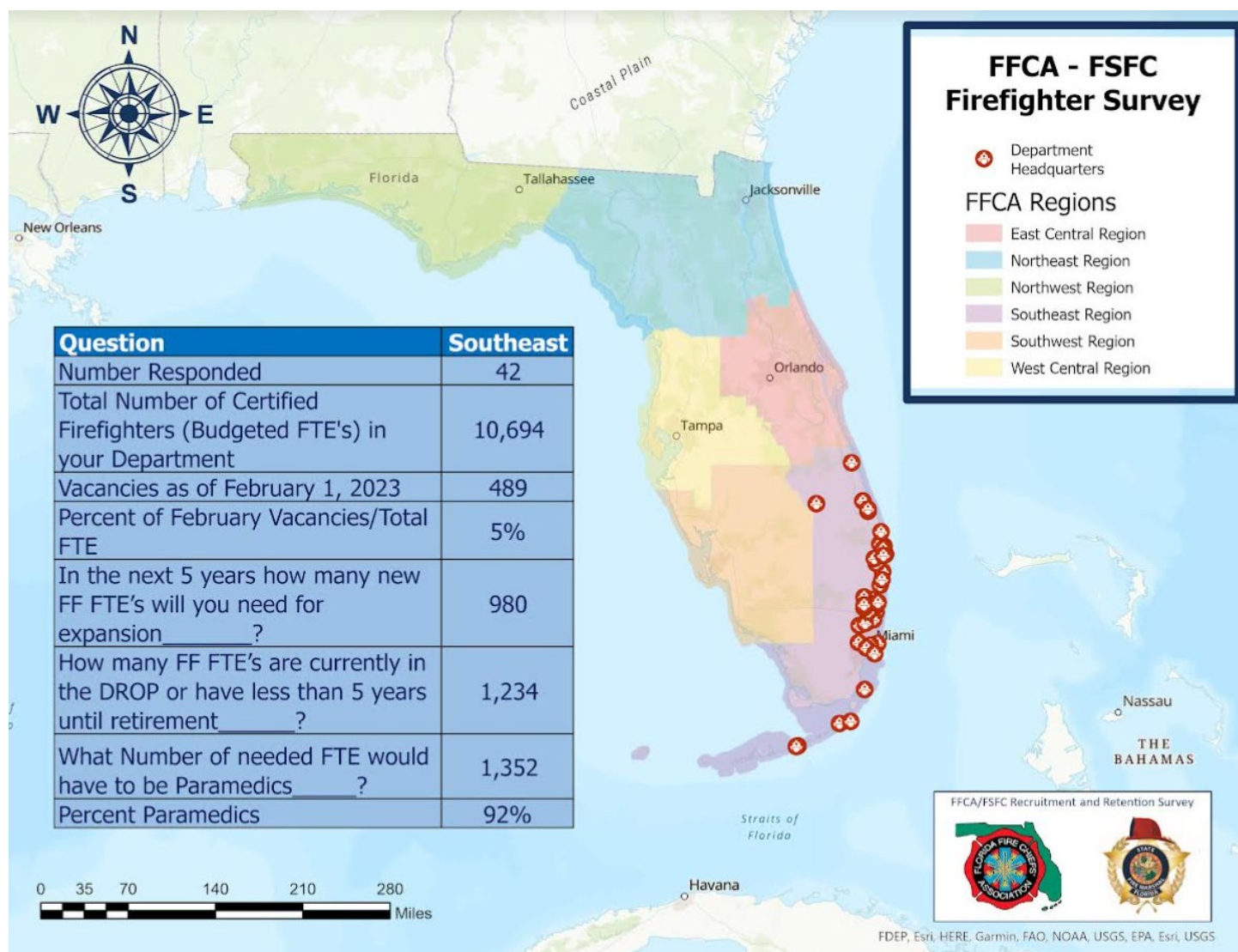


## Southwest Region

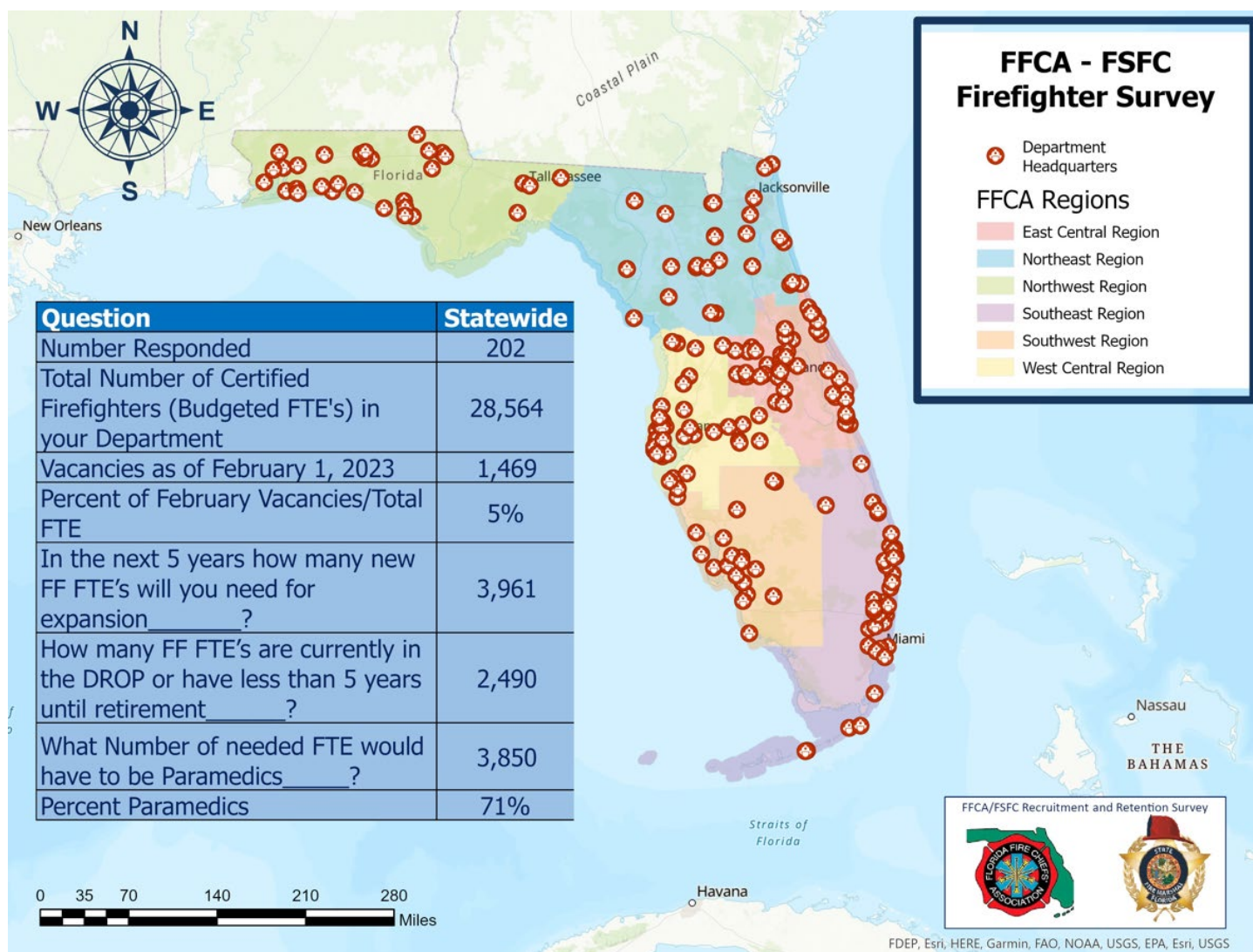




## Southeast Region



## Statewide



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