

# Serving the community while balancing multiple responsibilities – experiences of working as a paid part-time firefighter

Paid part-time  
firefighter

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study was to describe experiences of working as a paid part-time firefighter (PTF) in Swedish rural areas.

**Design/methodology/approach** – An inductive explorative design was used, based on interviews with 18 paid PTFs in Sweden. Data were analyzed using qualitative latent content analysis.

**Findings** – Three themes emerged from the interviews and describe paid PTFs' experiences. The findings provide insights into how firefighters share a strong commitment, how support plays a crucial role, and how training and call-outs contribute to their experiences. Paid PTFs' experiences are nuanced, ranging from personal limitations and challenges to satisfaction and the contrast with ordinary life.

**Practical implications** – The implications for fire and rescue service organizations are that they can encourage firefighters' commitment and pride, as well as the commitment and support of their families and main employers. Further, highlighting the importance of support and facilitating flexibility when on call is crucial. Finally, acknowledging and promoting personal development and facilitating an inclusive culture are important factors for both motivation and satisfaction.

**Originality/value** – Paid PTFs are under-represented in the literature, despite the reliance on them in Sweden, and this study begins to address the knowledge gap. To improve retention, it is vital to understand paid PTFs work situation: what motivates them, what barriers they face, and how those challenges influence their experiences.

**Keywords** Commitment, Fire and rescue service, Job satisfaction, Non-career firefighters, Part-time firefighters, Recruitment, Retention, Rural areas

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Even though there is great reliance on non-career firefighters (e.g. volunteer, on-call or part-time firefighters [PTFs]) for responses to accidents and emergencies, the recruitment

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and retention of these firefighters is a critical challenge in several countries (Boezeman and Ellemers, 2008; Evarts and Stein, 2017; McLennan and Birch, 2005). There has been a trend towards falling numbers of non-career firefighters, which is related to economic and demographic changes (McLennan and Birch, 2005). However, there are also other factors that contribute to this challenge. Studies show that difficulties in balancing family life and work responsibilities can create stress that leads to resigning (Cowlshaw *et al.*, 2014; McLennan *et al.*, 2009; Yarnal and Dowler, 2002). An inability to recruit and retain non-career firefighters makes it difficult for fire and rescue services (FRSs) to meet their community protection responsibilities. A literature review in the field by Lantz and Runefors (2021) describe factors contributing to motivation and challenges non-career firefighters experience. The majority of included studies in this review refer to volunteer firefighters. However, even though there is a reasonable amount of research regarding volunteer firefighters, few studies are covering the context of paid PTFs. There are several factors contributing to the recruitment and retention of non-career firefighters and a common denominator includes altruistic feelings (Gazzale, 2019; Henderson and Sowa, 2019). Recognition, supervisor support and climate are also related to satisfaction and intention to remain (Rice and Fallon, 2011). Recurrent reasons for resigning are often family related, such as family disapproval or lack of time to fulfil domestic demands (Malinen and Mankinen, 2018; McLennan *et al.*, 2009).

In Sweden, approximately 70% of all firefighters are paid PTFs, a position that entails serving in the FRS in addition to their main employment in other trades (MSB, 2021a). PTFs, with their competencies and local social relationships, are important elements in rural community resilience (Almklov *et al.*, 2018). Recruiting and retaining PTFs have been repeatedly stated as a major challenge, which is a cause of concern due to the important service they provide (SOU 2018:54). There has been a decrease in numbers of PTFs in Sweden, approximately 7 % decrease between 2001 and 2021; but there is no clear declining trend in the recent years (MSB, 2021b). However, the majority of FRSs state that they have difficulties recruiting new PTFs (MSB, 2021a). In addition, over the last 20 years, call-outs have increased by an average of 20% in Sweden (SKR, 2021a). Consequently, there is a high reliance on PTFs' contributions to fulfil the demands of the Civil Protection Act (LSO 2003:778). Enabling the retention of PTFs in rural areas is important not only for the FRSs but also for emergency medical services (EMSs) because PTFs are often used as an additional resource. Common concepts in rural areas are while waiting for ambulance (WWFA) and dual dispatch with PTFs and an ambulance; these are important co-uses of resources to shorten response time (Raun *et al.*, 2019; Svensson *et al.*, 2019; Nordberg *et al.*, 2015; Saner *et al.*, 2013). Fire stations in Sweden are dimensioned after specific criteria for response times, leading to a higher density of fire stations and thereby shorter response times in rural areas, when compared to EMSs.

PTFs are on call, which means that they have a pager while on duty and are required to respond to calls around the clock. PTFs need the consent of their main employer to engage in the FRS, enabling them to respond to calls during working hours (SOU 2018:54). Unlike volunteer firefighters, PTFs receive compensation for being on call and additional compensation for mandatory training and call-outs. Upon receiving a call, firefighters are required to immediately leave their current activity and transport themselves to the fire station within a specific amount of time, usually 5–10 min, which limits the area in which they can live and work. Since the mission of FRSs is ultimately to save lives, environment and property, knowledge that helps facilitate PTFs in rural areas is important. The literature review by Lantz and Runefors (2021) conveys that the majority of existing research addresses volunteer firefighters and mainly from the contexts of Australia or USA. Consequently, there is a lack of knowledge about PTFs. To improve retention, it is vital to understand their work situation: what motivates them, what barriers they face, and how those challenges influence their experiences. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to describe experiences of working as a paid PTF in rural areas in Sweden.

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## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Design

This study was based on an inductive design with an explorative qualitative approach.

### 2.2 Setting and criteria

The Swedish FRSs are diverse in terms of their organization and management. Some municipalities own and run their own FRS, while others collaborate with neighboring municipalities by either having a joint service or having a joint political board. There are around 15,000 firefighters in Sweden, of which about 11,000 are PTFs (SKR, 2021b). PTFs are traditionally employed in rural settings and in sparsely populated areas to respond to fires and other emergencies in their local community, but they also operate in urban areas as a complement to full-time firefighters. Hence, PTFs operate both at full-time fire stations and part-time fire station. The main criterion for inclusion in this study was participants in current duty as PTFs in Swedish rural areas at a part-time fire station. Rural in this context means that the area is primarily served by PTFs rather than full-time firefighters. Firefighters who currently work as both a full-time firefighter and a PTF were excluded. PTFs operating at a full-time station were also excluded since this defines as an urban area.

### 2.3 Participants

The study is based on a strategic selection of 18 PTFs to gain an understanding of their experiences. FRSs with different organizational structures, different sizes and with a geographical spread were selected and discussed among the authors, providing a large breadth and diverse profiles. First, the FRS manager was contacted and informed of the study. After receiving consent in writing from the manager, they mediated contact information to PTFs. Then the PTFs were contacted and informed, both in writing and orally. Their participation was voluntary and all participants signed an informed consent form. The PTFs were 13 men and 5 women from 18 municipalities in Sweden; five from the north, seven from the central part, and six from the south of Sweden. The ages ranged from 29 to 62 years and their professional experience ranged from 1 to 43 years, see [Table 1](#).

### 2.4 Data collection

Using in-depth interviews, data were collected to describe the varied experiences of work as a PTF. The first author contacted both FRS managers and participants and, after obtaining informed consent from both, interviews were conducted over a period of two months. The interviews lasted from 45 to 80 min, with an average of 57 min. Interviews were conducted using the Zoom video conferencing service followed by verbatim transcription.

The interviews focused on the participants' experiences of being a PTF, such as its benefits and challenges. At the beginning of the interview, demographic information was collected followed by a warm-up question about why and how they became a PTF. Then more exploratory questions about their experiences followed, like "describe your experiences of being a part-time firefighter". The questions allowed for some standardization in the interview process, while also allowing participants to provide in-depth responses about their experiences. Probing and checking were used to provide more well-developed, rich and detailed answers and to promote dialogue, such as "could you elaborate on that" or "explain what you mean by that". In order to give the participants the opportunity to have a final say, the interview ended with a summary followed by the question: "Is there anything we have not talked about that you would like to add?"

### 2.5 Data analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative latent content analysis according to the procedure by [Erlingsson and Brysiewicz \(2017\)](#). The initial step was to read through the text to get a

Characteristics	Number
<i>Sex</i>	
Woman	5
Man	13
<i>Age (years)</i>	
20–30	3
31–45	9
>45	6
<i>Family status</i>	
Partner with no children	4
Partner with children	12
Single	1
Single with children	1
<i>Main employment</i>	
Student	1
Self-employed	2
<i>Employed</i>	
Private	9
Public	5
Retired	1
<i>Employment time in fire service (years)</i>	
<5	7
5–15	8
>15	3
<i>Position</i>	
Firefighter	11
Commander (or combined with firefighter)	7
<i>Time from call-out to departure (minutes)</i>	
Within 5	12
Within 6–8	6
<i>Fire crew composition</i>	
1 Fire officer and minimum 4 firefighters*	12
1 Fire officer and maximum 3 firefighters	4
0 Fire officer and maximum 4 firefighters	2
<b>Note(s):</b> *1 Fire officer and 4 firefighters is the minimum permitted crew for performing a breathing apparatus intervention	

**Table 1.**  
Socio-demographic  
characteristics of study  
participants

sense of it as a whole. The text responding to the study's purpose was then divided into meaning units, followed by condensation. Condensed meaning units were labelled with a code that described the content in two to three words. Codes that were related to each other, by content or context, were grouped into categories. Categories described manifest content responding to who, what, when or where? Once the categories were established, the analysis process of finding latent meaning in relation to the study purpose began. Categories were sorted into themes and then an overarching theme, the highest form of abstraction, which is intended to represent the underlying meaning, see [Table 2](#). Themes describe the content of responses to questions as why, how, in what way or through what means? All authors discussed the analysis steps, and agreement was found in codes, categories and then latent meaning found in the themes as well as the overarching theme. This process was performed in the original language of Swedish, followed by translating the results to English.

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning unit	Code	Category	Theme	Overarching theme
"Either you should not have a family at all or you should have a partner who is very understanding to make it work"	Either no family or an understanding partner to make it work	Support from others	Need of support	Being on call requires lifestyle adjustments and support from others	Serving the community while balancing multiple responsibilities demands support and commitment
"I had very small children at home when I was on-call. (. . .) When the pager went off, I contacted grandma and told the children that now dad had to go. Grandma is coming now"	Small children at home when on call. I contacted grandma and told the children dad had to go	On call with children			

**Table 2.**  
Example of the analysis procedure that leads to higher levels of abstraction

### 2.6 Ethical consideration

The study followed the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (WMA, 2018). Throughout the study, participants were informed that participation was voluntary, data were handled confidentially and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time without providing a reason. The privacy of the participants was protected by not mentioning names, dates or specific details. All participants signed an informed consent form. An ethical committee approval was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (reg. no. 2021–00563).

## 3. Findings

The findings are presented as the overarching theme, followed by three themes that describe the various and multifaceted experiences of PTFs, see Table 3.

PTFs serve their local community in an FRS while also balancing multiple responsibilities from their main employment and family. Doing so requires support from others, shown as family encouragement, back-up support when children are involved and the consent of the main employer. The PTFs share a strong sense of commitment and motivation. However, motivation is affected by the working environment. Equipment, facilities and culture can both enhance and decrease motivation. Supportive colleagues, a harmonious culture and feedback contribute to motivation, which leads to satisfaction. A low call-out frequency, on the other hand, lowers motivation. The PTFs' work situations require life adjustments and responsibilities but offer adaptive development of competence from training and call-outs, adding to the dimension of work as a PTF.

### 3.1 Commitment and motivation contribute to satisfaction but are affected by the working environment

The PTFs have a strong sense of commitment to the community and of contributing to the welfare of others, combined with individual motivation from their feelings of pride and fulfilment. The commitment and motivation contributes to job satisfaction but can be altered by the working environment.

Commitment and social meaning underpin the work as a PTF, which relates to helping others and serving the community. The PTFs have a sense of responsibility to contribute to

Category	Theme	Overarching theme
Community commitment	Commitment and motivation contribute to satisfaction, while being affected by the working environment	Serving the community while balancing multiple responsibilities demands support and commitment
Individual motivation		
Working environment		
Being on call	Being on call requires lifestyle adjustments and support from others	
Need for support		
Learning from training	Development of competence through training and call-outs, aiming for proficiency	
Experiences from call-outs		

**Table 3.**  
Categories, themes and the overarching theme

the community and feelings of doing something meaningful, making a difference in people's lives. Despite it being a part-time job, the PTFs describe themselves as professional and highly committed. They also feel an obligation to contribute to make communities in rural areas liveable. *"They [municipality] have basically closed down everything here but, so far, at least someone will come when I am in need"*. These obligations originate from a sense of responsibility and a striving to provide an FRS with high standards, and to contribute to the welfare of the community. The benefits of the service provided to inhabitants are often very obvious, especially in sparsely populated areas. Further, there is strong cohesion within the work group that is described as essential. Camaraderie is an important factor in being engaged in the FRS, and the PTFs describe feelings of trust, reliance and support in the group. *"Perhaps I trust them more than I trust most other people I know in some strange way; even though we do not talk so much privately, it is still an incredibly strong community"*.

The PTFs are motivated by several individual but recurrent factors. There is a sense of pride which can be reinforced by community inhabitants. There are examples when they literally save someone's life after a cardiac arrest and, a couple of weeks later, get a "thank you" at the local grocery store. Even though being a PTF encroaches on family, work and leisure time, the reward and gratitude from the community is often great. Helping others in need brings a great sense of satisfaction. The PTFs describe their work as exciting, stimulating and fun and they see a future in the FRS. There are similarities to volunteering. *"I would have done this without compensation. (...) I love this work"*. The financial compensation is viewed as a motivation, while others find it small in relation to the important services they deliver. However, pay is not a primary reason for working as a PTF. Another important motivator is the opportunity to gain new knowledge and personal development. Even if the possibilities for acquiring practical skills are significant, self-awareness and personal development are described as essential. Further, knowledge attained in the service is often useful in other aspects of life. The PTFs feel more equipped to handle difficult and stressful situations and are more willing to act when they encounter an accident outside the FRS in private settings.

The FRS working environment, both cultural and physical, affects the PTFs experiences and job satisfaction. Incidents from call-outs can leave PTFs struggling with upsetting emotions and memories. To gain emotional resilience, debriefing and feedback are vital tools in the

organization, along with collegial support and encouraging leaders. Age, personality and living conditions differ among the PTFs, and this diversity has been described as a characteristic that contributes to a harmonious culture. However, the PTFs also describe the need to fit in with current norms at the fire station, of becoming an outsider if they do not fit in. PTFs also express the feeling that women are unwelcome and not suitable for the service. *“There is an opinion that females have no place in the fire and rescue service”*. Female PTFs describe the male-dominated workplace as having an impact on their experiences, for example, being treated differently due to being in the minority. Exclusion is also shown in the form of facilities; there are fire stations which do not have female changing rooms, leading to females showering at home, missing out on valuable post-call-out conversations. Another physical factor that affects experiences is how part-time fire stations often inherit older vehicles and equipment, which leads to reduced motivation due to the feeling of not being valued in the organization.

### 3.2 *Being on call requires life adjustments and support from others*

A considerable part of the work as a PTF involves being on call, which requires lifestyle adjustments and necessitates support. Life in general, family needs and activities are all affected by being on call, because a PTF must be able to leave what they are doing immediately, at any time. Having support is essential for many reasons, ranging from family encouragement to the necessary prerequisite: official support in the form of the main employer’s consent.

Being on call means that the PTFs must be prepared to immediately leave their current activity to respond to the call. Some PTFs use the description *“sock week”*, which implies constant readiness, wearing socks even with sandals in the middle of summer. Being on constant stand-by affects the amount of experienced stress and quality of sleep. PTFs are required to be within a certain range of the fire station so they can respond to calls, which affects them in numerous ways, ranging from not being able to take the dog for a walk, to needing backup care for children. Being on call intrudes on spontaneous activities with friends and family. *“Nothing gets easier when on call”*. It involves effort and planning, and resembles being locked up or restrained, with a seemingly higher impact in smaller communities since the range of community services is smaller. Being on call is described in terms of both a puzzle and a lifestyle. The PTF’s family is, to some extent, affected and being on call is described as a burden on the family. However, the family also show encouragement as well as pride. Another nuance of being on call is the expectation to spend more time at home which implies an opportunity to catch up with household chores.

One emerging element is the need for support. *“I do not think that anyone can work as a part-time firefighter if you do not have the support of your closest network, in the form of family, and also your workplace, of course”*. Support from friends and family is especially important when children are involved. There are families where the PTF is on call, and a relative or a family member is also on call to provide childcare cover at home. Further, support from the main employer is essential, partly because they need not only to consent to the PTF attending calls during working hours but also to support planning and organizing work to fit around the duty periods. However, even though having a PTF employed entails certain requirements, positive synergy exists in the form of added safety expertise. The PTFs describe how their main employer expresses a sense of security in having a PTF employed, as well as pride in contributing to the welfare of the community. Another nuance to needing support is the collegial support found in the FRS. The PTFs rely on each other to swap shifts, both on a regular basis due to main employment outside the area, and also more spontaneously for various other reasons. Even if the PTFs help each other on a regular basis, there is an unwillingness to ask for help. PTFs take extra shifts despite not really wanting to, due to feelings of obligation and commitment to each other. On the contrary, it is self-evident that the need and expectation for support also requires providing support to others.

### 3.3 Development of competence through training and call-outs, aiming for proficiency

A great deal of work as a PTF involves adaptive learning through training, increasing knowledge in parallel with gaining experience by attending call-outs. Training and call-outs contribute to developing competence over time, aiming for proficiency and enhancing the experience of being a PTF.

Competence development is an essential part of working as a PTF. It is important that the training is effective and worthwhile, since it takes a lot of time from the family and main employment. Additional training entails extra planning and sacrificing other activities in life, and is a challenge. Learning and experience from call-outs are built over time; the PTFs feel that it is an ongoing adaptive process, one that is not only interesting but also challenging. This striving for competence creates both motivation and stress; motivation as a feeling of personal development but, on the other hand, stress due to the feeling of never really being adequately trained. Further, there are competencies that are described as being extra useful in civilian life. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation and emergency care are described as valued skills in life and by the main employers. The PTFs are often given the role of safety representative and their skills are appreciated by their main employers. Even though there is a willingness to learn more, there is also a feeling of shortage of time. *“It can feel like a disadvantage with this job, that you never have time to work with all the equipment. So you feel like you never become 100% [confident] at everything”.*

One nuance to working as a PTF is the experience of responding to call-outs. The frequency of call-outs can differ between fire stations, with the frequency affecting experience and motivation. Low frequency contributes to stress due to inexperience. The PTFs also express a feeling of growing carelessness, boredom or declining motivation due to a low frequency of call-outs. Attending call-outs is important to maintain motivation and practice skills in real settings. There are stations which implement free call-outs (attending when available in your free time) when the frequency is low. The adrenaline rush caused by responding to a call is a fundamental factor when working as a PTF, as the excitement and adrenaline is a stimulating contrast to ordinary life. However, there is always a risk of attending a call where the PTFs encounter someone they know, especially in smaller communities. Another aspect of attending calls is the time taken from other activities. Call-outs which last for several hours create stress. *“If you go away for half a day and then you come back, well that was half a day of your main employment. When are you going to recoup that?”* Attending WWFA are described from a dual perspective. On the one hand, the benefit in the community is seen as high, but on the other these calls are emotionally taxing. In sparsely populated areas and large municipalities, the response times are long. *“We went to a cardiac arrest the other week, with a two-hour drive. And we were closer, the ambulance was another hour behind us”.* Emergency care is described as interesting and important but, simultaneously, the amount of time waiting for the ambulance is stressful.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Discussion of findings

This study shows that work as a paid PTF offers great satisfaction from helping others and contributing to the welfare of the local community, as well as feelings of obligation. This is similar to Yarnal and Dowlers's findings (2002) that volunteer firefighting requires a level of dedication and responsibility beyond the initial expectations, reinforcing the obligatory ties that volunteers feel toward serving their community. [Abelsson \(2018\)](#) highlights the importance of acknowledging firefighters for their contribution to other people's lives and well-being. The findings of this study show that there is a strong commitment and motivation among PTFs, which contributes to job satisfaction. However, this satisfaction can be affected by the FRS working environment. Facilitating an inclusive environment is important for both recruitment and for retention. Since the findings show that PTFs describe the need to fit in with

prevailing norms to not become an outsider, cultural factors affect the working environment and, accordingly, motivation and satisfaction. A study by McLennan *et al.* (2009) shows that negative aspects such as a poor climate, leadership failures and organizational shortcomings are the primary sources of dissatisfaction that leads to resignations (McLennan *et al.*, 2009). FRS management should educate leaders in conflict management and cultural biases, aiming for an inclusive environment that strengthens the working environment and job satisfaction. Another important measure is investing in the physical environment (e.g. vehicles and equipment) to promote sustainable retention of PTFs. It has been stated that loyalty and willingness to contribute to community has decreased, both in general and at a local level, that social ties within communities have become weaker (SOU, 2018:54). However, the study's findings contradict this view and show that there is great willingness and commitment to contributing to the community among active paid PTFs in Sweden. The satisfaction found in helping others and the obligation to the community is particularly clear. This corresponds to a study by Gazzale (2019), which states that altruism and giving back to the community are important values for volunteer firefighters when joining the service. FRS organizations should encourage PTFs' commitment, as well as the commitment shown by their families and main employers.

The findings of this study show that being a PTF requires lifestyle adjustments and support from others, especially family. A study by Hill *et al.* (2020) shows that relatives to volunteer firefighters describe work in an FRS as a way of life and prioritizing this means that family life is built around the needs of the organization. Further, family or partner disapproval is a barrier for serving as a volunteer firefighter (Malinen and Mankkinen, 2018). Another study shows that a significant predictor of burnout in firefighters is work–family conflict (Smith *et al.*, 2019). FRSs should help PTFs find a balance between the service and other commitments and, when possible, adapt flexibility to individuals' differing circumstances, needs and preferences. The findings of this study not only point out the important role of the family but also highlight the support of FRS colleagues and the main employer as vital for commitment to the service. FRSs should strive to mediate sustainable relationships between PTFs and their main employers, and point out the positive synergy effects for employers who have PTFs in their organization.

These findings show that being a PTF entails the continual acquisition of competences from training and experiences from call-outs, which leading to feelings of motivation and of stress. A source of call-out related stress is in waiting for an ambulance, especially in sparsely populated areas where the time waiting for back-up can be long. Debriefing, feedback and collegial support are vital tools for gaining emotional resilience. A study by Abellsson (2018) show that supportive colleagues, mentally preparing and being allowed to show feelings are all important factors that enable coping with a stressful environment. FRSs should facilitate supportive tools and ensure that PTFs set aside time for debriefing and feedback on a continuous basis. Further, the study's findings show that feelings of never being good enough can arise, along with feelings of time restraints, since additional training can be a challenge for PTFs. Other studies show that too much or unsatisfactory training can be a trigger for resignations among non-career firefighters (McLennan *et al.*, 2009; Malinen and Mankkinen, 2018; Lantz and Runefors, 2021). FRSs should facilitate flexibility regarding training and evaluate the efficiency of training. Since a low frequency of call-outs can negatively affect motivation, free call-outs could be used to increase individual opportunities to respond.

#### 4.2 Methodical considerations

To test the questions, a pilot interview was carried out, transcribed and then discussed among the authors. The first author interviewed all PTFs and transcribed the interviews. To ensure a high level of accuracy, the first author transcribed the data soon after the interviews were conducted. The other authors read the first four transcriptions to verify the interview guide in relation to the study's purpose. Dependability of the collected data was maintained by using the same interview guide throughout the entire study. Credibility was confirmed by allocating

sufficient time for data collection and analysis. Agreement by the authors was reached at every step after dialogue, to ensure that the analysis was supported by the data. Moreover, to attain dependability and confirmability, the analysis was discussed and reviewed by all authors and the analysis was also confirmed using direct quotes from the data. Finally, all authors agreed on the codes, categories and themes that emerged from the latent meanings, see [Table 3](#). The transferability of findings in this study should be conceivable in similar settings. Even though PTFs receive compensation for being on call, unlike volunteer firefighters, there are similar factors as regards commitment, motivation and challenges.

To recruit participants, managers were asked to mediate contact information for PTFs in their FRS organization. This could have affected which participants were included, because the manager had the opportunity to influence selection, for example by only mediating contacts to positive and motivated individuals. However, in large FRSs, the managers may not know their employees at an individual level. The strategic selection, based on a geographical spread, and varied experiences and ages, contributes to the richness of the data. The first author interacted with the participants throughout the interview, leading to a potential bias. However, the author did not lead the participants in specific directions during the interviews and maintained subjectivity and objectivity during the analysis. As the first author is a current participant in an FRS, both benefit and bias may be derived from understanding of concepts, own experiences and nomenclature. However, an understanding of contexts and nomenclature did ease the dialogue.

## 5. Conclusion and implications

The experiences of working as a paid PTF in rural areas in Sweden cover multiple aspects, ranging from commitment to obligation, from stress to satisfaction. PTFs serve the community but need to find a balance between the service and other commitments related to their main employment and family. Work as a PTF entails personal sacrifices but also adds contrast to life, for example, personal development and adrenaline when attending calls. Behind the firefighters is a network of friends and family who support and encourage them. The PTFs are highly motivated by their mission, leading to job satisfaction but are also affected by the work environment.

To facilitate and secure adequate numbers of PTFs in the future, FRSs need to address issues and thereby boost job satisfaction and minimize barriers to commitment. FRSs need to encourage PTFs' commitment and pride, and also endorse the commitment and support given by their families and main employers. Increased sense of pride and involving main employers could be facilitated in the form of rewards or benefits. PTF families could be invited to the station with the aim of engaging the community and increase the expectations and knowledge about the service. Further, it is important to illuminate the importance of support and facilitate flexibility as regards training and being on call. Since the family support is essential, FRSs should put in effort to educate families and discuss expectations when recruiting PTFs. Further, FRSs could explore flexible on-call schemes. Finally, acknowledging and promoting personal development and facilitating an inclusive culture are important factors for motivation and satisfaction. Since the working environment have a great impact on retention, practical implications of this study is to focus on creating a healthy culture, educate leaders and address barriers in the physical environment.

This study interviewed active paid PTFs. Future research could explore and describe the exit reasons of former PTFs, as well as examining the implications of Swedish volunteer firefighters' experiences. More beneficial insights could be gained by also investigating the experiences of PTFs' families and conducting studies to examine PTFs' satisfaction, commitment and values over time. Since support from the main employer is crucial for PTFs, determining which factors contribute to enabling this collaboration further would be very valuable.

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