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It was 1968 when Kevin Carry started with Darby Borough Fire Company No. 1, and back then, there were 300 volunteers at the ready when a fire broke out.

The oldest volunteer fire company in Delaware County and one of the oldest in the country, it started in 1775 and prospered along with Darby, where grist and woolen mills drove the economy.

"We used to have guys coming out of the walls," said Carry, now 55 and president of the fire company. He added, "It was the thing to do back then: volunteer and help the community."

But like many volunteer fire companies across the nation, Darby's has struggled to keep up its numbers. The larger of Darby's two volunteer companies, Fire Company No. 1 has 30 to 40 active members, Carry said.

"The guys we have now are pretty well dedicated," he said. "Probably only five guys still live in Darby. Guys who grew up in Darby keep coming back."

Firefighters interviewed in Delaware County, where 66 of the 68 active fire companies are volunteer, said part of the problem in securing volunteers stems from people leaving the towns in which they grew up. Many of the firefighters sticking it out at the volunteer companies are second-, third- or fourth-generation members. Joe Davis, Norwood's chief, has been with the company for 42 years, since he was 16. His father and his two sons also belong.

"We all still live in Norwood," he said.

The trouble isn't so much with recruiting young men eager to fight fire, Davis said. It's holding onto people whom the volunteer companies take the time and money to train.

Some young professionals are working more than one job and have less time to volunteer. More than ever, people leave their hometowns when they finish college or marry, said Joseph Locke Sr., chief fire inspector for the Delaware County Firemen's Association and a member of the Collingdale Fire Department for 40 years.

"They join when they're young, but then they get married," he said. "It used to be a lifetime commitment. Very few make it 20 years anymore."

In the 1960s, when a big fire broke out in Collingdale, nearly 100 volunteers responded to the call. But these days, the fire company can draw only about half that number, Locke said.

"We're lucky. We've been holding pretty good," he said.

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In Darby, a daytime fire might draw only a dozen firefighters, Carry said. If the numbers are too low, nearby companies can be called for help.

"What's missing in manpower, we make up for in mutual aid," Carry said.

As legislators look for ways to create incentives for **volunteer firefighters**, Carry and others are trying to keep family members coming back to the fire company.

Carry is proud that despite the big dropoff in volunteers, the company answers about 400 fire calls a year.

"There hasn't been a time when we had to scratch a call," he said.

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