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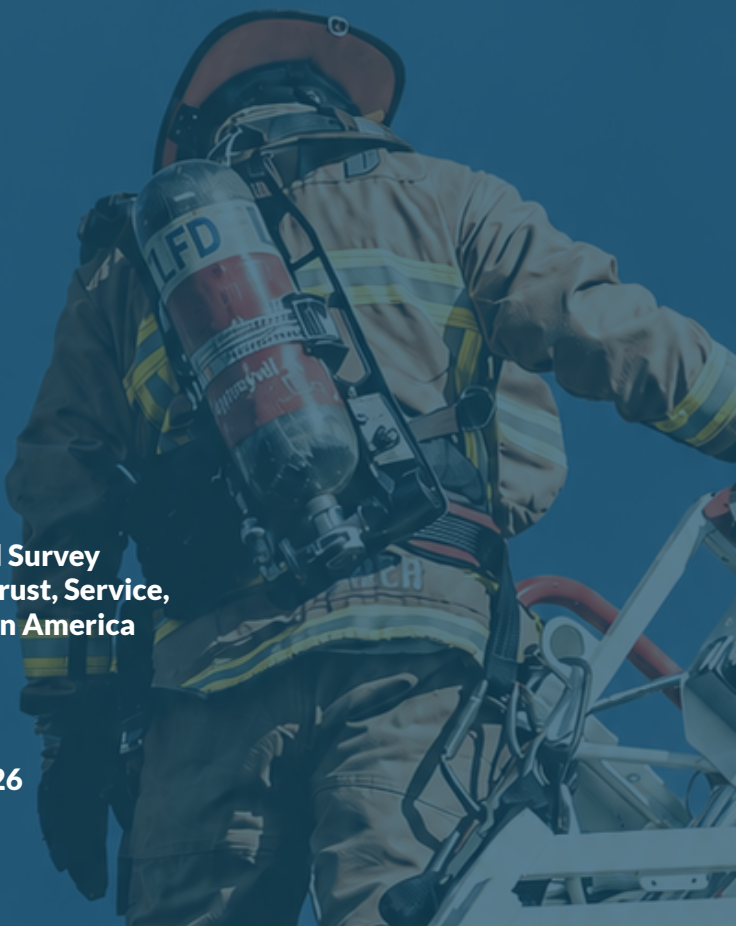
FIREFIGHTERS: THE LAST COMMON GROUND?



What a National Survey Reveals About Trust, Service, and Civic Unity in America

NOVEMBER 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Americans disagree on a great deal: politics, the media, science, institutions, even basic facts. Against that backdrop, a new national survey conducted by HarrisX for Philip Morris International's U.S. businesses (PMI U.S.) finds one point of near-total agreement: Ninety-five percent of U.S. adults trust firefighters to act in the best interests of their community, a level of trust that holds steady across generations, genders, and political affiliations.

This paper examines what the data show, why firefighters command such broad trust, how the firehouse became one of the country's most durable civic institutions, and what this means for companies and individuals seeking to strengthen their communities. The main finding is simple: Firefighters aren't one trusted group among many. They may be the last broadly shared symbol of public service in American life.


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TOPLINE FINDINGS

95%

Trust to serve
Trust firefighters to act in their community's best interests

32%

Ranked first
Chose firefighters as their most trusted group

83%

Ready to act
Are likely to support or thank firefighters this holiday season

- **In firefighters we trust.** Ninety-five percent of respondents trust firefighters to act in their community's best interests, and 94 percent trust them to do the right thing for their community.
- **First choice by a wide margin.** Asked which single group they trust most, 32 percent chose firefighters, nearly twice the share for doctors (18 percent) and more than 10 times the share for local elected officials (3 percent).
- **Partisan agreement.** Trust in firefighters is nearly universal across political lines: 95 percent among Republicans, 94 percent among Democrats, and 95 percent among Independents.
- **A unifying symbol.** Ninety-five percent agree firefighters are a unifying symbol of service in America, and the same percentage say they represent the best of public service.
- **Support equals community.** Ninety-five percent agree that supporting firefighters is a meaningful way for individuals and companies to strengthen local communities.
- **Ready to act.** Eighty-three percent say they are likely to thank, support, or contribute to an organization serving firefighters this holiday season, including 41 percent who are very likely to do so.

PMI U.S. Thanks for Giving: Drawing on a national HarrisX survey of 2,008 U.S. adults aged 21+, fielded October 30 to November 2, 2026.

PMI U.S.: Invested in the People Who Strengthen Communities

At PMI U.S., supporting firefighters is part of a broader commitment to being invested in the people and institutions that help communities thrive. Through its *Invested in America* platform, PMI U.S. focuses on practical, community-centered engagement that addresses real needs and creates tangible local impact. Since 2022, PMI U.S. has supported its community partners with more than $40 million in funding.

Our approach to what we call *pragmatic philanthropy* rests on a simple principle: Meaningful support begins with listening, showing up, and contributing in ways that matter—values firefighters embody every day. They respond when emergencies occur, help communities prepare for challenges and prevent disasters, and serve their neighbors without regard to politics, background, or circumstance. Supporting firefighters is therefore about

more than recognizing one profession. It is an investment in the resilience and well-being of the communities they protect.

PMI U.S. is proud to support firefighter and first-responder organizations across the country, including through $1.7 million in firefighter-related commitments to date. This includes support for the Los Angeles County Fire Department, the FDNY Foundation, the Wildland Firefighter Foundation in Colorado and Oregon, the Milwaukee Firefighters Local 215 Charitable Foundation, the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, the Sacramento Firefighters Local 522 Benevolent Fund, and the CFFU Charity Fund.

In 2026, PMI U.S.'s annual Thanks for Giving initiative focuses on firefighters under the banner **Thanks for Answering the Call**. The effort combines national recognition with local action, including support for holiday meals for firefighters in one community in each of the 50 states. Through firehouse visits, community engagement, and investment in organizations that support the fire service, the initiative is designed to turn gratitude into action.

By pairing appreciation with practical support, PMI U.S. seeks to strengthen the local institutions and community connections that make America's towns and cities more resilient. Learn more at uspmi.com/corporate-social-responsibility.

WHAT THE SURVEY REVEALS

94%

Doing what's right
Trust firefighters to do the right thing for their community

41 pts

A striking lead
The trust gap between firefighters and local elected officials

1 pt

Across party lines
The Republican–Democrat gap in trust in firefighters

The Trust Problem in American Life

For more than a generation, trust in American institutions has been declining. Neighbors sort themselves by politics, the news is consumed through partisan filters, and many Americans believe leaders in government, media, and business serve someone other than them. Institutions that once held communities together, such as civic clubs, religious congregations, and local newspapers, have weakened or disappeared in many places.

The HarrisX data reflect this. Only 54 percent of adults trust local elected officials to act in their community's best interests, and only 63 percent trust local journalists to do so. Even groups with traditionally strong reputations are showing cracks. Trust in police officers is at 78 percent overall but falls to 67 percent among Gen Z adults and varies widely by party. Trust in teachers is 92 percent among Democrats and 80 percent among Republicans.

Firefighters are the exception. Their trust scores are high and consistent. Most groups the survey tested split along lines of age, gender, or ideology. Firefighters don't. That consistency is what turns a popular profession into a unifying one.


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Table 1

TRUST BY GROUP, U.S. ADULTS 21+

(percent trusting "a great deal" or "somewhat")

Group	Act in community's best interests	Do the right thing for the community	Trusted MOST (single choice)
Firefighters	**95%**	**94%**	**32%**
Doctors	90%	90%	18%
Teachers	87%	87%	14%
Small-business owners	87%	87%	9%
Police officers	78%	80%	16%
Local nonprofit leaders	76%	77%	7%
Local journalists	63%	66%	2%
Local elected officials	54%	56%	3%

Source: HarrisX for PMI U.S., Oct. 30 to Nov. 2, 2026.

Table 2

TRUST TO ACT IN THE COMMUNITY'S BEST INTERESTS, BY PARTY

Group	GOP	Dem	Indy	Spread (GOP vs. Dem)
Firefighters	**95%**	**94%**	**95%**	**1pt**
Doctors	90%	90%	91%	0pts
Teachers	80%	92%	87%	12pts
Police officers	87%	74%	75%	13pts
Local nonprofit leaders	73%	82%	71%	9pts
Local journalists	49%	77%	61%	28pts
Local elected officials	57%	59%	45%	2pts

Source: HarrisX for PMI U.S.

The Trust Ladder: Where Firefighters Stand

The survey asked respondents how much they trust each of eight groups to act in the best interests of people in their community, and separately, to do the right thing for their community. Firefighters ranked first on both measures.

The single-choice question paints the clearest picture. When respondents had to pick just one group they trusted most, they didn't spread their answers evenly across the eight professions. A plurality chose firefighters. The 14-point lead over doctors, the second-place group, is large for a field this strong. The distance between firefighters and local elected officials is even more striking: 41 points on the best-interests measure and 29 points on the single-choice question.

In short, Americans hold firefighters to the highest standard and believe firefighters meet it.

A Consensus That Crosses Every Divide

Across Party Lines

Perhaps the study's most significant finding is the nonpartisan results. At a time when it can be hard to find a statement that a large majority of Republicans and Democrats both accept, firefighters draw near-unanimous support from both.



Several groups (local journalists, police officers, and teachers) show double-digit partisan gaps. Local elected officials are trusted by barely half of the members of either major political party. Firefighters stand apart for both the strength of trust they inspire and the absence of a meaningful partisan gap. The single-choice results follow the same cross-partisan pattern: 32 percent of Republicans, 30 percent of Democrats, and 34 percent of Independents named firefighters as the group they trust most, significantly higher than any of the other options.

Across Generations

Trust in firefighters is strong across generations but declines slightly among younger respondents—from 98 percent among Baby Boomers and 97 percent among Gen X to 92 percent among Millennials and 89 percent among Gen Z adults. Even among the youngest respondents, however, trust in firefighters is significantly higher than their trust in local nonprofit leaders (71 percent) and police officers (67 percent).

Across Genders

Men and women trust firefighters at nearly the same rates (94 and 96 percent, respectively), and those same percentages agree that these public servants are a unifying symbol of service. Women are somewhat more likely than men to name firefighters as the group they trust most (35 percent vs. 28 percent).

Table 3

FIREFIGHTER MEASURES BY GENERATION

Measure	Gen Z (21+)	Millennials	Gen X	Boomers
Trust firefighters to act in community members' best interests	89%	92%	97%	98%
Trust firefighters to do the right thing for the community	91%	91%	94%	98%
Chose firefighters as MOST trusted among the 8 groups listed	31%	30%	36%	30%
Firefighters are a unifying symbol of service in America (% agree)	91%	94%	95%	98%

Source: HarrisX for PMI U.S.

Why Americans Trust Firefighters

HarrisX asked the 32 percent of respondents who named firefighters as their most trusted group to explain why. Their answers fell into a few consistent themes. Firefighters are seen as action-oriented public servants whose mission is to save lives and protect communities. They willingly put themselves in danger, show up reliably in emergencies, and help people regardless of politics, background, or personal gain.

Theme One: They Run Toward Danger

The most visible reason for trust is physical courage. Respondents described firefighters as people who go toward the risk that everyone else is fleeing.

> ***Firefighters run into burning buildings while others are running out."***

> ***They're genuinely hard-working, trustworthy people who are willing to go into a dangerous, burning place to save you if needed. They're courageous and honorable."***

Theme Two: They Have No Agenda

Many respondents contrasted firefighters with groups they see as driven by ideology or a desire for power or money. A firefighter's job is defined by results that can't be faked: the fire is out, people are safe, and the home or business is protected. That leaves little room for suspicion about motives.

> ***The only agenda they have is to save lives."***

> ***They aren't in it for the power or the ability to lord over people or for the money. They are in it for one thing: to be of service to the people."***

Theme Three: They Show Up for Everyone

Respondents noted that firefighters responding to an emergency don't ask whom the person in need voted for, what they believe, or what they can pay. Help comes to everyone the same way, and that impartiality is what lets people across the spectrum see firefighters as their own.

> ***They show up when people need help, put others before themselves, and work hard to keep the community safe without expecting anything in return."***

Theme Four: They Are Our Neighbors

Respondents also stressed that firefighters belong to the community. They typically live where they serve, and the families they protect include their own.

> ***Firefighters are usually residents in the community. They put their lives on the line every day and are often in challenging situations. They serve the residents and their own families too."***

Taken together, these themes describe trust earned over time through proven competence, visible sacrifice, impartial service, and local belonging. That combination is rare for institutions.





Roots of a Unifying Institution

The American fire service predates the country. On December 7, 1736, Benjamin Franklin co-founded Philadelphia's Union Fire Company, generally described as the first organized all-volunteer fire company in the colonies.[1] Its early members brought their own leather buckets and bags to every fire, met monthly to discuss prevention and firefighting methods, and became a model for fire companies across the colonies. One essential difference from earlier mutual-aid fire societies in Boston was that the earlier groups protected only their own members, while Franklin's company served the wider community. The Philadelphia Fire Department traces its roots to Franklin's company.[2]

That founding idea, neighbors organizing voluntarily to protect one another, still runs through the American fire service. It also explains why firefighters feel like part of the community rather than an outside authority. The firehouse began as a civic association, and in thousands of towns it still is one.

1 Benjamin Franklin Historical Society, "The Union Fire Company."
2 Fireman's Hall Museum, "History of Firefighting in Philadelphia."

The Firehouse Today

According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), the United States had approximately 1,018,100 firefighters in 2023. Of those, 383,000 were career firefighters, and 635,100 were volunteers, meaning volunteers account for roughly 62 percent of the nation's fire service.[3]

Although most Americans are protected by career departments, more than 82 percent of the nation's fire departments are all-volunteer or mostly volunteer, underscoring the continued importance of volunteer firefighters, particularly in rural and smaller communities. The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) reports that 18,873 departments are all-volunteer and another 5,335 are mostly volunteer. Citing a Fire Protection Research Foundation study, the NVFC estimates that the time volunteer firefighters donate provides communities with about $46.9 billion in value each year.[4]

3 National Fire Protection Association, *U.S. Fire Department Profile 2023* (Quincy, MA: NFPA, 2024).

4 National Volunteer Fire Council, *Volunteer Fire Service Fact Sheet.*

Table 4

THE AMERICAN FIRE SERVICE AT A GLANCE

Indicator	Figure	Source
U.S. fire departments (2020)	29,452	NFPA
Total firefighters (2023)	~1,018,100	NFPA
Volunteer share of firefighters (2020)	62%	NFPA
All-volunteer departments	18,873	NVFC
Estimated annual savings from volunteer time	$46.9 billion	NVFC/ FPRF

Sources: NFPA U.S. Fire Department Profile 2023; NVFC Volunteer Fire Service Fact Sheet.

A Trusted Institution Under Strain

While firefighters are among the most trusted people in American life, the departments they serve are struggling to recruit and retain volunteers. The NFPA reported that the 2020 volunteer count was the lowest it had recorded, and the NVFC's more recent figure of 635,100 volunteers shows the decline continuing.[5] The strain on resources is exacerbated by firefighters responding to a wider range of emergencies, including medical calls, vehicle crashes, hazardous-materials incidents, natural disasters, and water rescues.[6]

This is where public goodwill matters. An institution trusted by 95 percent of Americans still depends on recruiting, equipment, training, health support, and public recognition. Meeting those needs increasingly requires active support from the communities firefighters serve.

5 National Fire Protection Association, *U.S. Fire Department Profile 2020*; National Volunteer Fire Council, *Volunteer Fire Service Fact Sheet*.

6 National Fire Protection Association, *U.S. Fire Department Profile 2023*.


DENVER
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Table 5

LIKELIHOOD TO THANK, SUPPORT, OR CONTRIBUTE TO AN ORGANIZATION SERVING FIREFIGHTERS THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

Segment	Likely + Very Likely	Very Likely
All adults 21+	83%	41%
Gen Z (21+)	85%	41%
Millennials	85%	46%
Gen X	82%	40%
Baby Boomers	81%	36%
Republicans	85%	47%
Democrats	81%	37%
Independents	84%	39%
Women	85%	41%
Men	82%	41%

Source: HarrisX for PMI U.S.

From Gratitude to Action

Trust alone does not keep fire departments running. It does not recruit volunteers, purchase equipment, fund training, or support firefighters and their families. That said, the encouraging news is that trust appears to be translating into a willingness to help. According to the HarrisX survey, 83 percent of Americans say they are likely to thank, support, or contribute to an organization serving firefighters this holiday season, including 41 percent who say they are very likely to. That suggests the deep reservoir of goodwill Americans feel toward firefighters may be matched by a willingness to invest in the people and institutions behind that trust.

Two patterns stand out. First, younger adults are the readiest to act. Millennials have the highest share saying they are very likely to support firefighters this holiday season (46 percent), and Gen Z and Millennials tie for the highest net likelihood (85 percent). Gen Z trusts firefighters slightly less than older adults do, yet they are among the most willing to show support. For organizations trying to reach younger Americans through civic engagement, that matters.

Second, intent to give holds up across parties: 85 percent of Republicans, 81 percent of Democrats, and 84 percent of Independents say they are likely to act. Supporting firefighters is one of the few forms of civic participation that nobody reads as a political statement.

The survey also shows how Americans see the payoff. Ninety-five percent agree that supporting firefighters is a meaningful way for individuals and companies to strengthen their local communities, with agreement of 90 percent or higher across every generation and 94 percent or higher across genders and political parties. The public doesn't regard donating to firefighters as charity for one profession. They see it as an investment in the community.




GOURMET
FDNY
K-9 UNIT
FDNY

IMPLICATIONS: A FOUNDATION FOR STRONGER COMMUNITIES

95%

Stronger communities
Believe supporting firefighters strengthens local communities

83%

Gratitude in action
Are likely to show support this holiday season

94%

Common ground
Across the political spectrum, agree that supporting firefighters strengthens communities

These findings have practical implications for anyone working to strengthen American communities, including civic leaders, philanthropies, employers, and individual citizens.

For Communities

The firehouse is one of the few places left where Americans of different political views and backgrounds equally share a sense of ownership. Pancake breakfasts, open houses, holiday toy drives, and memorial ceremonies give people a reason to gather around something they agree on. Communities looking to rebuild civic connection can start with an institution residents already trust.

For Companies

Ninety-five percent of Americans say companies can strengthen local communities by supporting firefighters, so corporate support for the fire service is both welcomed and understood. The approach matters, though. The qualities Americans admire in firefighters, such as action over words, showing up, and expecting nothing in return, are the same standards they apply to companies that support them. Credible engagement is local, steady, and personal. It means visiting firehouses, listening to firefighters' needs, and backing organizations that serve them, not just writing checks from a distance.

For PMI U.S. and Thanks for Giving / Thanks for Answering the Call

PMI U.S.'s 2026 Thanks for Giving initiative is built around a simple idea: Gratitude is most meaningful when it is expressed through action. Under the banner "Thanks for Answering the Call," the program goes directly to firehouses across the country to thank firefighters and support organizations serving them and their communities. The approach reflects a deeper truth revealed by the data: Americans do not merely admire firefighters. They want to stand behind them, support them, and strengthen the institutions that help keep their communities safe. And they expect businesses to do the same.

The timing also fits the moment. With the holidays and #GivingTuesday approaching, 83 percent of U.S. adults said they intend to support firefighters. Initiatives like Thanks for Answering the Call can help turn that goodwill into specific actions: a visit, a thank-you, or a contribution to an organization that serves firefighters.

For Every American

The simplest takeaway is for individuals. In a country that can feel divided, thanking a firefighter is something Americans almost universally agree on. The gesture may be small, but it affirms the bonds that hold communities together and the spirit of service that helps them endure.

Table 6

A CAUSE AMERICANS CAN RALLY BEHIND

	GOP	Dem	Indy
Supporting firefighters is a meaningful way for individuals and companies to strengthen their local communities (% agreeing)	95%	95%	94%

Source: HarrisX for PMI U.S.


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CLOSING THOUGHTS

This survey was designed to measure trust, but it also revealed something increasingly rare: a source of broad national consensus. At a time when Americans are deeply divided over many institutions, firefighters command remarkably consistent trust across political, demographic, and generational lines. Republicans, Democrats, and Independents trust them at nearly identical levels, as do women and men, and Boomers and Gen Z adults. The reasons are straightforward: Firefighters run toward danger when others are running away. They help people without regard to political views or background. And they remain deeply rooted in the communities they serve.

That trust is more than a reflection of public opinion. It is a civic asset, one that communities have a stake in sustaining. The fire service is under increasing pressure from rising demands, evolving hazards, and declining volunteer ranks, yet Americans recognize what is at stake: 95 percent believe supporting firefighters strengthens communities, and 83 percent expect to show that support this holiday season.

Nearly three centuries ago, Ben Franklin's fire company was founded on a simple premise: that neighbors share responsibility for one another's well-being. That idea has endured. The firehouse remains one of America's most trusted and most unifying institutions. In communities across the country, it is still a place where service matters more than division, where people work together regardless of background, and where a shared commitment to others continues to turn trust into action.

That is worth celebrating and, more meaningfully, worth supporting.

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METHODOLOGY

HarrisX conducted the online survey on behalf of PMI U.S. between October 30 and November 2, 2026. The sample was 2,008 U.S. adults aged 21 and older. The sampling margin of error is +/- 2.2 percentage points at a 95 percent confidence level. Respondents were recruited through opt-in web-panel sampling from a broad range of professional, validated respondent panels to widen the sampling frame and limit the influence of any single panel. Results were weighted by gender, age, race/ethnicity, region, and income where necessary to match the demographic makeup of the U.S. adult population aged 21 and older. Respondent quotations come from an open-ended follow-up question asked of respondents who chose firefighters as their most trusted group.


LOS ANGELES FIRE DEPT.

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