

Matt Riley Advocates for Volunteer Fire Service and Emergency Readiness

Matt Riley of Red Oak, Iowa, highlights the urgent need for volunteer firefighters and stronger local emergency response systems.



Des Moines, Iowa May 8, 2026 (IssueWire.com) - Matt Riley, a business owner and former volunteer fire captain, is raising awareness of the growing shortage of volunteer firefighters and its implications for emergency response in rural communities.

Riley served ten years with the Corning Volunteer Fire Department, advancing to the rank of Captain. During that time, he responded to calls at all hours and saw firsthand how critical volunteer crews are to public safety.

“When the pager goes off at 2 a.m., you don’t think about convenience,” Riley said. “You think about getting there fast and being ready to do the job.”

Across the United States, volunteer fire departments make up nearly 70% of the fire service. However, according to the National Volunteer Fire Council, the number of volunteer firefighters has declined by

more than 25% since the 1980s. At the same time, emergency call volumes have more than tripled.

That imbalance creates pressure on response times, especially in rural areas where departments rely heavily on volunteers.

“If you have fewer people responding, everything slows down,” Riley said. “That’s not a theory. That’s real life. Minutes matter when someone’s house is on fire or there’s a medical call.”

Riley explains that the issue is not a lack of capable people, but a lack of awareness and participation. Many residents simply do not realize how much their local departments depend on volunteers.

“Most people assume someone else will show up,” he said. “But in small towns, you are someone else.”

Volunteer service, Riley notes, offers more than just emergency response experience. It builds discipline, teamwork, and leadership under pressure—skills that carry into everyday life and careers.

“When you’re on scene, there’s no room for guesswork,” he said. “You rely on training, structure, and the people next to you.”

Departments today face additional challenges. Training requirements have increased. Time demands are higher. Many potential volunteers balance full-time jobs and family responsibilities.

Still, Riley believes small actions can make a meaningful difference.

“Not everyone needs to fight fires,” he said. “Departments need support roles too—communications, logistics, administration. There’s a place for people with different skill sets.”

Riley is encouraging community members to take a simple first step: learn about their local department.

Call to Action

Residents are encouraged to attend a local fire department open house or information session. Speaking directly with current volunteers can provide a clear picture of what service involves and how individuals can contribute.

“You don’t have to commit on day one,” Riley said. “Just show up, ask questions, and understand what your community needs.”

As rural communities continue to grow and change, Riley emphasizes that emergency readiness depends on local participation.

“This isn’t something you outsource,” he said. “Your community’s safety depends on people willing to step forward.”

About Matt Riley

Matt Riley is a Red Oak, Iowa-based business owner and former volunteer fire captain. He served ten years with the Corning Volunteer Fire Department, where he held leadership and board roles. His background also includes work in construction, aviation, and public safety diving. Riley advocates for skilled trades, structured leadership, and community-based emergency readiness.

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