

# FIRE WATCH



## THE VRFA ACHIEVES PRESTIGIOUS KULTURECITY® CERTIFICATION, FURTHERING COMMITMENT TO INCLUSIVITY

Partnering with KultureCity®, a leading nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting inclusivity and accessibility for individuals with sensory needs, the Valley Regional Fire Authority has joined other first responder departments across the United States in becoming Sensory Inclusive™ Certified. To achieve this certification, nearly all uniformed and non-uniformed members completed online training led by leading medical and neurodivergent professionals on recognizing individuals with sensory needs and handling sensory overload situations.

The VRFA first became aware of KultureCity® when VRFA Captain Reed Astley visited the Phoenix Zoo with his family. Astley's daughter is one of more than 1 in 4 people in the United States who are neurodivergent. He often asks for a sensory kit when visiting new places with his daughter. While at the zoo, he and his wife noticed the high quality of the bag provided and saw the logo on the bag in several places around the zoo grounds. One of the items in the bag was a set of cards with pictures that their daughter used to point out how she was

feeling or what she needed. These cards were so helpful that they wanted to know where to get more. That is when they discovered KultureCity®.

Captain Astley was enthusiastic about introducing this program to the VRFA's leadership team, and he believed the organization would benefit from sensory kits at fire stations and on fire apparatus. Astley says, "I have been a first responder for 20 years, and the population has doubled during this time. We are interacting with more people with different life circumstances and needs. People may not always remember what you say or do, but they will remember how you made them feel. Anything we can do to show compassion to those going through difficult times is worth adopting."

After completing the certification process in late April, VRFA received a supply of KultureCity® sensory bags. These bags are now carried on all fire engines, aid cars, and staff vehicles, and located at each fire station. The kits include noise-canceling headphones, fidget tools, verbal cue cards, and other helpful items. According to Astley, "A big red fire truck or ambulance, with bright lights and loud



sirens, can be very intimidating and dysregulating for people. Having a group of strangers wearing all sorts of gear, with flashlights, radios, and loud monitoring equipment coming into their safe place can potentially be worse for someone than the reason that made them need 911 assistance in the first place." He continued, "We can create a more comfortable situation by showing up more discreetly and thoughtfully and providing a kit to hand to the parent or caregiver before entering. We show them we are prepared and trained not just to mitigate the emergency but to take care of the

Article continued on page 4...

## VRFA PROPOSITION NO. 1 FIRE BENEFIT CHARGE RENEWAL

On August 6, 2024, voters within the Valley Regional Fire Authority's service area will be asked to consider Proposition No. 1 on their primary election ballot. During the VRFA Board of Governance (BOG) meeting on April 9, 2024, the BOG unanimously authorized placing Proposition No. 1 on the ballot with the intention of continuing the use of a voter-approved fire benefit charge (FBC) each year for the next ten years.

The FBC is a fee reflecting a direct and proportional assessment of the cost of providing appropriate fire protection services to a building. It is calculated based on occupancy type and square footage of structures. In addition to the FBC, the VRFA's budget is supported by revenue collected from property tax which is limited to \$1.00 per \$1,000 of assessed value. Currently, the FBC supports about 37% of the VRFA's operating budget. By law, it cannot exceed 60 percent. Discounts are allowed for senior citizens as well as residential and commercial properties with approved fire sprinkler systems.

The VRFA has used the FBC funding mechanism for the entire history of the organization. After initial voter approval in 2006, the FBC has been

renewed twice, once in 2012 and again in 2018. Recent changes in state law allow the VRFA to request voter approval for a six-year, ten-year, or permanent FBC. After careful consideration, the BOG authorized the ten-year option.

Reauthorization of the FBC will enable the VRFA to maintain its response times and service levels for fire protection, emergency medical aid calls, personnel training, and public education programs, while also providing funding for the purchase of necessary equipment and supplies.

If Proposition No. 1 is not approved, the VRFA could impose an additional property tax of fifty [50] cents per thousand dollars of assessed property value for fire protection services under RCW 52.26. With this change, there will likely not be enough revenue to maintain all current services.



To learn more about the Fire Benefit Charge, visit our website at <https://www.vrfa.org/about/fire-benefit-charge/>.



Information on Proposition No.1 is available on our website at [www.vrfa.org](http://www.vrfa.org), by email at [AskTheVRFA@vrfa.org](mailto:AskTheVRFA@vrfa.org), or by calling us at 253.288.5800. You can also follow us on social media for updates.



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# FIREWORKS: CELEBRATE SAFELY—IT BEGINS WITH YOU!

The VRFA wants to ensure the safety of the communities we serve during 4th of July celebrations.

Below are the current regulations regarding fireworks in our service area:

**Algona**  
Discharge of all fireworks is illegal within the City of Algona.

**Auburn & Pacific**  
Discharge of legal fireworks is allowed only on July 4th, between 9 a.m. and 11 p.m.



Don't let a fireworks mishap ruin your 4th of July celebrations. Mishandling fireworks can lead to serious injuries, such as eye trauma, loss of limbs, and severe burns. Even seemingly harmless sparklers can cause significant harm, burning at temperatures exceeding 1,200 degrees Fahrenheit.

Furthermore, each year, firefighters respond to fires caused by fireworks. Weather conditions can cause grasses and vegetation to become dry, which can lead to devastating property damage on a day intended for safe celebration with family and friends.

**Be Prepared—Before You Light Fireworks**

- Never allow young children to handle fireworks. Always supervise older children when they use them.
- Keep pets indoors.
- Keep a bucket of water nearby to fully extinguish fireworks that don't go off or in case of a fire.
- Light fireworks on a flat and level surface, away from houses, trees, and other flammable objects.

**Be Safe—When Lighting Fireworks**

- Only use fireworks outside and away from people, houses, and flammable materials.
- Never point or throw fireworks at anyone.
- Wear protective eyewear if you're handling fireworks or standing nearby.

- Light one firework at a time and move away quickly.
- Never try to relight or handle malfunctioning fireworks. Soak them with water and throw them away.
- Never place any part of your body directly over a firework when lighting the fuse.

**Be Responsible—After Using Fireworks**

- Soak used fireworks in water for a few hours before discarding.
- Be considerate.
- Never use fireworks while impaired by alcohol or drugs.



The VRFA encourages you to consider using safer alternatives like **glow sticks, confetti poppers, or colored streamers** instead of sparklers.



# 2023 ANNUAL AWARD RECIPIENTS

Each year the Valley Regional Fire Authority celebrates employee achievements by recognizing a Firefighter and Fire Officer of the Year. The recipients of these awards, who are chosen by their peers, embody characteristics and skills which exemplify excellence in leadership, firefighting, and the delivery of emergency medical services.

Professional Excellence Awards were also given to uniformed and non-uniformed members who consistently exemplified professional excellence and/or exceptional customer service, embodied the mission of the VRFA, and demonstrated the VRFA's

guiding values of selfless service, integrity, and grit. Recipients of these awards were nominated by their peers and/or selected by the Fire Chief.

In addition to Firefighter and Fire Officer of the Year and Professional Excellence awards, this year Fire Chief Thompson awarded a Letter of Commendation to Puget Sound Regional Fire Authority's Fire Mechanic Wayne Yotsuuye for his "dedication, expertise, and unwavering commitment to excellence." Wayne works at Station 31's maintenance facility as part of VRFA's contract with Puget Sound Fire for vehicle maintenance.



FIREFIGHTER OF THE YEAR  
**STEWART ALWAY**  
FIREFIGHTER



FIRE OFFICER OF THE YEAR  
**RYAN CHADWICK**  
CAPTAIN



PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE AWARD  
**RICK OLSON**  
DEPUTY CHIEF



PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE AWARD  
**CARRIE TALAMAIVAO**  
LEAD SOCIAL WORKER



PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE AWARD  
**STEPHANIE LOPES**  
SOCIAL WORKER



PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE AWARD  
**NICOLE EBY**  
ACCOUNTING SPECIALIST



LETTER OF COMMENDATION  
**WAYNE YOTSUUYE**  
FIRE MECHANIC

**The Bill Mack Award**

Battalion Chief Bill Mack was a firefighter who served with the legacy Auburn Fire Department and the VRFA for 29-years before retiring as the Deputy Chief of Operations with East Pierce Fire & Rescue in September 2023. Throughout his 31-year career, Bill promoted camaraderie, respect, kindness, inclusivity, and humor. To earn a "Mack

Award," individuals were nominated by peers at their assigned station and selected by a final round of voting. The 2023 Bill Mack Award recipients come to work with a positive attitude, work hard, make their colleagues laugh, and leave everyone with a lasting impression of respect and inclusivity.



Matt Harrington, Stephen Sparks, Steve Rierson, Cory Wallace, and Gary Barker

**The 2023 Bill Mack Award Winners are:**

- Station 31 – Battalion Chief **Gary Barker**
- Station 32 – Firefighter **Cory Wallace**
- Station 33 – Firefighter **Steve Rierson**
- Station 35 – Deputy Fire Marshal **Matt Harrington**
- Station 38 – Firefighter **Stephen Sparks**

# WILDFIRE WON'T WAIT

**ACT NOW TO PREPARE, PREVENT, AND MINIMIZE THE DAMAGES OF WILDFIRES IN OUR COMMUNITY.**

Wildfires are often associated with Eastern Washington or California. However, the frequency of wildfires in Western Washington has increased in recent years. This increase highlights the importance of communities in King County preparing for the possibility of wildfire in their area. Several factors, such as dense forests, dry weather, a growing population, and housing developments built near wildlands, have all contributed to the increased threat of wildfires, making it a real risk for Western Washington. Reviewing the resources below to help you and your family prepare for wildfire and other emergencies that may require evacuation is crucial.

**What is Defensible Space?**

Defensible space is the area surrounding your home that is modified, cleared, or designed to minimize fire risk. It involves creating and maintaining a buffer zone free from flammable materials like landscaping and debris that can ignite easily.

Not only does creating a defensible space improve firefighter access, but it also slows down fire spread, reducing home damage risks.

**Defensible Space Zones** .....

**Zone 0**

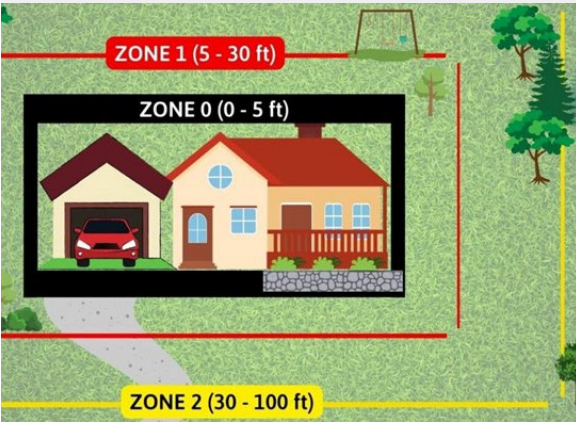
Includes the structure of your home and up to a **five [5] foot radius** around it.

**Zone 1**

Includes everything within a **5–30-foot radius** around the perimeter of your home.

**Zone 2**

Includes everything within a **30–100-foot radius** of your home.





# FIRE CHIEF’S MESSAGE



BRAD THOMPSON

valuable resource - our people - are doing daily to enhance public safety and help you and your family enjoy a warm summer full of fun activities.

Thank you for taking the time to catch up on what the VRFA is doing in our community. Our staff believes our mission is to serve you and enhance your daily life through safe, effective, and efficient public safety programs. We aim to keep you informed about what our most

As we move into this season, we shift our focus to the additional challenges of wildland urban interface firefighting activities. Rest assured, the VRFA has a fully trained team of firefighters who have prepared for these challenging events. Although it is unknown when and how severe these fires will be this year, our staff has prepared by acquiring the proper equipment and putting in many hours of training to be ready when they do.

To continue delivering vital life safety programs, including fire and emergency medical services, prevention, education, and mobile integrated health, we must ensure a solid foundation and budget to accomplish our mutual goals. In this issue of Fire Watch, we hope to inform you about a critical component of our funding. The VRFA’s

It is our honor to serve, and our staff remains steadfast in our mission.

voter-approved fire benefit charge provides a stable funding mechanism that continues to support our response times and service levels.

Again, thank you for taking the time to learn more about the Valley Regional Fire Authority. We tailor our programs to enhance quality of life through efficient public safety service delivery. It is our honor to serve, and our staff remains steadfast in our mission.

Take care and be safe.

## WILDFIRE WON’T WAIT

Continued from page 2.

### What can you to protect and defend your home from Wildfire?

- Rake leaves, dead limbs, and twigs. Remove leaves and rubbish from under structures and remove vines from the walls of the home. Clear all flammable vegetation.
- Remove dead branches that extend over the roof. Remove tree branches/limbs that are within ten feet of a chimney.
- Remove all tree branches and limbs that overhang a roofline or deck.
- Mow grass regularly.
- Remove all vegetation from underneath decks.
- Remove all combustible storage from underneath decks.
- Remove all dead vegetation and brush piles on the ground.
- Clear a 10-foot area around propane tanks and the barbecue.
- Regularly dispose of newspapers and rubbish at an approved site. Follow local burning regulations.
- Store gasoline, oily rags, and other flammable materials in approved safety cans.
- Store firewood at least 100 feet away from your home.

## Ready, Set, Go!

### Wildfire Evacuation Levels

The “Ready, Set, Go!” evacuation campaign provides clear instructions on how to respond to the three levels of evacuations.

#### Level 1- Ready

##### Be aware of the danger in your area and start preparing for possible evacuation.

Monitor local media and check on neighbors. If you do not already have an evacuation plan or a Go Kit, consider assembling one.

#### Level 2- Set

##### Short-notice evacuation is likely in your area.

Be prepared for sudden evacuation. People who need help or more time to evacuate, people with disabilities, people with small children, people with medical conditions and people with large animals-should evacuate now.

#### Level 3 – Go

##### Evacuate immediately from your area.

Go now! Danger in your area is current or imminent. Follow directions from law enforcement or fire departments and do not return home until officials have determined it is safe. Notification that it is safe to return home will be given as soon as possible.

### THE VRFA

## WELCOMES TEN NEW MEMBERS TO THE TEAM

Eight firefighter recruits graduated from the South King County Fire Training Consortium recruit academy in January. They spent two weeks with Support Services staff learning more about VRFA before reporting to their shift assignments in February.



JOHN ABERCROMBIE  
FIREFIGHTER

Abercrombie is originally from Atlanta, GA, and graduated from North Georgia University. Before joining the VRFA, he spent 15 years working as a River Guide in Nepal, Norway, Alaska, Hawaii, Canada, the southeast United States, and the Pacific Northwest.



JONATHON COOKSTON  
FIREFIGHTER

Before joining the VRFA, Cookston worked in commercial construction for 12 years and was a volunteer firefighter for two years.



SCOTT RAY  
FIREFIGHTER

Ray holds dual citizenship with the United Kingdom and graduated from the University of Washington with a medical anthropology and global health degree.



ROBERT MONTANO  
FIREFIGHTER

Montano’s background is in Automotive Technology. He worked as part of a professional road race team for 15 years and earned a degree in Spanish from the Forester Language School in San Jose, Costa Rica.



ANTHONI HEFFERNAN  
FIREFIGHTER

Heffernan holds a marketing degree from Fort Hays State University in Kansas. He started wrestling at a young age and continued through college.



AUSTIN NETHERTON  
FIREFIGHTER

Netherton graduated from Franklin College in Indiana, where he played football. He enjoys surfing, fly fishing, and camping.



CODEE ALLEN  
FIREFIGHTER

Allen graduated from Eastern Washington University, where he played football and earned a degree in Recreation Management. Before joining VRFA, he worked as a high-rise window cleaner.



IOSEFO “SEFO” LIUFAU  
FIREFIGHTER

Liufau received a degree in Economics from the University of Colorado. Originally from Tacoma, he worked in the mortgage industry before joining VRFA.

We also recently welcomed two new administrative team members.



SARA MORRIS  
COMMUNITY OUTREACH SPECIALIST

Sara worked in a similar role at a neighboring fire agency for five years before joining the VRFA. In 2023, she was honored as the Washington State Fire Educator of the Year. Sara holds a degree in Public Health from Central Washington University.



MARISA JONSON  
HUMAN RESOURCES SPECIALIST

Marisa has more than five years of experience in human resources and administration. She most recently worked as a Human Resource Coordinator at Costco. In her free time, Marisa enjoys traveling, camping, and hosting family game nights.



# THE VRFA GIVES BACK



## 2024 Firefighter Stairclimb

On the morning of March 10, 2024, 23 VRFA firefighters stood at the bottom of the Columbia Center in Seattle, looking up and preparing to climb 69 floors in full firefighting gear. They joined firefighters from around the world who have, for the past 33 years, taken on this 788-foot vertical climb, all in the name of raising funds for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society.

This year, the VRFA team welcomed eight new climbers who joined veterans like Battalion Chief Gary Barker, who completed his 23rd climb. The team placed 13th out of the 180 teams. Most importantly, the team raised over \$25,000, setting new VRFA fundraising records and putting the team in 11th place for total fundraising among all teams.

Team leader Firefighter Ryan Simpson says, "I could not be prouder of the effort from every team member. I look forward to the challenge again next year, and thank you to everyone who helped make our team a success this year."

**The 2024 VRFA Stairclimb team:**

Ryan Simpson, Gary Barker, Shawn Bowen, Tiffany Carlson, Justin Erickson, Blakelee Evans, Colton Fogelberg, Ben Groenhout, Ethan Kenney, Matthew Kinnee, Rachael Labender, Blake Laidlaw, Aaron Martin, Jerry Montiel, Jeremiah Mushen, Ryan Nauer, Steve Rierson, Tim Roberts, Emma Sheehy, Guy Smith, Josh Swift, Cory Wallace, and Chad Wilder.

# FIRE STATION CONSTRUCTION UPDATE!



Thanks to the generous support for Proposition 1 in the November 2023 general election, the design work for Stations 36 and 38 is underway. These are the first two priorities of the VRFA's Capital Facility Plan. The preliminary design of Station 36, located at 30th and I Street Northeast in Auburn, is almost complete. Once construction is finished, a minimum of three firefighters will staff the station. Due to the long and narrow shape of the site – the property runs from I Street Northeast to the east to Auburn Way North to the west – the station's large bay doors will face east towards I Street Northeast. After leaving the station, responding units will quickly turn left on the driveway and exit the station's property onto 30th Street Northeast.

The design process for the relocation of Station 38, located on

Ellingson Road and Tacoma Boulevard in Pacific, is also underway. VRFA's architects and other consultants are analyzing different options for positioning the station on the 2-acre property. Like Station 36, Station 38 will accommodate three firefighters working in shifts around the clock.

Both stations will be constructed to meet seismic, health, and safety standards and will feature facilities for training, refueling, and other support systems. This will enable firefighters to efficiently maintain emergency equipment and crew training requirements.

Preliminary work on the Station 31 site, as well as work related to support services and maintenance spaces, will likely begin later this year. VRFA is in the process of updating our website, [www.vrfa.org](http://www.vrfa.org), to show progress on our capital projects. Make sure to check it out!

# KULTURE

Article continued from cover story.

human side of the situation. We show them that we see them and that we care."

KultureCity® has recognized that some people don't withdraw from communities by choice but due to circumstances, as they worry about whether the world will accept or include them. However, despite this fear, KultureCity®'s motto of "Making the Nevers Possible" can be helpful for both fun times and emergencies. It is unacceptable for someone to be afraid to call 911 in an emergency due to worry about how they or their loved one might be perceived or fear

that the fire department won't be able to provide the appropriate care and understanding. Being more afraid of the cure than the ailment can be terrifying. The VRFA's mission statement declares that "we serve the whole community," and we are dedicated to utilizing the KultureCity® Sensory Inclusive™ program to better serve all members of our community.

If you want to learn more about KultureCity® or bring it to your organization, please visit [KultureCity.org](http://KultureCity.org).



## VRFA Services

The VRFA provides CPR and First Aid classes, complimentary blood pressure checks, fire station tours, custom-fit bicycle helmets, custom-fit life jackets, smoke alarms, child car seat inspections and more.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

call **253-288-5800** or  
go to **[www.vrfa.org](http://www.vrfa.org)**

## VRFA Administration

- Brad Thompson**  
Fire Chief/Administrator
- Rick Olson**  
Deputy Chief of Operations
- Tim Day**  
Deputy Chief of Community Risk Reduction
- Mark Horaski**  
Chief Financial Officer
- Sarah Borden**  
Human Resources Director

## Board of Governance

- Nancy Backus**  
Chair, City of Auburn Mayor
- Troy Linnell**  
Vice-Chair, City of Algona Mayor

## Members

- Larry Brown**  
Auburn Deputy Mayor
- Kerry Garberding**  
Pacific City Council
- Vic Kave**  
City of Pacific Mayor
- Lynda Osborn**  
Algona City Council
- Eric Petersen**  
Pacific City Council
- Tracy Taylor**  
Auburn City Council
- Bill Thomas**  
Algona City Council

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## VRFA HEADQUARTERS

Fire Station 31  
1101 D Street NE, Auburn, WA 98002  
253-288-5800  
Business Hours 8 a.m. – 5 p.m.  
[www.vrfa.org](http://www.vrfa.org)



The VRFA is committed to our mission:  
**WE SERVE THE WHOLE COMMUNITY**