

Fire Chief's Recommendations 24/7 Committee

October 19, 2015

Over the last decade, I have documented the need for a structural change in our call system. I have warned that it has been weakening and oftentimes fails to provide an appropriate response to emergencies. The increasing volume of calls for service at night, coupled with the decreased response at night by our call firefighters, leaves us in a very vulnerable position. This problem is not an isolated issue. It is a national issue for reasons we have already discussed ad nauseam. The leadership of the Topsfield Fire Department sensed this national trend and attempted to slow down the deterioration by implementing the following strategies:

Ten years ago, we had an average of 7 firefighters responding to calls during the off hours. Now we have an average of 4 firefighters responding. These firefighters respond when willing and able. They may not yet have the required skills necessary to handle the emergency in a timely manner. This leads to unsafe staffing to those responding and to burnout for those consistently responding.

We asked each member to share with us the reason that they don't come out at night. Those reasons ranged from low pay rates, the recreational consumption of alcohol deterring their ability to respond, work and family obligations, and health concerns.

Well over 10 years ago, we began an Explorer program in cooperation with the Boy Scouts of America. Dozens of boys and girls 12-21 years of age have benefitted from this program and the exposure to a very rewarding job. Our hope was that they would join the department when they became of age. Several have, but most of them moved away after college. Several have gotten jobs in public safety but with other communities.

In 1993, the Call Firefighters got together and met with the then Chief of the Department. They presented a list of concerns and inadequacies that they believed to impact their safety. The concerns included adequate protective gear, uniforms, rotating schedules to address decreased turnout at night and that standard operating guidelines be put in place for uniformity in the station and on the emergency scene. As early as 1993, the call firefighters realized that there was a problem with our night time response and were trying to formulate a solution with the Chief.

To build our team, we invite all members of the call force to attend lunch each Friday. The meal is prepared by the full-time staff and gives our members a chance to network and team build.

We have reached out to the call force to attend a Christmas luncheon each holiday season to network with our team as well as peers from other fire departments and town departments. We have applied for several local and regional grants to increase opportunity for training. Through these grants, we have provided all staff with OSHA compliant turn out gear for their safety. Previously, call firefighters would "go to the attic" and find gear that "fit".

We have implemented a recruitment program by attending the Strawberry Festival and the Health Fair at Steward School annually with the idea of supplying people with information about joining and giving back to our community.

We developed the first website in our Town for the fire department. We frequently posted information about what we do and tried to entice folks to join. We are very active in social media using Facebook, Twitter and Nixle to keep the public informed about our activities and opportunities to participate. Our most recent recruitment drive using a multimedia approach yielded one completed application.

We have increased call firefighter wages to stay competitive with peer departments. We now provide members with uniform allowance, double-time on holidays, overtime, longevity and other perks which we did not provide in the past.

We established a training committee made up of full-time and call members for planning and feedback purposes. This allows both groups to be represented as to the content, frequency, and duration of our training.

A couple of years ago, we increased the training budget to increase EMS skill proficiency, and apparatus operation ability.

The fact of the matter is that the job of a firefighter has changed over time. The training requirements, job duties and hours have increased in all aspects of the job. Additionally, our society has changed. Employers cannot afford to let staff leave work to respond to calls. Employees work longer hours at their jobs. Families value their decreased time together. The demands of training and responding to calls can have a negative impact on the dynamics of that family.

The committee has been supplied with a lot of data for their review. I would consider a lot of it to be in the "nice to know category" and somewhat of a distraction from your mission. I believe we should rely on National standards and best business practices to arrive at a safe and reasonable recommendation for our community.

Therefore, I recommend the following:

Basic Firefighter safety standards (OSHA) 2 in 2 out = 4 Members 24/7 365 would need 12 additional FTE's to accomplish this standard.

Phase 1--- 2 Members 24/7 365... 4 additional FTE's Additional funding needed...

Alt Phase 1--- 3 Members 6A-6P ... 3 Members 6P-6A 2 Members... 6 additional FTE's Funds needed...

Phase 2 ---3 Members 24/7 365 ... 8 additional FTE's ...additional funds needed

Phase 3--- 4 Members 24/7 365... 12 additional FTE's ... additional funds needed