

# **Working With Your Local Fire Department**

By Rich Marinucci

Fire Chief

Farmington Hills, Michigan

## **1. Introduction**

In most communities in the United States it is the local fire department that is the first to respond to emergencies, whether they are small, day-to-day types or large disasters. As the first official government agency contacted, they have the responsibility to manage the incident. Consequently, any volunteer group that wants to provide assistance during these emergencies must work with the local fire/rescue organization if they are to be effective.

## **2. Fire Department Organization and Structure**

***Governing Bodies*** - In order to work with local fire departments, it is first necessary to understand the variety of organizational structures in local government and the fire departments themselves. Generally, fire departments can be assigned to one of three government bodies – municipal government, county government or a fire district. Municipal governments will have either a mayor in charge or a city manager. In most cases, the fire chief (and the fire department) will be responsible to one of these two individuals. On a county level, there is usually a county executive who has authority over the fire chief and the fire department. Where a fire department is responsible to a fire district, a governing board provides policy and direction.

***Types of Fire Organizations*** - There are many variations of fire department structure, but they can be classified into one of these three types – career, volunteer or combination. Career departments are staffed completely by full-time, paid personnel. Volunteer departments are a little bit more complicated. There are volunteer organizations where the members are paid or compensated in some way (such as a pension or length of service award program). Because of these differences, fire departments are considered volunteer if they use part-time or unpaid firefighters. The third type, combination, uses both career and volunteer firefighters. The percentage of career and volunteer can vary greatly. Regardless, the basic definition of combination fire departments would include all of these variations.

***Services Provided*** - For whatever reason, the image of the fire department is such that many people believe that the only job responsibility of fire fighters is to extinguish fires. The reality is that most organizations have evolved so that they provide a wide variety of emergency services that include not only fire suppression, but emergency medical services, hazardous materials response and mitigation, special rescue situations and emergency management. In addition to these emergency services, virtually all fire departments are involved in fire prevention activities. These activities include inspection and code enforcement, plan review for construction projects, fire and arson investigation, and public fire safety education. It is important for volunteer organizations to understand

the variety of services provided by the fire department. This can help determine what areas the volunteers can provide assistance. It also provides a perspective as to how busy the fire department can be, which affects the amount of time, resources, and personnel to available to support volunteer groups.

***Apparatus*** - The next thing to look at is some of the basic nomenclature of fire department apparatus. The most basic piece is a fire engine. Its purpose is to deliver water on the fire ground. It will usually carry water and fire hose, have a pump capable of increasing the pressure from the water source and also carry ancillary equipment needed on the fire ground. The next apparatus is the ladder truck. It also may go by different names like “truck” or “aerial.” These vehicles provide the obvious, i.e. ladders and usually an elevating device, but also other support equipment needed to properly extinguish a fire. Other vehicles include rescues, special response vehicles, ambulances, and vehicles to carry large amounts of water. You should note that there is a difference in various parts of the country regarding the names of fire apparatus. For example there are vehicles that carry large amounts of water for areas that are not served by fire hydrants. Some organizations refer to these as tankers, while others call them water tenders. Try to learn about your region. This will not only help you understand the fire department better but will indicate to the members your willingness to learn.

***Command Structure*** - Now that you have some basis for the local government and the fire department, it is important to know the command structure within the fire department. Those in the fire service consider their organization paramilitary with a fairly rigid chain of command. Generally, there is a fire chief or fire commissioner in charge. If you are a volunteer organization, you need to know who is ultimately in charge and who gives the final authority for the fire department to get involved with a volunteer organization. The fire chief, or commissioner, is in charge of all aspects of the fire department including both emergency and non-emergency response.

Like any organization whether public or private, paid or volunteer, there is much to do to keep the organization running properly. Fire departments usually divide these functions into line or staff issues. Line functions generally refer to everything required for the emergency response. This would include everything needed to make sure that the firefighters are prepared and have the necessary equipment to do the job. Staff functions are everything else that the fire department may do. This would include the fire prevention activities, administrative duties such as purchasing and record keeping, and the various human resource issues necessary to keep the organization functioning properly.

### **3. Approaching the Fire Department**

Now that you have this general background information, we can discuss the various ways to approach the fire department with the concept of working with volunteer groups. As we do, please remember the importance of knowing and understanding how the department is organized, who is in charge, and who has the authority over the department. Initially there are two people that you should contact – the boss of the fire

department (which would be the mayor, city manager, county executive or fire board.) At about the same time, you also need to make contact with the decision-maker of the fire department, either the fire chief or the fire commissioner. Without the support of both of these individuals, it is very difficult to have a successful working relationship. There is one more individual that needs to be contacted. That would be the emergency manager for the community. This could be the fire chief, or, more than likely, another individual. That individual could work for the department, or work for another department within the municipality. In some cases, smaller communities have banded together and a county employee has been designated as the emergency manager for a group of communities. Regardless, none of these individuals wants to hear information second hand. They need to be involved in the process right from the start.

The next step is to understand some basic politics and relationships in working with your local governmental entity. Obviously those with appropriate political contacts have a much easier time of establishing a working relationship with the fire department. Especially effective are personal relationships with the fire chief, mayor or city manager. Those that are previously established allow individuals to have access to those who ultimately must make a decision regarding the cooperation with volunteer groups. If you don't have a personal relationship, there are a couple of things you can do. You can either work to establish a new relationship, or seek out someone who may already have that personal connection that is so vital to being successful. You may also wish to make an inventory of your political contacts, influential groups, members of the business community who work with your local government, and anybody who may be affiliated with any boards and commissions. These personal contacts allow you the access necessary to begin the process of building a long term relationship with the local fire department.

#### **4. Barriers to Establishing a Working Relationship with the Fire Department**

On the surface it seems so logical to utilize volunteers to help with those very unusual and infrequent incidents that occur. If it is so advantageous to have volunteers, one must ask the question as to why it is so difficult to establish that strong bond. There are some barriers to establishing working relationships. These have been established through previous personal histories of working with volunteer groups, or through "horror stories" heard from other members within the fire service profession.

These barriers would include:

- Fear of additional workload
- Perceived lack of control of volunteer groups
- Union/labor issues
- Lack of rewards
- Added responsibilities

While these may or may not be a factor in your community, you can be sure that any fire department that is approached by a volunteer group will have these things in the back of

their mind. These thoughts will come from more people in the organization than just the fire chief. It will include those that ultimately will have the working responsibility, i.e. those that may get delegated the task of working with a volunteer organization.

There are other barriers that have an effect and are related to those listed above. The first is a lack of any recent disasters in your area. When this happens, there is a mindset of many that says that those things are not going to happen in my community. If they are not likely to occur, why should I commit the added work to prepare for something that is not likely to occur? This is the opposite of what may happen when disasters are more frequent. For example those fire departments in Florida who are subject to the annual threat of hurricanes are more likely to embrace the volunteer group because they know they are likely to need them.

Fire departments are also concerned about the use of their limited resources. They may not believe that they have the personnel, time or funding to provide adequate support to your volunteer group when they are barely meeting their core responsibilities. Another thing you should check on is the support that the fire department has from its bosses. As mentioned above, all fire departments are responsible to some individual or group. If that individual or group is not supportive in working with others, it would be difficult to convince the fire department of the value, especially when they believe that they have enough work already.

## **5. Overcoming the Barriers**

Now that we've identified all the barriers and reasons why fire departments are reluctant to instantly jump into a cooperative program with a volunteer group, we will discuss some tactics to overcome these barriers. The first thing that you need to do is minimize the burden that you place on the fire department. This can be done by having your volunteers do as much work as possible. You want to avoid adding any unnecessary work that would be perceived as busy work, work of limited value, or not as important as other assigned duties.

***Minimize the Burden*** - You will want to keep your volunteers from generating ideas for the fire department to do. Many times you'll see individuals develop concepts that seem like a good thing. The next thing they do is look for somebody to carry out these ideas. Often times it is expected that the fire department will graciously do some of that work. Though the idea may be good, the fire department doesn't want volunteer organizations to delegate work for them. An example for this would be if a volunteer member thought it would be a good idea to publicize the work being done by the group. Someone would need to contact the media and possibly even write a story. While it might be a good thing to talk about the values of the cooperation of the volunteer group and the fire department, most fire department personnel would not like this assignment. It would help the fire department if a member of the volunteer group took on the responsibility to write that article.

There are other things that volunteer groups can do to minimize the impact on the fire department. Do as much of the work as possible such as research of information and the completion of any subsequent reports or minutes of meetings that may be necessary. This will avoid resentment between the two groups later on. Utilize your people as much as possible.

***Start Slow*** - There are other tactics to use in trying to overcome the barriers in establishing a good working relationship with your local fire department. Start off slowly. Do not try to solve the problems of the world right away. Look for an early success. Try something simple, something that is important but does not require a large investment of the fire department's time. Once you have established a track record of being successful and a reputation of not placing a burden on the fire department, you begin to improve your working relationship. This makes work on the next slightly larger or more complicated project a little easier to accept.

***Recruit and Control Volunteers*** - You also need to recruit volunteers who will work and also establish a system to control the volunteers so they don't create additional personnel issues for the fire department to deal with. All personnel, regardless of whether or not they are paid, require attention. Make sure the contributions of all your people are worth the effort. Volunteers can cause problems. Do not transfer the responsibility to maintain control to the fire department.

***Communications*** - As with all relationships, the key is communications. Good, sound, fundamental communications are essential to establishing a cooperative relationship. It can be very tricky in that you need to maintain this communication without overdoing it. This can be accomplished by sticking to the important issues. It is suggested that you handle all communications the easiest way, starting with verbal communications and working towards short memos, e-mails and longer reports or letters. Anything that would not require a lengthy, written response from the fire department should be avoided.

Meetings to fire chiefs are an everyday occurrence. They generally do not want to go to any more. Unfortunately, you will need to meet. Whenever possible minimize the time needed. Publish an agenda for meetings and stick to it. Time spent with your group is time taken from another responsibility. This will require more time on the job for the fire chief. They won't mind as much if the time is well spent and productive.

***Identify Potential Future Benefits to the Fire Department*** - One thing that fire departments will want to know is the benefit to the fire department for entering into this working arrangement. As a volunteer group you need to identify these potential future benefits. While it is idealistic to think that all fire departments will jump on your bandwagon just because you have a good idea, most will need a little coaxing. The reality is that they will need to see how this relationship is going to improve their organization. Many times volunteer groups provide additional political support for the basic needs of the fire department, which sometimes translates into more basic resources. The fire department will be more willing to work with you if they perceive that they are

going to get an increase in the resources that they believe they need to accomplish their job.

***Maintain Political Support and Your Relationship with the Fire Department*** - On a final note regarding the need to overcome these barriers, there are two things that you need to do. First, obtain and maintain support from the local political body for your volunteer organization. This support produces implied and/or direct pressure on the fire department to cooperate and work with you. The second thing that needs to be done is to establish and continue a strong relationship with the fire department, particularly with the fire chief. But, with so many things, and depending on the size of the fire department, you will also need to develop a relationship with other fire department employees as they will, more than likely, be working with your organization. Having a good established working relationship certainly allows you to be much more successful.

## **6. Summary**

In summary, there are three basic things that need to be done to work with your local fire department. First, you need to understand how they're organized and how they fit into the local government. Second, understand why they may be resistant to your overtures to offer them help. Lastly, do not create unnecessary additional work while also emphasizing the benefits to the local fire department in the community.