

Emergency Response Systems

**11 Bonnie Lane
Kingston, Massachusetts 02364**

Review of
of the
**Organization
Operations
Management
Structure**
of the
**Town of Lynnfield
Fire Department**

Overview

The Town of Lynnfield is a characteristically suburban residential community with a very limited employment base and is located 12 miles north of downtown Boston. The town occupies an area of approximately 10 square miles and is home to approximately 12,000 residents.

The community is relatively stable in terms of population. The land area is almost fully developed and the prospects of major growth are unlikely, although some in-fill is occurring and at least one relatively large project has been proposed. The overall character of the community is not expected to change rapidly and the demand for fire and emergency services is expected to follow established trends.

Lynnfield enjoys a low rate of fire incidents and very few serious fires, which is primarily a reflection of the character of the community. The Lynnfield Fire Department responds to an average of less than 1,500 incidents annually. The trend in emergency response activity shows an increasing number of medical incidents each year, while fire calls are decreasing. These trends parallel the experience in many similar suburban residential communities.

The Lynnfield Fire Department responds to an average of two medical incidents per day, but less than one actual building fire per month and only one or two working structure fires annually.

The Lynnfield Fire Department is staffed by a combination of career (full-time paid) and call (paid-on-call) employees, operating from two fire stations. The organization is best described as a call fire department, supplemented by a small core of career personnel. The call force roster includes 34 members of whom approximately 20 would be classified as active in responding to emergency calls and participating in training activities.

The career component includes the Acting Fire Chief, one Captain, one Lieutenant and three firefighters. The position of Deputy Chief is currently vacant and an additional full-time position for a firefighter-paramedic has been authorized in the current budget. The career personnel work on a Monday-to-Friday daytime schedule and ensure that the Fire Department has the ability to respond without delay during the hours that fewer call members are likely to be available.

A detailed examination of the Lynnfield Fire Department leads to the observation that the existing system meets the needs of the community in terms of effectiveness and reliability. It is also evident that the current structure is very efficient in terms of cost to the taxpayers. Most of the communities in the surrounding area have moved toward fully or predominantly career fire departments at a much higher cost to the taxpayers. The Town of Lynnfield has managed to maintain an effective call force, which appears to satisfy the current demand for services at a much lower cost.

The leadership of the Town and of the Fire Department should be commended for creating and maintaining a very cost-effective fire and emergency medical service organization over a period of at least 20 to 30 years. This structure has been successful, because the contributions of career and call personnel are valued equally and blended effectively. The current system works well today; however the focus of this consultation is to make recommendations for the future, considering several challenges that will have to be faced.

Strengths

The Lynnfield Fire Department has been successful in recruiting and retaining a force of call firefighters who are experienced, well-trained and dedicated to the community and to their organization. Many similar communities have been forced to move in the direction of career fire departments, at significantly higher cost, because they were been unable to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of call firefighters to sustain an effective emergency response system. The combined call/career force in Lynnfield is continuing to meet the needs of the community.

The Lynnfield Fire Department is also well-equipped, operating a front line fleet of two rescue-pumpers, a new tower-ladder and a relatively new ambulance. Three additional pumpers and an older ambulance are maintained in reserve status and the fleet includes several additional vehicles. All of the vehicles are in very-good to excellent condition and the equipment carried on those vehicles meets or exceeds applicable standards.

Challenges

The most significant challenge facing Lynnfield is whether the existing organizational model can be maintained in the future. In addition to recruiting a new Fire Chief, the Fire Department will soon be faced with the need to replace several additional officers and experienced members due to their advancing age. Several additional call firefighters will have to be recruited and trained in order to maintain an adequate number to respond when they are needed. It will be particularly challenging to maintain the call force at the current level, if several individuals who occupy key positions have to be replaced in a short time period.

If Lynnfield is unable to recruit, train and retain new call members, the Town will be left with very limited options. Replacing the call force with career personnel

would inevitably involve a major increase in cost and would likely also result in a decrease in the level of service that can be provided.

The current budget provides approximately \$580,000 for career salaries and \$368,000 for compensation of the call members. The combined total of \$ 948,000 provides 5 or 6 career personnel on duty daytime weekdays and one individual on duty at night and on weekends, along with the availability of 34 call members who can be expected to respond to emergency incidents as they are needed. The records indicate that an average of 10 to 12 of these members can be counted-upon to respond to a fire call, which allows the Lynnfield Fire Department to meet the requirements of NFPA standard 1720, the recognized performance standard for volunteer fire departments.

If the full amount that is budgeted to compensate the 34 call members were converted to career salaries, the Lynnfield Fire Department would be able to employ only 4 or 5 additional career firefighters. The resulting career force would only be able to maintain a minimum of two firefighters on duty, 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. The budget would have to be doubled to maintain a crew of 4 personnel on duty 24/7, which is the minimum recommended staffing for a single engine company under NFPA standard 1710 (applicable to career fire departments). The response capabilities of the Lynnfield Fire Department would be significantly reduced, while the cost would be greatly increased. In addition, Lynnfield would have to depend on mutual aid to respond to every reported structure fire.

The logical recommendation for Lynnfield is to maintain an effective call force as long as possible. The recommended strategy is to support the existing organizational model and to make adjustments that will ensure that the call force is viable, reliable and adequately supported.

Options and Opportunities

If a reliable and effective call force cannot be maintained, the Town of Lynnfield should consider two additional options. One option would be to join forces with one or more neighboring communities to develop a regional fire service system. A regional fire service, whether fully career or primarily career with call back-up, could likely meet the needs of several communities at a lower cost than maintaining their individual fire departments.

A second option could be to contract with one of the neighboring fire department to provide coverage for Lynnfield.

If the Town is unable to retain an effective call force, the option of contracting with a private ambulance company to provide ALS transportation service should also be considered. Limited staffing would probably require the Fire Department to limit emergency medical activities to initial response and treatment.

Recommendations

Management Positions and Structure

The most critical decision for the Lynnfield Fire Department is the selection of a new Fire Chief. This individual who is selected for this position will set the course for the organization and whether it continues to function effectively as a predominantly call fire department or follows the prevailing trend and becomes a predominantly career department. The importance of this selection cannot be overemphasized.

In the past the Lynnfield Fire Department operated with, in essence, a part-time Fire Chief and a full-time Deputy Chief. The previous Fire Chief was employed as the full-time Police Chief. At the present time the Deputy Chief is acting in the position of full-time Fire Chief and the career Captain is performing many of the duties that would normally be assigned to the Deputy Chief.

Looking forward, it appears that only two full-time management positions are required and the third management position could be filled by a part-time employee. The part-time manager should be assigned specific duties and should work a set number of hours on a defined schedule. New job descriptions should be developed for all three of these positions.

The Fire Chief should be a full-time position, with one full-time and one part-time officer as direct subordinates. The two individuals reporting directly to the Fire Chief could be two Deputy Chiefs, two Captains, or one Deputy Chief and one Captain. The individual who is selected as Fire Chief should be given the opportunity to make the final decision on these positions.

The management functions could be strengthened by employing a part-time clerical position in an administrative role.

Fire Chief Recruitment

The single most important factor in defining the future of the Lynnfield Fire Department is the selection of the next Fire Chief. If the Town intends to maintain the existing fire department structure, it is critical to select a Fire Chief who understands, agrees with and is committed to that strategy. An individual who lacks experience in an effective combination system would have difficulty balancing the interests of career and call members and ensuring that the two groups work in harmony.

Most Fire Chiefs find it much less demanding to manage a fully career department or a department that is predominantly career with a limited back-up call force, than to manage an organization that effectively balances the two components. The key factors are:

- Ensure that all members recognize and respect the equality of career and call members within the organization;
- Ensure that all members are held to the same expectations, including training, performance standards and discipline;
- Provide equal respect and recognition for all members, with respect to rank, operational authority, responsibilities and promotional opportunities;
- Provide equal opportunities for career and call personnel to participate in training and other activities, including overtime and paid details;

- Provide appropriate compensation, benefits, recognition and rewards for all members, based on their value and contributions to the organizational mission;

The Lynnfield Fire Department is operating successfully under these principles at the present time. Assuming that the Town wishes to continue with this organizational structure, it will be important to appoint a new Fire Chief who brings the appropriate skills to the position.

The Town of Lynnfield should also recognize that the call system must be supported and allowed to evolve in order to maintain the existing organizational model. The imminent retirement of several senior officers and experienced members must be recognized and efforts to recruit qualified replacements must be prioritized. The call force could deteriorate very quickly if it is not provided with strong support and leadership.

Recruiting and Retention of Call Firefighters

One of the problems facing most call and volunteer fire departments is the on-going demand for new members that is created by a normal membership attrition rate. Recruiting and retention are increasingly difficult in most communities due to prevailing social and economic factors. Lynnfield has been more successful than most comparable communities in maintaining a force of active, qualified and enthusiastic members to staff the call force. The attrition rate has been relatively slow and there has been very little turnover in officer positions for at least the past decade.

Several call members of the Lynnfield Fire Department have now reached the age that their ability to meet the physical demands of their positions is a cause for concern. At least three of the six call officers are over 65 years of age and their

retirement from active duty in the near future should be anticipated. While age in itself is not an absolute determinant, individuals of this age should only be permitted to perform emergency duties with the approval of a qualified physician.

A very recent legal opinion suggests that call members over the age of 65 may not be covered for workers compensation under the Massachusetts Public Employee Retirement System. If this information is accurate, the Town of Lynnfield could be faced with the dilemma of either obtaining alternative disability coverage for several members or finding replacements for them without delay.

The Lynnfield Fire Department should plan to recruit and obtain basic entry-level training for at least 4 to 6 new members every year in order to maintain a roster of at least 30 qualified members and at least 20 active members. The difference between total and active membership is not unusual, since valuable members may become temporarily inactive due to military duty, temporary job postings and personal circumstances.

The planning must incorporate the time that is required to provide basic training before the new members are permitted to participate in emergency operations. Individuals who are already trained as firefighters and particularly those who are certified as emergency medical technicians or paramedics should be encouraged to apply for call positions in Lynnfield.

The recruiting of new members should focus on four target groups:

1. Town residents who are committed to living-in and contributing to their community for a long period of time;
2. Veterans with recent military experience that is directly applicable to the fire service;

3. Younger individuals who are interested in a fire service career and are seeking opportunities to obtain training and gain practical experience;
4. Career firefighters and emergency medical personnel who live in the area and are seeking for opportunities to work additional hours within their professions;

Promotions

In addition to recruiting new members, the Lynnfield Fire Department should be grooming future leaders to replace the older members who will be vacating leadership positions.

The Lynnfield Fire Department should begin a process of selecting and developing the next generation of officers without delay. Basic minimum qualifications should be established for Lieutenant, Captain and Deputy Chief and current members (both call and career) should be invited to apply for the anticipated openings. If additional training is required to enable candidates to qualify for these positions, efforts should be made to provide access to this training as quickly as possible.

Well documented job descriptions should be prepared to clearly define the expectations and responsibilities of each position. The selection of officers should be conducted through the same promotional process, whether the positions are full-time (career) or part-time (call). The formal process should include a portfolio assessment and a thorough evaluation of each candidate's skills and abilities in relation to the position.

The anticipated opening for a career lieutenant and for any other career positions should be open to call and career members. If the positions cannot be filled by internal candidates, the recruiting should be expanded to outside applicants.

Additional training should be provided for the individuals who are selected for these promotions to ensure that they are well-prepared for the duties and responsibilities that are assigned to them.

Fire Stations

Both of the existing Lynnfield fire stations are crowded with vehicles and provide very limited space for personnel and administrative functions. While the situation is not urgent, the Town should plan to expand and remodel both fire stations or replace them with new facilities. The two-station deployment works well with a predominantly call force as it allows members in each part of the town to respond to a relatively nearby fire station to staff the apparatus. The possibility of consolidating operations into a single more centrally located fire station should be considered if the Fire Department moves toward a predominantly career system in the future.

Apparatus Fleet

The existing fleet of fire apparatus is in good condition and the Town should be committed to a regular replacement schedule to maintain an adequate and reliable fleet of vehicles. The fleet could be reduced by one pumper, maintaining two front-line and two reserve pumpers in service. The budget should anticipate replacing one pumper every 5 years. The new tower ladder should meet the needs of the Town for at least 15 to 20 years.

Two ambulances should be maintained in service (one front line and one reserve) with a schedule to replace one ambulance every 3 to 4 years depending on use.

The existing rescue truck is maintained as a special service truck. This vehicle sees very little use; however it is useful for special events and situations. When this vehicle becomes due for replacement, the need should be reevaluated.

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