

TO: James L. App, City Manager
FROM: Ken Johnson, ES Chief 
SUBJECT: Emergency Services Department Volunteer Program
DATE: April 20, 2004

NEEDS: For the City Council to consider restructuring the Emergency Services Department volunteer program.

- FACTS:**
1. Volunteer firefighters have provided valuable service to this community for many years.
 2. State and Federal training and certification requirements for firefighters have increased significantly over the last decade.
 3. The City's population, and consequently emergency services demand, has increased considerably over the last 20 years.
 4. The City Council adopted the Emergency Services Growth Management Plan in 2000, which increased service standards.
 5. Increases in training requirements, call demand, and service standards all combined to create unrealistic demands upon volunteer firefighters.
 6. This evolution of emergency services delivery demand has compromised the volunteer firefighter program.
 7. The Police Department faced similar challenges in the past and developed a model for change that has been successful in balancing the use of volunteers and reserve officers.

ANALYSIS &

CONCLUSION: The Department of Emergency Services has utilized volunteer firefighters since its inception in 1890. State and Federal regulations for fire suppression workers were virtually non-existent at that time. Over time, these regulations dramatically increased. The time commitment for volunteers has likewise increased to the point it has become exceedingly difficult for volunteer firefighters to fit in all of the training to meet these requirements and maintain proficiency.

Over the last five to ten years, the City has also seen significant changes in the type and volume of services delivered. Emergency medical services, at the advanced life support (paramedic) level, have come to represent a high majority of the service demand. Hazardous materials response, rescue work, and other more specialized services have also been initiated. Each of these requires significant amounts of training.

In 2003, the Department responded to 2,373 calls for service. This level of activity eclipsed the capacity of the volunteer corps, thus requiring the assistance of neighboring departments (through automatic and mutual aid agreements).

The use of outside resources has further degraded the involvement opportunities for volunteers. Volunteers are typically called out only for large and/or long-term fire events. It's simply become too difficult to maintain a high degree of enthusiasm among the volunteers when countless training hours are required for the minimal number of calls necessitating their assistance.

The volunteer program could be restructured to provide opportunities for citizens to aid in fire prevention, inspection and education activities, and for those with ample time and proper training, fire suppression and other emergency response duties in a paid-call type reserve officer program.

The reserve and volunteer programs would be modeled after those currently employed by the Police Department. These are generally considered to be highly effective. It is Emergency Services' intent to emulate their success.

POLICY

REFERENCE: None

FISCAL

IMPACT: None. Any costs associated with the volunteer and reserve firefighter programs would be covered within existing budget allocations.

OPTIONS:

- a. Authorize the Emergency Services Chief to initiate those changes necessary to transition from a volunteer firefighter program to a reserve firefighter program, and to initiate a volunteer program to address non-emergent support and community service needs.
- b. Amend, modify, or reject above option.

Volunteer Firefighter Realignment

Summary

The City of Paso Robles has long enjoyed citizen-volunteer service for community emergency fire response needs. Over time, however, total calls for emergency service have increased dramatically, call type mix changed materially (to include predominantly medical aid, rescue, and non-emergency public assistance), and training requirements grown to the point where most citizen-volunteers have been pre-empted from continued service. A restructuring of the volunteer program could re-energize and more effectively utilize citizen volunteers, as well as directly address expanding community emergency service demands.

A retooled citizen volunteer effort, with the development of a new “reserve firefighter” program, would further community and emergency service objectives. Specifically, citizen volunteers could be trained and deployed to assist in the Department’s fire prevention, public education, and service support efforts – much like the Police Department’s volunteer programs. And, a “reserve” corps could be developed to include those with ample time and interest to train and serve (as part-time employees) in direct emergency service delivery – again, much like the Police Department’s reserve program. And, this restructuring could be undertaken without increased cost.

Facts/Discussion

The volunteer firefighter program is confronted with a number of challenges:

Evolving Organization

Increases in emergency response activity placed significant time pressure on volunteers. To lessen the impact and enhance response, the City hired paid firefighters. The shift to paid firefighters decreased the frequency of volunteer response. Volunteers are now used primarily during extended operations or large events. As large events are relatively infrequent, and the department has hired employees to handle most of the day-to-day service delivery, volunteers began to question their role in the organization.

Training

State and federally mandated requirements for fire response volunteer basic training and certification is equal to that required for paid firefighters. The increased volunteer training requirement demanded more time from both the volunteers and paid staff.

Call Participation

Volunteer assistance for emergency calls is requested on a regular basis. Time of the day, day of the week, and type of call has impacted volunteer availability. Volunteer response has declined significantly over time.

Compensation

Volunteers receive a monthly stipend—designed to cover their out-of-pocket expenses. Because volunteer firefighters must train like, and may perform duties identical to those of, paid firefighters, it is difficult to justify wages for one, but not the other.

In 2002, volunteers were summoned for 103 emergency calls; most (82%) responded to 20 or fewer of these requests. This level of response caused the Department to become more reliant on neighboring fire departments to provide the resources necessary to respond.

Volunteers have proven quite effective in non-emergency fire prevention, public education and other support activities. Success in these activities is attributed to an ability to schedule the events in advance and minimal technical prerequisites.

Recommendation

The best approach to improving the services provided by the Department would be a restructuring of the volunteer program into two divisions.

One group would serve as true volunteers. This would be a virtually unlimited number of people providing support in fire prevention, public education, and administrative support.

The second group would serve as “Reserve Firefighters.” It would be small in number (3-6). The Reserves would be trained to the same standards as required for all firefighters. Their training would be conducted during required shifts (2-3 per month). In return, they would be compensated at an hourly rate. The benefits of the Reserve Firefighters are that:

- ❑ Reserves would assimilate more effectively with existing resources
- ❑ Training would be tailored to the Reserves’ specific needs and occur during their assigned shifts
- ❑ Reserves would be more closely integrated with existing employees, increasing camaraderie and communication
- ❑ A Reserve force could increase total available staffing during critical periods
- ❑ Reserve firefighters would serve as a more reliable workforce to assist in large scale incidents