

Success Stories of the Illinois Fire Service

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The Illinois Fire Service is made up of 1,209 fire departments, of which, approximately three-fourths are fire protection districts. Nearly 70 percent are staffed by volunteer or paid-on-call firefighters. These departments are allocated a minor portion of their community's total budget, making it difficult to serve their communities' changing needs. The fire service of today is far different from the fire service of 50 years ago, when many of the local funding plans were enacted. Today, the role of the fire service has changed dramatically. Overall, fire calls have more than doubled in the past 15 years, but include significant new tasks. These assigned additional duties include providing emergency medical service, hazardous material incident response, roadway extrication, search and rescue, and response to terrorist incidents to its original mission of fire suppression. Despite these challenges, fire safety has increased dramatically in Illinois due to an aggressive public awareness and education campaign and programs operated by the Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM).

The budgets for providing essential fire protection to the citizens come from a combination of sources including property taxes, and in many rural communities, from local fund-raising. Even so, the fire service is one of the last community-based organizations that, in many cases, relies solely on volunteers to provide essential life safety and life protection. Traditionally, the fire service has seldom received any state financial resources. In addition, tax formulas created many decades ago have since been limited by tax caps. Given the original purpose of funding

firefighting and suppression capabilities, new mandates as described above have created additional costs without providing additional resources.

In hundreds of communities in Illinois, fire protection operates on a shoestring budget. In many cases, volunteers are forced to support their operations and buy limited amounts of gear through chicken fries, pancake breakfasts, and other venues. Too often, many of our state's firefighters lack protective clothing and boots when responding to fires. They put their lives on the line for the citizens of Illinois. Many fire departments and fire protection districts are in serious financial condition. Without adequate funding, the potential consequence to our citizens is that fire protection may not be available at all in the future because of tax caps. Therefore, this report offers solutions and funding sources to ensure that these essential services continue.

While the fire service enjoys unparalleled public support in terms of job satisfaction, many departments are volunteer. This volunteer spirit goes back to the 1800s and is traditional. Unfortunately, society has changed, and there are fewer volunteers and an increasing reliance on government provided and funded service programs. Communities rely upon their local fire departments and law enforcement to protect them. Unlike the fire service, law enforcement has very little volunteer personnel. Unlike the fire service, law enforcement receives extensive financial support for personnel, vehicles and equipment. In this changing society, public safety is dependent upon adequate funding of increasingly complex responsibilities which require sophisticated equipment and protective clothing for those dedicated personnel willing to risk their lives in service to others.

The fire service of Illinois is provided by several means. Major cities have full-time paid fire departments with active and ongoing inspection and enforcement programs. Of the 1,209 fire departments, 79 are fully paid, 412 are paid-on-call and 195 use a combination of paid, paid-

on-call and volunteer firefighters. The remaining departments are staffed completely by volunteers. As a result of the high percentage of volunteer and paid-on-call staff, there is a great degree of reliance on the OSFM for essential services.

The State Fire Marshal's Office has statutory mandates that impact safety in all communities. These are summarized as follows:

1. The Division of Arson Investigation provides fire investigations for determinations of arson. The investigators have peace officer status and respond to calls for assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The division also coordinates the state's juvenile firesetter intervention program.

2. The Division of Boiler and Pressure Vessel Safety conducts a safety and regulatory program at all of the over 100,000 boilers and pressure vessels that are commonly used in public buildings. Many safety violations are discovered through annual inspections and corrected before tragedy occurs.

3. The Division of Fire Prevention provides inspections at state owned or regulated facilities including day care centers and day care homes, residential facility programs at the request of Illinois Department of Human Services, correctional centers with the Illinois Department of Corrections, racetracks, telecommunications switching offices, and public buildings. It also enforces rules for the storage, sale, and use of gasoline at self-serve gas stations, aboveground tanks, and large LP-gas tanks.

4. The Division of Management Services processes fire incident reports from the fire departments, maintains the agency's internet page, and software that manages the various registration and regulatory programs and monitors fiscal matters.

5. The Division of Personnel Standards and Education administers exams to firefighters throughout the state for 33 certification courses. In addition, the division administers a training reimbursement fund for participating fire departments.

6. The Division of Petroleum and Chemical Safety regulates underground storage tanks containing petroleum and hazardous substances. Routine inspections occur during installation, removal and repair programs to ensure the safe operation of the tanks. When tanks fail or leak anywhere in the state, storage tank specialists provide emergency response.

Additionally, the State Fire Marshal's Office administers funding to the Chicago Fire Department to facilitate the department's firefighter training. In addition, the University of Illinois Fire Service Institute receives a direct appropriation from the Fire Prevention Fund to provide training for firefighters from all areas of the state. Several important advisory boards deal with a variety of public safety issues: hazardous materials, fire equipment distributors and employees, furniture fire safety, boiler safety, juvenile firesetters intervention, the advisory committees for the various fire service certification courses, and the advisory groups representing the statewide fire service organizations. Together, the OSFM and the fire service remain united in their efforts to enhance fire safety.

The fire problem in both Illinois and the nation has a dramatic impact on people's lives, their homes, businesses, and both the state and national economy. The National Fire Protection Association has identified the fire problem in the U.S. The alarming impact is summarized below in the most recent ten-year statistics (1989-1998):

- 19.6 million reported fires
- 46,000 civilian deaths
- 971 firefighter deaths in the line of duty

- 270,000 civilian injuries
- 953,000 firefighter injuries
- \$86 billion in direct property damage

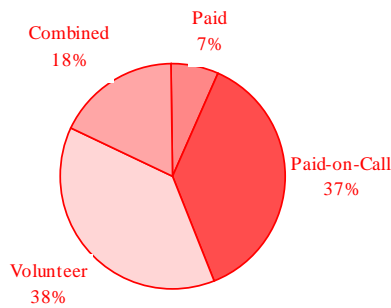
While fire deaths have been decreasing due to an aggressive public awareness and education campaign, too many Illinois citizens are still dying as the result of fires. More aggressive actions are needed to educate people how to better protect themselves in their homes. Essential protective clothing and equipment is needed to protect the firefighters in Illinois who risk their lives in service to others.

The fire problem in the U.S. has also been addressed by national level groups such as the U.S. Fire Administration's Panel, which released its "America Burning Re-commissioned" report to Director James Lee Witt of Federal Emergency Management Agency on May 2, 2000. The report found that fire hazards have a low priority compared to other areas of public safety: "The failure to adequately fund fire prevention and response...has resulted in continued loss of life and property at levels that would otherwise have been substantially reduced." It also cited the understaffing and underfunding of fire departments: "Firefighters respond to over a quarter million hazardous materials incidents each year in the U.S." In addition, firefighters "are charged with protecting the public during and after an incident involving weapons of mass destruction. Thousands of firefighters and emergency medical personnel lack rudimentary medical evaluation and well/fitness programs that can dramatically work to ameliorate the negative effects of emergency response and toxic exposure. Too many firefighters and paramedics suffer from cancer as the result of chronic exposure to toxic products of combustion and the numbers continue to increase. Additionally, each year more firefighters are exposed to

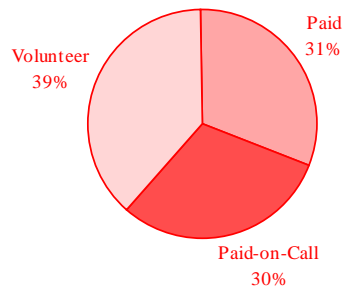
infectious diseases during the provision of basic and advanced life support in uncontrolled, emergency environments.”

The report also found that “protective clothing and equipment utilized by firefighters and emergency medical personnel are not always properly selected, used, and maintained. Inferior products may still be in use and procured by fire departments.” A significant number of departments lack adequate protective clothing altogether. This report offers solutions to these problems.

Profile of the 1,209 Fire Departments in Illinois



Profile of the 42,000 Firefighters in Illinois



The Office of the State Fire Marshal’s fire data exhibits the dramatic increase in emergency calls by fire departments and the changing role from fire suppression to other areas.

Illinois Fire Service Responses	1983	1998
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire and explosion structure fires; vehicle fires; tree, bush, grass fires; refuse fires; explosions; spills or leaks. 	38,877	62,445
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rescue call inhalator calls; emergency medical calls; lock-ins; searches; extrications; other rescue calls. 	46,299	204,341
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hazardous condition, standby spills; leaks with no ignition, explosive, bomb removals; excessive heat; power line down, 	15,074	30,893

arcing, shorted electrical equipment; aircraft standby; chemical emergency; hazardous condition, other hazardous conditions.		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over pressure rupture, steam rupture; air gas rupture; other over pressure rupture. 	539	650
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Service call lock-out; water evacuation; smoke; odor removal, animal rescue; assist police; unauthorized burning; other service calls. 	10,547	31,608
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good intent call smoke scare; wrong location; controlled burning; vicinity alarm; steam; other gas mistaken for smoke; other good intent calls. 	15,818	32,573
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> False call malicious, mischievous false call; bomb scare, no bomb; system malfunction; unintentional; other false calls. 	39,086	82,485
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Other situation found 	2,832	6,359
TOTAL	169,072	451,354

Urgent Fire Service Needs

Firefighting is one of the most dangerous professions in the country. Each year, Illinois honors the state’s firefighters who lost their lives in the line of duty. The Illinois Firefighter Memorial on the west side of the State Capitol reminds us of the ultimate sacrifices that have been made in protecting our citizens from fire. Needless deaths and injuries to Illinois firefighters can be reduced when the state funds an organized, standardized and comprehensive approach to providing fire protection.

To adequately protect Illinois firefighters and ensure fire protection of our homes, schools, nursing homes, businesses and other facilities, the Blue Ribbon Committee has identified several key areas that could immediately improve safety and response with measurable results:

- Providing essential personal protective gear for all firefighters in Illinois, including such fundamental items as bunker gear, helmets, boots, and air packs.
- Expanding fundamental firefighter training at the local level throughout the state. With the reliance on volunteers comes a staggering turnover rate of approximately 20 percent per year. Recruitment and retention of firefighters is a major challenge in many communities. It is becoming more and more difficult to have enough firefighters respond to a scene when they have other jobs. In addition, when they respond, they often do so in vehicles or equipment which may be older than the firefighters.
- Providing the necessary equipment to respond to new mandates, such as hazardous materials response, emergency medical services, rescue, highway accident extrication, terrorist incidents, and other essential services that are expected of the fire service, but often underfunded (if funded at all).
- Providing resources to fire departments and fire protection districts to offset revenues lost through tax caps and the creation of TIFF districts and the increased expense of covering new businesses and industries that benefit from tax incentives.

Safety of our firefighters is a paramount concern as well. We must ensure that our men and women of the fire service return home to their families after answering a call. When we send firefighters into burning buildings to rescue others, we must do all we can to see that they also make it out alive.

Fundamental changes are also needed to ensure fire safety in public buildings throughout the state. Currently, local fire departments do not have jurisdiction in public schools or universities and colleges. Yet, in times of fires or explosions, the fire department will certainly provide emergency services. The State Board of Education controls fire safety requirements and inspections. Because the State Board of Education's fire codes prevail, it allows standards which may be less stringent or in conflict with local codes thereby creating differing local regulations. When facilities are built or remodeled, the local fire department is usually excluded from the process of design, plan reviews, or inspections. This could result in conflicts with local codes or the fire safety for the students. When firefighters respond to fires at night, shutting the electricity off to prevent electrocution poses a dangerous situation. When fire departments are not allowed to inspect these school buildings in their own communities or when walls or doors are changed without notification to the departments, lives of the firefighters are endangered when they are responding to fires. Add to this to the dangers posed by the chemicals in chemistry labs, pesticides and herbicides in maintenance rooms, and other risks. It is clear that the fire service should be allowed to work closely with school administrators to ensure the safety of the students as well as the firefighters.

Similar restrictions apply for certain government buildings, day care centers, nursing homes, and hospitals. The principle is the same for day care centers as it is for schools: the fire service represents all of the professionals from the fire protection engineers to inspectors to the firefighters. When the alarm sounds, the fire service will be there during a fire or other emergency. Therefore, the fire service should be active participants in building safety and inspections within their service areas. There should be an effective and ongoing partnership with

school and university administrators to ensure the safety of all students in the state. Once again, the Governor's Office could bring the agencies and entities together to address these concerns.

Fire prevention and building codes are designed to provide a comprehensive strategy of protection. Therefore, local fire departments should have authority for all buildings and occupancies.

OSFM has distributed 1,706 smoke alarms, several carbon monoxide alarms, and many computerized fire safety games free of charge to the fire service and interested civic organizations of Illinois. Thousands of written educational materials have been distributed to this state's fire service and others for use within their communities. A comprehensive list of all public fire safety houses in Illinois is maintained by this agency. The fire safety houses are designed to teach children how to safely escape from fire.

OSFM has secured a grant from the National Fire Protection Association to begin coordinating a statewide injury prevention curriculum for Pre-K through eighth grades. The program, developed by the National Fire Protection Association, entitled *Risk Watch*®, will be coordinated with the support of the Illinois Department of Public Health, Illinois State Board of Education, the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board, and the Illinois Department of Transportation.

A comprehensive Media and Budgeting Resource Guide for the Fire Service was distributed to all fire departments statewide. The guide covers topics such as fireworks safety, seasonal fire safety, National Fire Prevention Week, smoke alarm use, and holiday and party fire safety.

OSFM continues to assist the public with their fire safety inquiries via the internet with our home page, and a special page for kids which contains valuable fire safety information, educational tools and games (www.state.il.us/osfm and www.state.il.us/kids).

The video library service loans training and educational programs free of charge to the fire service and civic organizations in Illinois. The Illinois Fire Services Tent and the Illinois Fire Museum at the Illinois State Fairgrounds is coordinated and operated during the state fair.

Fire service organizations throughout the nation cite the importance of public fire safety education and awareness in reducing the number of fire deaths and injuries. In keeping with this idea and OSFM's goal of "Protection Through Prevention," the Public Information Office coordinates the agency's many publications, public education programs and activities, and also coordinates the agency's participation at various conferences throughout the state. Proactive partnerships with the fire service help us achieve our goal and benefit the citizens of Illinois. We will continue to reinforce our organizational unity and shared goals with the fire service, the business community and elected officials. We are committed to our mission, "To reduce death, injury and property loss of Illinois citizens from fires, explosions and other hazards." Fire safety awareness and education is a top priority of this agency.