

FIRE SERVICE

The New Castle County Fire Services (NCCFS) provides fire, rescue, and ambulance (BLS) services to all citizens of New Castle County as well as mutual aid to the surrounding communities. Although the service is valued, the following recommendations are crucial for the continued delivery of exceptional emergency services in New Castle County.

Strengths

The NCCFS is comprised of twenty-one (21) fire departments that operate out of thirty-one (31) stations. These stations are located throughout New Castle County with the exception of the City of Wilmington. There is a long-standing mutual aid agreement between the County Fire Service & the Wilmington Fire Department.

All 21 Fire Departments are equipped with state of the art fire, rescue & ems apparatus that respond to all types of hazards. The staffed apparatus is a combination of highly trained, experienced career and volunteer firefighters/emts. The majority of the staff is cross-trained and respond together on vehicle collisions, structural fires, hazmat incidents, etc. Some of the benefits of the New Castle County fire/ems service are a huge strength for delivering the most efficient and cost effective service to the citizens of the County.

The City of Wilmington's FY 2017 budget for the fire department alone is \$25m which covers a population of approximately 72k people and approximately 17 square miles.

The New Castle County Fire Service provides coverage for approximately 500k people and covering approximately 470 square miles including waterways. New Castle County currently allocates to the New Castle County Fire Service approximately \$4.3 which is divided among the 21 departments. Each individual department takes care of training their own staff, maintaining apparatus & equipment, purchasing & supplying fire & ems gear/uniforms and other various daily needs at no additional charge to New Castle County.

Weakness

Nationwide, volunteerism is down for many reasons. This issue is not unique just to the fire service but in any organization that relies on volunteer assistance. A contributing factor to this decline is that in many households today, more than one adult works and quite often adults are working more than one job to adequately provide for their family. Another factor is that currently employers are not as likely to allow their employees who are volunteers to respond to emergency calls during work hours as they were 10 to 20 years ago. In addition, the number of volunteers available to respond, especially during the daytime hours, has been negatively affected by the decrease in the number of the large manufacturing employers in the County and the decrease in the number of shift-workers.

The shortage of volunteers at times requires ambulance crews to be utilized for fire suppression calls. This often results in the ambulance unit being placed in “bypass” because there is not sufficient staffing. When this occurs, the next due ambulance is required to respond, sometimes from a greater distance causing a delay in service and creating a domino effect. This happens on a daily basis in New Castle County.

Fire Service Impact Fees are difficult to receive due to restrictive language, which limits the ability to withdraw money from the accounts. The language does not allow the departments to use the funding to replace equipment or apparatus; it only allows funding to be used for additional resources for the departments. Most fire department districts are no longer growing and are faced with declining membership so the restrictions on the use of Fire Service Impact fees are not practical. In August of 2016 there was legislation (O16088) introduced into County Council to streamline the manner in which impact fees are transferred to fire departments, however as of this writing there is no update. The disbursement of these impact fees are vital and are needed to help supplement the \$4.3m from the County that is divided amongst the 21 departments.

Currently the Fire and Ambulance Advisory Board is the liaison between the County & the fire service. The committee feels that the board is underutilized and could better serve both entities if it had more support and a more defined process as the representative of the fire service to the County.

Opportunities

The County supplied each fire department a mobile data terminal (MDT) to be used in the ambulances, 1 for their command vehicle and 1 extra. The individual departments pay their own data fees to connect to the County network. Additional MDTs for at least the first due apparatus could provide a more efficient response, utilization of apparatus as well as utilization and accountability of personnel working an incident by the incident command.

There are untapped resources within the County. For example the New Castle County TV channel can help to promote a positive image, recruitment of new members or just create an awareness of what the fire service has to offer. In addition, involvement in community events sponsored by the County like sleep under the stars and the ice cream festival that attract large crowds.

When doing press releases, recognize the fire service as part of the public safety family along with the police and EMS divisions

Over the last several years, there have been many discussions over sprinkler legislation. It is the recommendation that the County invest time in researching all aspects & effects of this legislation and see if the benefits outweigh the negatives.

Threats

The Committee realizes that the steady increase in both Fire and EMS calls coupled with the decline in volunteerism is a major threat. This is currently taxing the existing system and makes the fire service vulnerable on the busiest of days. A large majority of these departments have made commitments to the communities they serve by hiring both full and part-time employees. They are not only paying salaries, but health benefits and insurance and as a result some of these departments have operating budgets that far exceed the minimal amount they receive of the \$4.3m that comes from the County. As a result there is a serious threat to the sustainability of the fire service on its own.

The County and the fire service need to partner together to look at additional funding resources to exceed the status quo of funding from years ago. Simple short term fixes such as changing the impact fee language would be extremely helpful and at no cost to the County. The Fire Service is a huge part of the County's public safety team and should be treated accordingly in the County budget. Solid funding is crucial now more than ever and any shortfalls in the funding will likely have an immediate negative impact on the services provided by the fire service.

Summary

In the face of increased pressures on staffing and funding, the New Castle County Fire Service continues to provide a professional level of "all hazards" response capability to the citizens and visitors of the County. 24/7 staffing, along with the flexible response mission of the departments, has insured competent management of fires, motor vehicle collisions, rescues, and other hazardous conditions. However, despite its outward appearance of invincibility, the cornerstone of the fire service is quickly being eroded by the loss of the very foundation on which it was established – volunteerism. The changing demographics of family life and the work force have affected every fire department in the County in a way from which none of them can turn back.

Raising the profile of the fire service in the public eye while assisting with recruitment efforts are two areas where the County may be able to provide significant support with little effort and perhaps little or no fiscal impact. Dovetailing these efforts with previous (Ameri-Corps?), existing, and perhaps new offerings such as a Public Safety recruitment camp could be mutually beneficial at little cost.

Simple language changes for accessing Fire Service Impact fees provides low hanging fruit to offer some short-term solutions to funding. Ongoing technical support – both in hardware and IT support – may take some burden off the fire service and help improve efficiencies.

Permanent, sustainable and dedicated funding streams will ultimately determine whether the fire and emergency services are able to sustain their professional level of service that the citizens have come to expect. In the current funding configuration, it will soon be unsustainable.