

**IS IT TIME FOR THE PONDEROSA VOLUNTEER FIRE
DEPARTMENT TO HIRE A FULL TIME FIRE CHIEF?**

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

This research project examined the problem that it may be time to hire a full time fire chief to manage the Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Department (PVFD) due to the evolving organizational structure and increasing responsibilities of the organization.

The purpose of this research project is to determine if the PVFD is ready to make the transition from a department headed by a volunteer fire chief to a department headed by a career fire chief. This report will be provided to Emergency Services District #28, the Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Association, Inc., and the PVFD to consider hiring a full time fire chief.

Action research was used to answer the following questions:

1. Do the changes in the organizational structure and personnel responsibilities of the PVFD require the management of a career fire chief?
2. What are the advantages of having a career fire chief?
3. What are the disadvantages of having a career fire chief?

The procedure was to perform an opinion survey of key officials and various fire chiefs, use comparative analysis between the groups, to perform a literature research, and to recommend the results to the Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Department and boards of directors of Harris County Emergency Services District #28 and the Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Association, Inc.

The results of the research identified that the advantages of hiring a full time fire chief outweigh the disadvantages.

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INTRODUCTION

The Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Department (PVFD) was established in 1972 as a substation of the Spring Volunteer Fire Department. The growth of the district has caused many changes in the departmental structure. These changes were implemented over the course of time to meet the challenges of providing quality fire and rescue services to the community. Harris County is the third most populous county in our nation and continues to grow. This growth has created many challenges that required the department to change the organizational structure by hiring a full time administrative office manager, a part-time assistant, and part-time paid emergency responders. As a result of personnel changes, the department has increased monthly stipends as well as increased responsibilities for all officers. These changes demonstrate that the organization is evolving to a combination type department where compensated staff is added to the organization. The problem is that the evolving organizational structure may require the hiring of a full time career fire chief to manage the organization.

The purpose of this research project is to determine if the PVFD is ready to make the transition from a department headed by a volunteer fire chief to a department headed by a career fire chief. This report will be provided to the Emergency Services District #28 (ESD28), the Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Association, Inc. (PVFA), and the PVFD to consider hiring a full time fire chief.

Action research was used to answer the following questions:

1. Do the changes in the organizational structure and personnel responsibilities of the PVFD require the management of a career fire chief?
2. What are the advantages of having a career fire chief?
3. What are the disadvantages of having a career fire chief?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Department began as a sub-station of the Spring Volunteer Fire Department in 1972. In 1976, the PVFD left the Spring organization to become its own entity providing fire and rescue services to a 13 square mile area of northern Harris County, Texas. The unincorporated area is north of the City of Houston and has exploded in population, businesses, and has major transportation thoroughfares. The PVFD was originally funded by donations, followed by a Rural Fire Prevention District with a tax rate of 3 cents per hundred dollars of evaluation. Currently it is funded by a Harris County Emergency Services District #28 (ESD28) with a tax rate of 6 cents per hundred dollars of evaluation. Growth in the area is evident with new building construction. New residential subdivisions, expanding existing subdivisions, and more commercial developments is the trend that is typical for most areas of Harris County.

The fire service is changing, and the change is very evident in the PVFD district. The district's population has grown from about 30,000 in 1990, to about 55,000 in 2002. The assessed property evaluation of the district has increased from \$1.36 billion in 1996 to \$2.03 billion in 2002. Emergency responses have increased from 1013 in 1992 to an estimated 1609 for 2002. This information was obtained from 1992 through 2001 ESD28 and PVFA audits. Harris County Appraisal District information was used for the 2002-03 tax year.

There are 54 fire departments in Harris County. The largest is the City of Houston and the largest combination department is the CyFair VFD, which is considered to be the nation's largest. The 900 square miles of unincorporated areas in Harris County are served by departments that range from poorly funded to well funded. Tax districts fund the vast majority of these fire departments. Many of these departments have had to deal with the demands of

community growth and fire department structure change. The Northwest, Aldine, Jacinto City, Westlake, Community, and Pasadena VFD's have hired full time career fire chiefs within the past three years. All of these, except Aldine VFD, hired fire chiefs from within the organization. However, that fire chief had a long history with the Aldine VFD and an adjacent volunteer fire department. A significant number of volunteer fire departments in the unincorporated county provide some type of monthly stipends to their senior staff including departmental vehicles. Monthly stipends range from small to large. CyFair VFD provides the fire chief with \$2,500 per month and other senior staff receives similar stipends.

Annexation laws and policies were significantly modified about five years ago and have affected departmental funding. Prior to the modification of the law, cities could annex large areas with little or no citizen input, and in some cases community based volunteer fire departments were eliminated. Fire departments were more cautious of capital improvements and operational costs since the threat of annexation could bankrupt organizations that planned for the future. The new state law severely limits cities' annexation powers and the effect is that fire departments can do more long range planning for service improvements. Under the new law cities must: have a rolling five year annexation plan; annex only whole water supply districts; provide equal to, or better service levels; and, must purchase facilities and equipment at fair market value if the areas annexed contain fire department facilities and equipment. The PVFD was instrumental in the legislative process that modified the annexation laws.

Several fire departments have recently invested millions of dollars in fleet replacements, training centers, administration buildings, and new and replacement fire stations committing to long-range community growth. The CyFair VFD has partnered with the Harris Montgomery

Community College District to build and operate an education and training center and a fire station with dormitories on the college's newest campus.

Community growth increases the demands for service, be it fire, rescue, EMS, public education, and community involvement. The fire service is expected to be an all provider resource. Service demands, mandated fire service performance standards, and governmental requirements continue to add demand for service to the entire organization, which in turn places more demands on departmental administration. The question is: Do the demands of community growth placed upon the department require further evolution of the departmental management structure to include a full time career fire chief?

This research project combines literature research and reflects a focus on surveying local and other emergency service organizations related to the Executive Leadership course of the Executive Fire Officers Program of the National Fire Academy. This research aligns with Unit V, Being In Transition, and Unit VI, Succession/Replacement Planning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review and surveys were used to support the purpose of this research. Survey instruments were used to obtain opinions and facts from other fire departments. They were as follows:

- Key officials (Appendix A)
- Career fire chiefs (Appendix B)
- Volunteer organizations fire chiefs who may transition to a career fire chief (Appendix C)
- Fire chiefs recently hired to lead primarily volunteer agencies (Appendix D)

The research included a review of Executive Fire Officer Program research projects that identified fire chief leadership values and the changing environment. Historical information was obtained by reviewing several years of financial audits from Emergency Services District #28, the taxing authority for the PVFD, and the Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Association, Inc. (PVFA), the non-profit corporation that is organized to operate and finance the PVFD.

The first survey for key officials and career fire chiefs asked a total of 10 questions. The survey's objective was to obtain the opinions of key officials and career fire chiefs to differentiate between volunteer and career fire chiefs, to identify the pros and cons of having a career fire chief in a primarily volunteer organization, and to seek their feedback for desired professional qualifications. The key officials surveyed were county and state elected officials and the members of the boards of the directors for ESD28 and the PVFA.

The second survey for volunteer organizations' fire chiefs who may transition to a career fire chief and the survey for fire chiefs recently hired to lead primarily volunteer agencies contained five questions that focused on the specifics of the advantages and disadvantages of having a career fire chief.

Figure 1 follows and shows the assessed property evaluation (y^1 axis) and revenue (y^2 axis) in ESD28 from 1996 through tax year 2003. The figure also shows a trend line that project four years into the future:

Figure 1

ESD28 Taxable Value and Revenue History

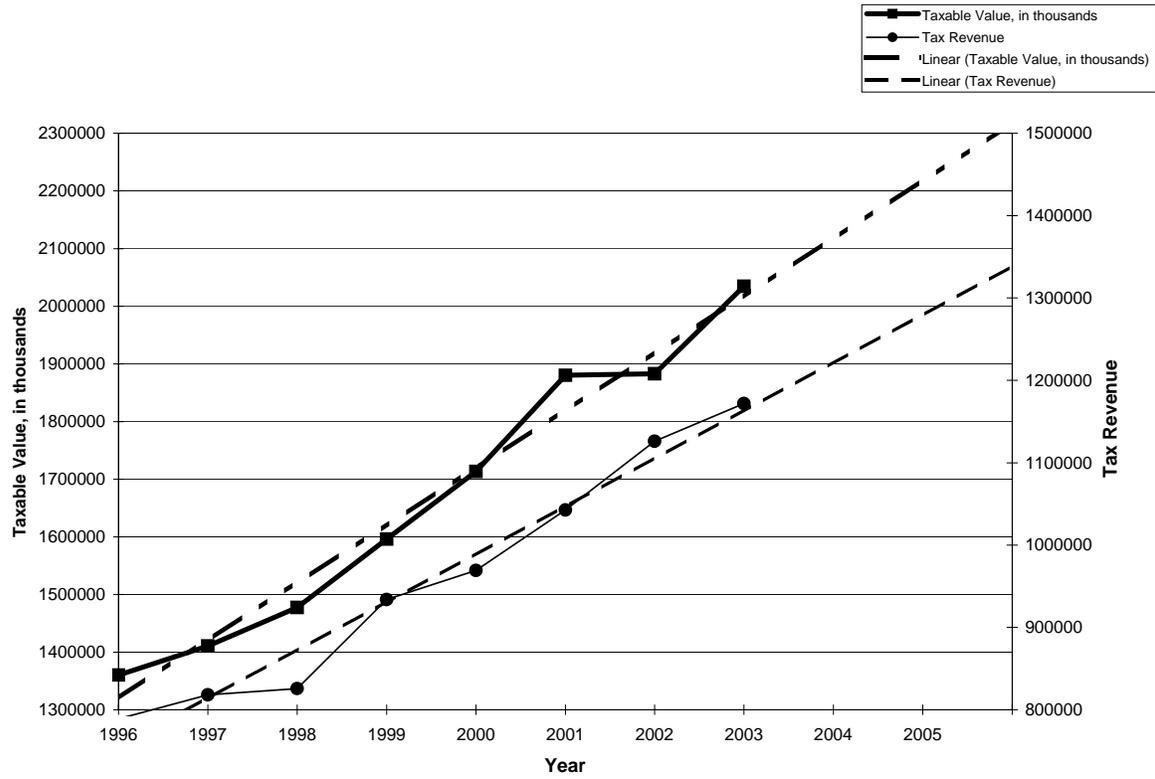
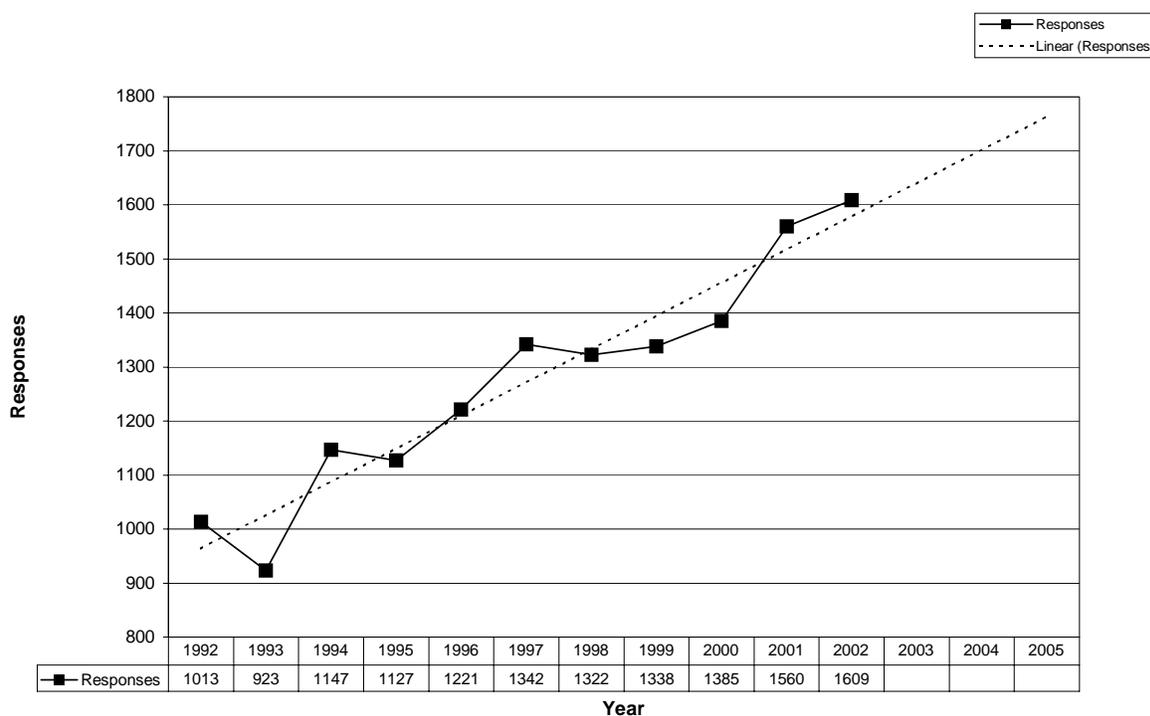


Figure 2 follows that shows PVFD emergency responses from 1992 through 2002 (est.), and a trend line projects three years into the future:

Figure 2

PVFD Emergency Response History



Chief Dennis Eller stated, “Today’s chief officers must change, they have to become more effective in management and leadership skills; if not, their departments will suffer the consequences” (Eller, 1997). “The fire service of today has evolved from an organization primarily responsible for fire prevention and fire suppression to one of a complex, multifaceted public safety service delivery system” (Wakeham, 1996).

Fire departments in unincorporated Harris County have evolved into a mixed breed of under-average, average and well-funded organizations dependent on district size and tax base. The growth of most of the area has been nothing short of phenomenal during the past three years equating to the growth during the late 1970's and early 1980's.

Responsibilities continue to increase primarily with regard to population growth, property values, and performance requirements, and most organizations have modified their operations and their funding base to address service levels. (Windisch, 2000)

Chief Keith Richter's Executive Fire Officers Program applied research paper makes an interesting point considering the fire service adjustments to EMS, hazardous materials, technical rescue, and the terrorist attacks on the United States.

The fire service is continually changing to meet the needs of the public. Just as one transition is completed to fill a void, a new challenge surfaces that requires another shift on the part of a fire department. The past decade has seen many changes in the services delivered by most fire departments. It is likely that the upcoming decade will bring even more changes in the way fire departments operate. (Richter, 1997)

David B. Gratz discusses change in his book, *Fire Department Management: Scope and Method*.

One of the most interesting contradictions in human nature is its ambivalence toward things new and different. Most of us strive year in and year out to obtain something new and hopefully better in our personal lives...to move up to something better. But, even while we seek such changes for the better in our personal lives, many of us are equally intense in *resisting* organizational changes. (Gratz, 1972, p. 122)

Mr. Gratz goes on to state, “Organizational change may require a realignment of personal relationships, a change in work patterns, and increased restrictions or control; all of which are looked upon as something less than desirable” (Gratz, 1972, p. 122).

Hyrum W. Smith discusses time and life management stating that time is a continuum, and he uses an analogy that can be applied to a fire chief.

What person has almost absolute total control over the events of his or her professional environment?... The answer given by some experts is a symphony conductor...some like him stands up, raises his baton---and what happens? A 110 piece orchestra responds right on cue, and every time that baton moves, the orchestra follows. (Smith, 1994, p. 20)

Mr. Smith further states in the section of the book entitled *Two Time Fallacies*.

The first fallacy is that we think *we're going to have more time at some unspecified future date than we do now*. “Well, I’ll do that next week, or next month, or next year, or when the children are grown, or when I retire. Then I’ll have more time.” The second fallacy is that we think *we can somehow save time*. The fact is, [sic] you *have* all the time there is. You’re given a check every day for twenty-four hours, and you have to spend every last second. (Smith, 1994, p. 27)

In Gratz’s book, he discusses the transition from volunteer to combination fire departments. He states, “Astute fire departments can, and must, plan for organizational change” (Gratz, 1972, p.125). “There are five distinct stages of anticipated change for which we can plan:” (Gratz, 1972, p. 123).

1 – Volunteer

2 – Predominantly volunteer with paid drivers, clerical, etc.

3 – Combination volunteer and paid

4 – Predominantly paid with volunteers as auxiliary

5 – Paid with no volunteers

PVFD payroll expenditures were \$67,351 in 1996, and the 2003 payroll is budgeted for \$199,500. The daytime/weekday paid fire fighter program has been expanding over the past several years with an hourly increase effective in 2003 based on a regional survey. Elected officers stipends have been increased, and the administrative staff has been expanded over the years. The appointed junior captain position will receive a monthly stipend effective in 2003, and the eight appointed lieutenants are provided annual stipends from the Ponderosa Volunteer Incentive Program that equated to \$4,000 in 2002. The PVFD is in the third stage described by Mr. Gratz.

Using the above information, and recognizing community and area growth, provides credible evidence to the fact the PVFD district is continuing to change, as well as growing older. PVFD management has been successful in addressing growth and change, however the growth and aging of the area will require increased time in the fire chief's position. Chief Dennis Compton states, "There is not a creditable leader in labor or management who hasn't wished for something better, a process geared toward mutual trust, mutual respect, problem solving, and even joint planning" (Compton, 1999, p. 2). The consideration of having a career PVFD fire chief can be a reasonable expectation and used as a planning element to continue quality service.

PROCEDURES

Survey instruments (Appendixes A-D) were sent to key officials and fire chiefs. The surveys were accompanied with a cover letter (Appendix E) explaining the importance and intent of completing the survey and a self-addressed stamped return envelope was provided for ease of return. The key officials survey population consisted of 13 elected officials, and the 10

members of the ESD28 and PVFA boards of directors. The career fire chiefs survey was sent to nine fire chiefs including seven local and regional chiefs, and two chiefs from out of state. The recently hired fire chiefs survey was sent to seven area chiefs, and one was sent to an out of state chief of a combination department. A survey was sent to five area volunteer fire departments and one out of state department who have the potential to hire a full time fire chief in the foreseeable future.

The key officials' and career fire chiefs' surveys consisted of 10 questions requesting opinions regarding professional experiences with volunteer and career fire chiefs, other comparative information, and asking desired educational backgrounds for fire chiefs. The survey questions were the same and the intent was to have "outside" observations of volunteer systems by career officials and fire chiefs. The recently hired fire chiefs' and the volunteer fire chiefs' surveys consisted of five questions that attempted to gather opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of career fire chiefs transitioning into a primarily volunteer fire department. The survey questions were the same and the intent was to have "inside" observations of their own systems by volunteer fire chiefs and recently hired fire chiefs.

The primary limitation was a risk of low participation in the surveys, and several follow-ups were necessary by personal contact and via email requests. Table 1 depicts the surveys population and return results:

Table 1

Survey Population and Return

Survey type	Number sent	Number received
Key officials	24	10
Career fire chiefs	9	6
Volunteer fire chiefs	6	5
Recently hired fire chiefs	8	4

Another limitation was the National Fire Academy's Learning Resource Center's apparent lack of similar Executive Fire Officer Program applied research projects regarding the transitioning of career fire chiefs into volunteer systems. Several attempts were made via the internet to access similar type studies; however, none were discovered. A personal visit to a local bookstore to seek literature on non-profit and/or volunteer organizations transitions to hiring a full time leader resulted in finding no publications.

The returned surveys' responses were compiled and used to determine the responses to the research questions. Emphasis is given that the surveys do request opinions, and the use of out of area sampling was used to allow for some comparative opinions.

RESULTS

1. Do the changes in the organizational structure and personnel responsibilities of the PVFD require the management of a career fire chief?

This question addresses a portion of the survey instruments with the survey answers compiled below that list the opinions of respondents. Duplicate or non-relative responses were not reported and the comments were edited for grammar, punctuation, and spelling corrections.

Numeric response requests were used in the following manner:

5 – Agree fully 3 – Agree 1 – Do not agree 0 – No Opinion

This section lists the responses from key officials and career fire chiefs.

Question number one was, do you believe that a full time career fire chief can improve the overall performance levels of a predominantly volunteer fire department?

Responses were, eight agreed fully and seven agreed, and there were no other responses in the other two categories. These responses state that a full time career chief can improve the overall performance levels of a predominantly volunteer fire department.

Some comments are listed below that are related to questions numbered two and three, if the respondents had personal/professional experiences with a volunteer fire chief:

- A paid chief will make it different, but not necessarily better or worse. It depends on several factors, who the chief is, perceptions, wants and needs. Each department is different.
- I believe that volunteer fire chiefs that I have known demonstrated no lack of commitment. What they lacked was time.
- The interaction has been good but having the chief available full time versus late evenings and weekends would be much better.
- Some have been very professional and had substantial fire service knowledge and experience, while others could barely spell chief and were a disgrace to the profession.
- Good intentions, but the person may not have the background and time necessary to manage in today's fire service.

- Our volunteer fire chiefs have been dedicated, hard working and effective.

The comments above show a recurring theme of time commitments that are reasonable considering volunteer chiefs usually work a full time job in addition to their duties as the fire chief. The comments also show that the respondents observed that volunteer fire chiefs are dedicated to the fire service profession.

Questions numbered four and five explored the respondents' relationships and opinions of career fire chiefs. Some of the comments are listed below:

- The career chiefs were as dedicated to the fire service as their volunteer counterparts. Again, it was the career chief's ability to devote more time and energy to the business of running a fire department that separated them from the volunteer fire chief.
- Career chiefs tend to be too mind set – not open to suggestions by knowledgeable volunteers
- In any profession, there are those who are undesirable, however as a rule I find that career fire chiefs have much more to offer the fire service than volunteer chiefs. In most cases, career chiefs are committed to their profession and do it day in and day out. Volunteer chiefs often have other interests or obligations that take large amounts of their time and resources.

The respondents to this question noted the time commitments of volunteer fire chiefs and a tendency that career fire chiefs may not be responsive to volunteers.

Responses to questions numbered eight and nine were not used for meeting the purpose of this research.

2. What are the advantages of having a career fire chief?

This section has the responses from key officials and career fire chiefs.

The sixth question asked, what values could a full time career fire chief add to an existing volunteer system? The comments are listed below:

- The chief must be open-minded – must be willing to work with volunteers, not work to get rid of them.
- A full time fire chief would be just that – a full time chief. He/she would have no other distractions.
- The key phrase is “full time”. In today’s world, customer service is a full time job for the fire service. He would be able and willing to devote his full energies and involvement to that job – his livelihood would be from that career.
- Stability, continuity, fulltime commitment, daily point of contact
- Availability, training, physical presence, visible role model that is able to concentrate his/her time to the VFD instead of on a stand-by basis.
- On going leadership and accountability to the boards of directors as an employee of the organization
- Relieve volunteers of administrative time and paperwork.
- A career chief could bring professionalism and minimize the “social club” environment of volunteer departments, provide more knowledgeable guidance to its members, and oversee today’s substantial assets in a more businesslike manner.

- Can focus on recruiting and retaining volunteers.

This question received the most comments from key officials and career fire chiefs.

Again, time commitments appear in most comments and consistency in the position with accountability is identified.

This section has the responses from volunteer fire chiefs who may hire fire chiefs in the future and recently hired fire chiefs.

Question number two was, what are the values of having a full time career chief compared to a volunteer chief? The question received many comments that are listed below:

- Available for all daily issues
- Workload may become unmanageable for a volunteer chief
- The Chief's position is generally an exempt position that allows the employer to require a higher level of availability.
- Depending on the governing agency, the majority of business may occur during daytime hours when most volunteer chiefs are not available.
- The department is a business now operating full-time ALS ambulance service, working out of three stations, staffing issues, purchases and budget issues. This was too much work and responsibility to be placed on a volunteer fire chief.
- A volunteer chief often operates in a crisis management mode and handles the next crisis in line without being able to develop a series of goals and realistic expectations with time frames to reach those goals.
- Being here full time allows me to work with citizens and business leaders in our community to represent the fire department and to "sell" our services to our

community. It has also allowed me better access to political leaders and to visit with them about the needs of the fire service at a county, state, and federal level.

- Being full time has allowed me more time to research for possible alternative funding sources for the department.
- More time to focus on running the business, developing standard operating guidelines, watching the growth of the district, participating in community programs, opportunity to create some long term continuum.
- Fire ground command is handled the same way day and night. Before I was available in the daytime, I believed that personnel were taking shortcuts in regards to fire ground safety during the daytime and often made response decisions without regard to potential liabilities.
- More time to run the department
- It is easier for me to keep up with the equipment needs of the department as I am now able to contact the equipment suppliers during working hours and am able to freely talk about our needs. I can do this without “stealing time” from my previous employers.
- Our trucks are now in the top maintenance condition that they have ever been because I have the time to devote to making sure all repair items are taken care of quickly and properly.
- Tactical leadership is not exposed to the voting whims of the general membership.

The respondents once again noted that time availability is the primary issue. Other comments demonstrated the opinion that safety improvements and running the business end of

the organization were very important issues. There are also comments regarding tactical issues being more consistent.

3. What are the disadvantages of having a career fire chief?

This section has the responses from key officials and career fire chiefs.

The seventh question asked, what do you believe to be the negative consequences of a predominantly volunteer system transitioning to a full time career fire chief? Comments are listed below:

- Change is always hard. There may be resentment from the troops towards the elimination of an “elected” or “appointed” chief.
- It takes a great deal of skill to be able to hold a group of volunteers together “working” for a paid chief. A paid chief may alienate some volunteers.
- Power struggle preference to certain individuals and a lack of accountability. How are the members going to vote out the bad? Could further divide “management” and “labor”.
- Ego, jealousy, better-than-thou attitude
- The cash outlay for salary, benefits and taxes for a qualified full time fire chief can cost more than smaller districts can justify.
- Overcoming the old attitudes that the chief should also be a volunteer.
- Some career chiefs are unable to relate to volunteers.
- None

The responses to this question identified the change that would occur when a career fire chief replaces the traditional volunteer chief and that some career chiefs cannot relate to

volunteers. One interesting comment was “none”; the respondent did not identify negative consequences of having a career fire chief.

This section has the responses from volunteer fire chiefs who may hire fire chiefs in the future and recently hired fire chiefs.

Question number three was what are the shortcomings of having a full time career chief?

The comments are listed below:

- The members may feel they have lost their voice in choosing their leader.
- The full-time chief may have demands placed upon him by his employer that he does not agree with and may feel they are not in the best interest of his department but must obey the demands since his job depends on it.
- The full-time career chief may experience burnout much quicker. His employer demands full service during the day and his volunteers demand full service at night and on weekends. It takes a unique individual to balance these demands and still maintain some sort of life away from the fire service.
- There is always the possibility of resentment from the volunteers towards any paid personnel. When you make demands of a volunteer, they can use the excuse, “I am a volunteer, let the paid guy do the work.” Many departments who have added any kind of paid staff have seen some form of this type of reaction towards paid staff. Unfortunately, in most organizations, the number of paid staff remains too small to accomplish all of the tasks that need to be completed.
- The only shortcomings are like any appointed position, appointment to the position, budget issues and staffing. Having an employment contract helps in being fired without just cause and severance pay considerations.

- The new career chief should be hired based upon personality. Can he/she get along with the volunteers?
- Salary drain on the budget
- Must have a good way to measure performance and set goals for the Chief. These goals would have to be accomplished with or without the support of the volunteers.
- Jealousy is always the word that comes to my mind when hiring someone within a volunteer system.

This question received many comments, and the primary disadvantage of hiring a full time fire chief appears to be the concern of the fire chief and volunteer relationship. Comments stated, “The new career chief should be hired based upon personality”, and other references identified potential conflict. The secondary disadvantages had to do with the employer and employee relationship that is related to career staff and volunteers. Also, cost is certainly a concern whenever a full time person is added to any organization.

Other Results

The tenth question for key officials and career fire chiefs asked, what criteria do you believe a potential career fire chief should possess prior to applying for a position? This question was used to determine education and experience for the potential fire chief. Table 2 lists the responses:

Table 2

Education and Experience Responses

Type of Education	# Responses
High School or GED	3
Some College	3
Vocational/Associates Degree	2
College Degree	9
State Certified Firefighter	13
Emergency Medical Technician	7
National Fire Academy education	7
Other professional certifications	6

The respondents clearly indicated that a college degree should be prerequisite for a career fire chief. The state certification is a requirement in Texas for a career fire chief, and it is interesting that respondents noted National Fire Academy education and other professional certifications are as important as a college degree. Respondents indicated a minimum of five years experience with the vast majority suggesting 10 years of experience.

Question number one in the survey instrument for volunteer fire chiefs who may hire in the future and recently hired fire chiefs was designed to solicit demographics and other information from the respondents' individual fire districts. The information could be used for further analysis.

The fourth question in the surveys was similar in that it asked, do you believe that your FD is better now/would be better since/if you have become/had a full time fire chief? This question, for both the recently hired fire chief and the possibility of hiring a fire chief, was designed to solicit opinions from the groups for comparative purposes.

The volunteer fire chiefs responded with:

- A full time executive administrator would be better and keep the control of the department within the department.
- Yes
- No, not until a study is done to determine if we should have a full time chief, full time administrator, or some other combination.
- In the case of the X fire department, no.
- At this time we do not see a need for a career chief but rather a department administrator who's duties encompass many of the Chief's duties but does not provide the direct leadership of the tactical team.

The recently hired fire chiefs responded with:

- I believe that it is neither better nor worse; it is different.
- The responsiveness to questions or requests from the community is handled on a timelier basis due to availability.
- Yes, the department is much better now with a full-time fire chief.
- I think our department was a very good department prior to my conversion to paid chief but I think we are better organized because of my availability.

The volunteer fire chiefs indicated that a full time fire chief may not be necessary, but they do reference that administrative efforts could be enhanced with a full time administrator

versus the traditional role of a tactical fire chief who is also responsible for the administrative duties.

Comparing the respondents' comments shows that the recently hired fire chiefs are mostly positive that their departments are better off now than before the position was a part time volunteer chief. The current volunteer fire chiefs indicated that a full time fire chief might not be necessary. They do reference that administrative efforts could be enhanced with a full time administrator versus the traditional role of a tactical fire chief who is also responsible for administrative duties.

The fifth and final question asked of volunteer fire chiefs who may hire career fire chiefs and newly hired fire chiefs is, what do you recommend to other FD's who may be considering hiring a full time career fire chief? This question can be used to compare the responses of volunteer fire chiefs to the recently hired fire chiefs' responses.

The volunteer chiefs responses were:

- Make sure the requirements meet your budget.
- Don't ask for more than you are willing to pay.
- Be sure you are ready to lose control over your department.
- Think about a department administrator before hiring a full time chief if the current leadership is working and the only problem is time to get things done.
- Hire a fire chief if inappropriate expenditures of department funds have been discovered attributed to the poor financial planning by the chief officer.
- The existing chief does not work well with the volunteers and duty crew and the department is losing membership.

The recently hired fire chiefs' responses were:

- Demand education for the position, not just simply convert to paid.
- Both the members and the governing body will watch the first full-time chief very carefully. Both groups will want to see proof that they made a good decision.
- The career chief must recognize that the paid people have different needs and desires than the volunteers.
- It would probably be good to have input from the volunteers in the development of the chief's job description. This input would provide valuable information to the chief prior to his hiring.
- Be honest with the membership about the pros and the cons and allow the membership to express their concerns about all aspects of the conversion.

The volunteer fire chiefs' comments were primarily related to the costs of having a full time position. The recently hired fire chiefs' primary comments were related to recognizing the impact of a paid position in a volunteer organization. Other comments were related to assuring a sufficiently educated individual for the job, not just promoting from within. Comments from both groups centered on working well with the volunteer staff and the concern about the volunteers losing control of their organization.

DISCUSSION

A review of the ESD28 revenue in the research data (Appendix F) and Figure 1 shows total revenue increasing an average of over seven percent per year during the past five years. The revenue for 2003 is expected to be \$1,172,000 and the projected revenue for 2005 is estimated to be \$1,300,000. A full time fire chief's salary for this area is about \$55,000 per year. This information was obtained from question number one in the survey instrument provided to

recently hired fire chiefs. It appears that the PVFD has sufficient revenue for a full time fire chief, and when the monthly stipend provided to the current volunteer fire chief is removed the increased financial impact is about \$48,000 per year, plus any benefits that may be provided.

Emergency responses continue to increase as shown in Figure 2. The PVFD has executed controls in the past that screen some types of responses such as automatic alarms, but there is a continuing increase in all fire and rescue responses; also, emergency medical assists continue to increase. The literature review demonstrates that fire service responsibilities are continuing to increase which will manifest into more demands on the administration.

The survey instrument responses from key officials and career fire chiefs showed that time commitments of volunteer fire chiefs are the primary concern. The surveys from recently hired fire chiefs stated the same concern and they added that their departments were better for various reasons since they had been hired. The comments from recently hired fire chiefs expanded the time element by explaining the various duties and responsibilities that have been accomplished after they held the position.

The current PVFD fire chief is retired from full time employment. The organization currently operates with the fire chief and senior staff as volunteers. Therefore, they are not expected to be available on a full time basis. The elected officers, less the fire chief, are career fire fighters and one police officer that serve in other jurisdictions. Their time is also limited by family commitments. It appears that a full time fire chief would have positive impact on the PVFD operations including direct supervision over the paid staff on a daily basis.

The survey instrument responses from volunteer fire chiefs focused on the dollars associated with hiring a full time fire chief. They noted that there would be some concerns in the power transfer with the lack of departmental elections versus the board of directors hiring a fire

chief. They also noted that the career chief must be concerned with volunteer relationships, and on creating an administrative position versus a career fire chief position. The cost of a PVFD full time fire chief is discussed above, and the future hiring of a fire chief should consider a person who has extensive volunteer fire service background.

Several fire departments in Harris County have hired full time fire chiefs to lead their organizations. All of them, except for Pasadena and Community VFD's, have smaller budgets than the PVFD. Their organizations have recognized the need of the full time commitment of a career fire chief. All of them have addressed the organizational structure that is associated to hiring a full time fire chief, and for the most part, the systems seem to be working properly. It appears that the cost associated with hiring a full time fire chief is not a significant concern for the PVFD.

There was some concern that the full time fire chief may be in conflict with the volunteers and the boards of directors. The fire department may want to go one direction and the board may want to go in another direction. This is not an unusual situation and can be addressed by a comprehensive employment contract. The board of directors will remain the superior, and the fire chief must be able to communicate the wants and needs of the organization on a regular basis. Leadership and management qualities must be an employment requirement.

Comments from the volunteer fire chiefs' surveys reflected an administrative position could assist the organizations. This is an interesting comment and appears to segregate the responsibilities of the fire chief. These organizations currently expect the fire chief to administer and tactically lead the fire department during emergencies. They offered no suggestions for implementation of this concept, however it is not inconceivable to expect the newly hired fire chief to fill both roles of administrator and tactical leader. One can surmise that time

commitments from doing both the administrative work and the tactical work is a concern of volunteer fire chiefs. A possible negative outcome of the administrator discussion is that internal conflict could arise when an administrator working under the fire chief could be in a position to disagree with the fire chief's direction. The administrator may have a more global and futuristic view of the business portion of the organization. It appears that the loss of authority by volunteer fire chiefs may be the cause of these comments. This is a natural response that should not be considered as judgment in this research because these fire chiefs are very dedicated to their organizations.

The PVFD has had a successful history and will be rated a three under the Insurance Service Office grading schedule effective January 1, 2003. The facilities and equipment are first class, and the services include fire suppression, rescue, first responder EMS, high angle rescue, water rescue, hazardous materials operations, and a host of other traditional services. However, the participation rate of the pure volunteer force appears to be lessening in responses, training attendance, and routine activities. This may be related to the activity rate and types of emergency responses and additional requirements associated with the organization. Comments from some volunteers state that the career fire fighter influence may be causing a drift away from supporting volunteer needs and the expectations of volunteers.

Career fire fighters fill five of the seven positions of the elected officers. Station one's three of four appointed line officers are career fire fighters. The one who is not a career fire fighter just completed the state mandated career fire fighter training and he is seeking employment as a career fire fighter. Station two's lieutenants are volunteer, and station three's lieutenants are volunteer. Most of the officers listed above are long-term members of the PVFD, and it is not the intent of this portion of the discussion to judge, but it is a consideration based on

certain anonymous comments of volunteer members. Since this is a significant consideration in a combination department, leadership must be aware of these trends and minimize conflict to assure sufficient and dedicated volunteers for the future.

The annexation discussion earlier in this paper describes that annexation is not a significant threat to the PVFD. This tends to allow for the PVFD to do more long term planning as demonstrated by the recent investment in a training facility. Annexation is not a concern when considering a full time chief for the PVFD.

The education suggestions provided by respondents indicate that a college degree is their highest recommendation. National Fire Academy education and other professional certifications including Emergency Medical Technician were also listed as high priorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study encompassed primarily local and some distant opinions from dedicated professionals as to the criteria of making the transition to a full time fire chief in volunteer fire departments. The research demonstrates that the full time commitment of a fire chief is clearly beneficial to the organization, especially long term. The PVFD district's responsibilities are growing, and the PVFD has the financial resources to support a full time fire chief. The research shows that the advantages of hiring a full time fire chief far outweigh the disadvantages. The disadvantages discussed in this project are more of an emotional consideration versus a business based consideration. Another recommendation is that the first full time fire chief should come from a volunteer fire department to minimize the exposure of alienating volunteers.

This applied research project will be provided to the PVFD organizations to allow them to consider hiring a full time fire chief to lead the PVFD into the future.

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SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR KEY OFFICIALS

5 – Agree fully 3 – Agree 1 – Do not agree 0 – No Opinion

1. Do you believe that a full time career fire chief can improve the overall performance levels of a predominantly volunteer fire department?

5 4 3 2 1 0

2. Have you had personal/professional experiences with a volunteer fire chief?

Yes No No Opinion

3. If you answered yes to #2 above, was your experience

Positive Negative No Opinion

Comments

4. Have you had personal/professional experiences with a career fire chief?

Yes No No Opinion

5. If you answered yes to #4 above, was your experience

Positive Negative No Opinion

Comments

6. In your opinion, what values could a full time career fire chief add to an existing volunteer system?

Comments

7. In your opinion, what do you believe to be the negative consequences of a predominantly volunteer system transitioning to a full time career fire chief?

Comments

8. Do you believe that Harris County fire departments should begin planning for more career fire chiefs to lead their organizations?

5 4 3 2 1 0

9. In your opinion, do you believe that Harris County fire departments are effective and efficient?

5 4 3 2 1 0

Comments

10. What criteria do you believe a potential career fire chief should possess prior to applying for a position? (Circle those that are important to you, and comment if you desire)

High School or GED

State Certified Firefighter

Some College

Emergency Medical Technician

Vocational/Associates Degree

National Fire Academy Education

College Degree

Other Professional Certifications

Desired years of experience? _____

Comments

SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR CAREER FIRE CHIEFS

5 – Agree fully 3 – Agree 1 – Do not agree 0 – No Opinion

1. Do you believe that a full time career fire chief can improve the overall performance levels of a predominantly volunteer fire department?

5 4 3 2 1 0

2. Have you had personal/professional experiences with a volunteer fire chief?

Yes No No Opinion

3. If you answered yes to #2 above, was your experience

Positive Negative No Opinion

Comments

4. Have you had personal/professional experiences with a career fire chief?

Yes No No Opinion

5. If you answered yes to #4 above, was your experience

Positive Negative No Opinion

Comments

6. In your opinion, what values could a full time career fire chief add to an existing volunteer system?

Comments

7. In your opinion, what do you believe to be the negative consequences of a predominantly volunteer system transitioning to a full time career fire chief?

Comments

8. Do you believe that Harris County fire departments should begin planning for more career fire chiefs to lead their organizations?

5 4 3 2 1 0

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State Certified Firefighter

Some College

Emergency Medical Technician

Vocational/Associates Degree

National Fire Academy Education

College Degree

Other Professional Certifications

Desired years of experience? _____

Comments

October 13, 2002

Mr.
address
address

Dear

I am requesting your assistance to participate in a survey seeking feedback for an applied research project pertaining to my fourth and final year of the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program. All information sources are confidential, and the survey results will be compiled into the final report. I would appreciate your immediate attention.

The research will attempt to identify the justifications for hiring a full time career fire chief for a Harris County volunteer fire department, and a potential job description may be produced.

This survey is focused toward key leadership positions within Harris and surrounding counties. Please complete the survey and mail to me in the enclosed envelope at your earliest convenience. Please feel free to add additional comments.

Thank you very much for your participation.

Fred C. Windisch
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