

**What Is The Impact To The Coon Rapids Fire Department Of Its Participation In The  
Anoka County Fire Investigation Team (ACFIT)?**

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

By: John Piper  
Coon Rapids Fire Department  
Coon Rapids, Minnesota

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**Abstract**

The problem is Coon Rapids Fire Department (CRFD) is uncertain of their role as a participant in the Anoka County Fire Investigation Team (ACFIT). The purpose of this research is to identify the role of participation of CRFD as a member of the ACFIT. The research method is descriptive. The approach consisted of literature review, a survey of all members of the investigative team, including select management officials and interviews. This exercise has revealed the advantages and challenges resulting from the creation of a countywide fire investigative team/task force. The research questions are:

- a) What are the benefits for an organization when participating in a group consisting of several different organizations?
- b) How do other fire departments determine their role in participation within a regional team?
- c) What do the key stakeholders for the City of Coon Rapids feel the impact/influence is?
- d) What do the Sheriff and County Attorney feel the impact/influence is to the county as a whole?

The results show the team is accomplishing its goals and with the same approach as other teams reviewed in the research. I recommend that CRFD continue to be involved in the team for the many benefits experienced by the city. Furthermore, it is my recommendation that Task Force/Fire Investigative Teams be established in more communities given the documented benefits.

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## **Introduction**

As budgets continue to be constrained, it is important for each organization to determine if its resources are being used efficiently and effectively. This can be achieved by evaluating each service or program offered to customers and determining if it is the best use of the available resources. The problem is that the Coon Rapids Fire Department (CRFD), which is part of the Anoka County Fire Investigation Team (ACFIT), is uncertain of their role as a participant within the county investigation team. Therefore, the CRFD has no way of knowing its role relating to participating within the team.

The purpose of this research is to identify the participant role of the CRFD as a member of the ACFIT. The research purpose is to create a survey to distribute to all members of the team along with the supervisors and managers who oversee the members of the team.

The method of research used is descriptive.

The research questions are as follows:

- a) What are the benefits for an organization when participating in a group made up of many different organizations?
- b) How do other fire departments determine their influence in participation within a regional team?
- c) What do the key stakeholders for the City of Coon Rapids feel the impact/influence is?
- d) What do the Sheriff and County Attorney feel the impact/influence is to the County as a whole?

## Background and Significance

Anoka County consists of 21 communities with a total population of 313,000 residents. Five of the larger cities have employed trained fire investigators for many years to conduct origin and cause fire investigations. In the event a community needed an investigation, with none of its own investigators available, the State Fire Marshal's Office (SFM) was contacted for assistance. Most of the smaller communities have never employed formally trained investigators. Other than the simplest of fires, they needed to call the SFM for any fires requiring investigation.

Prior to budget cuts, the SFM had 14 investigators located throughout the state who responded regardless of the type of fire. Recent budget cuts have reduced the number of investigators from 14 to 9. This has significantly reduced the response capabilities of the SFM investigators. The criteria to request a SFM investigator has become more stringent and must now meet one of the following criteria:

- a) Fatality
- b) Serious injury, especially to a public safety official
- c) Large monetary loss or community impact
- d) Arson or undetermined with indications of possible arson
- e) Special cases as determined by the SFM investigator – Fire department has no resources for an investigation of any kind

This policy change has had a dramatic effect on the ability of communities to obtain an SFM investigation if the fire did not meet one of the aforementioned criteria.

With this in mind, fire officials in Anoka County began discussing about what could be done to ensure that every fire in the County was properly investigated. The first planning meeting for the team was held in February, 2003. The team was officially formed on April 15, 2004. The team

started performing investigations in October, 2004. The current members of the team work in the following areas:

- a) Law Enforcement – 4
- b) Fire – 14
- c) County Attorney – 1
- d) Alcohol, Tobacco, & Firearms (ATF) – 1
- e) State Fire Marshal's Office (SFM) – 1

When an investigation is needed, the on-scene Incident Commander contacts Anoka County Central Dispatch and requests the ACFIT. The Fire Dispatcher then contacts the ACFIT on-call Team Leader to communicate the request. The Team leader is the initial contact for dispatch and the person in the position rotates on a monthly basis. The ACFIT Team Leader contacts the Incident Commander to determine the resources necessary at the scene. After determining what is needed, the Team Leader contacts the appropriate blend of team members to respond to the scene and conduct the investigation.

In the past, the CRFD Investigators only conducted fire investigations within the city limits. If the investigator was off-duty, overtime was paid. In the event that no CRFD Investigators were available, the SFM was contacted and a SFM Investigator conducted the investigation at no charge to the city. With four trained investigators on the fire department, investigators were usually available. Currently, 3 of the 4 investigators are members of the ACFIT. With the present situation, as members CRFD Investigators conduct investigations outside of the city limits and, when off-duty are paid overtime. Additionally, CRFD Investigators who are team members attend regular meetings and training sessions where overtime is paid for off-duty personnel. Given the current budget constraints at the State level, there is no indication

that the SFM policy for requesting an investigator or returning to previous investigator staffing levels (14) will happen in the near future. Therefore, the ACFIT will be needed during the foreseeable future.

Since inception of the team, through August 20, 2005, CRFD Investigators have responded to calls outside of the city on four occasions, with overtime being paid once. The City of Coon Rapids has requested the ACFIT once during this period of time. The City of Coon Rapids, due to the number of investigators, can expect to answer other communities more often than receiving the service.

The Teams Unit of the National Fire Academy's Executive Development course describes nine characteristics of an effective team. (Federal Emergency Management Agency, United States Fire Administration, National Fire Academy [FEMA, USFA, NFA], 2004). Of the nine characteristics, the following were evaluated during the development process and will continue to be evaluated as the team continues to perform its mission:

1. The team's clear, elevating goal, is to provide a timely and competent fire investigation to any community that requests it.
2. There is a results-driven structure with the team goal of determining the cause of as many fires as possible and, when arson is the cause, all members of the team work together for a successful prosecution.
3. The team member selection process determines the needs of the various situations that arise by providing a combination of police and fire officials, an ATF Agent, State Fire Marshal Investigator and Anoka County Prosecuting Attorney.

The remaining characteristics will also need to be evaluated as the Team continues to operate.

The team has extensive external support and recognition from the department heads of the various team members. The County Sheriff, County Attorney and the majority of Police and Fire Chiefs have been very supportive of the program by allowing members of their respective departments to be members of the team.

The establishment of the ACFIT has done an excellent job of meeting USFA Operational Objective goal number five, 'appropriately respond in a timely manner to emergent issues'. The SFM budget reduction caused significant difficulty for the smaller departments to obtain timely fire investigations for all types of fires.

### **Literature Review**

A review of the literature illustrates that these Task Force/Fire Investigation Teams may consist of police and fire personnel from an individual jurisdiction, which is typical of larger cities, or may be multi-jurisdictional as in County teams. Combining resources to accomplish a task enables the team to be more efficient. A team may also be formed as a response to reductions as organizations seek more effective resource utilization. In this case, multiple jurisdictions provide investigators to the team making them available to any jurisdiction within Anoka County.

The task force approach has been used in small jurisdictions for years, a necessity created by limited manpower and expertise (Meehan & Fry, 1987). The Task Force concept can be enacted for single as well as multiple jurisdictions. The task force requires planning, coordination and training among all participating agencies. Participation can be agreed upon under mutual aid, contracted aid, moral obligations or other reciprocal types of agreements. Typically, participating agencies will cover the costs of the personnel, equipment, and resources they supply to the task force (Seidel, 1991). For a County Fire Investigation Team the mission is

to provide assistance to any member city when the need arises. It supplies a supplemental force of experienced investigators to assist with the investigation. It is not a force that assumes control of an investigation (Meehan & Fry, 1987).

The concept of team work is extremely important for a Task Force/Fire Investigation Team to operate. Turf battles are problems in many organizations and have been cited as a concern while doing this research. The most difficult responsibility of each of these highly trained and qualified investigators is to recognize and respect the differences between the two professions, police and fire, and have the ability, and desire, to blend and work together as a team with the difficult responsibility of solving the crime of arson. First, the municipality must lay political boundaries aside and recognize the need for an Arson Task Force (Larson, 1997). Although the need for greater cooperation between all agencies involved in fire investigations has long been recognized it has historically gone unaddressed. The biggest obstacle to overcome is suspicion between fire brigades, the police and insurers (Miller, 1999).

Another benefit for a team is simply the effectiveness of both police and fire working together in an organized manner; this teamwork enables them to more effectively combat the crime of arson. Modern technology has served to enhance our capacity for investigating arson. In addition to more sophisticated equipment, investigations also have improved by the use of the task force approach. As a result, more arrests and convictions have been obtained (Meehan & Fry, 1997). The concept of an Arson Task Force is the most logical approach to the pursuit of any successful prosecution. Regardless of the arsonist's motive, the Arson Task Force combines the expertise of professionals in the fire service and law enforcement to insure that the investigation leaves no stones unturned (Larson, 1997). Team work also increases the amount of successful determinations of origin and cause. In fact, the ATF team reports a success rate of

96%. This is credited to timely and coordinated responses. (Vita, 1987) During the investigative process it is important to include the fire suppressions personnel as member of the team. First arriving firefighters can provide information valuable information to the investigation such as the structure's condition, fire characteristics and the condition of doors and windows. (Sykes, 1992)

Several cities have used the teamwork approach to improve their ability to investigate and prosecute arson. In DuPage County, Illinois, the effectiveness of arson prosecution changed dramatically with the formation of the Task Force. Prior to the Task Force's existence, there were only 3-5 arrests a year for arson. In the first 31 months of the Task Force, there were 42 arrests. Nationally, the conviction rate for arson is 2 percent, whereas in DuPage, the conviction rate for cases investigated and prosecuted as a result of the Arson Task Force is 47 percent (Rogers, 2002). In Utica, NY the Strike Force began operations on April 4, 1997, staffed around the clock by teams of investigators from city, county, state and federal agencies, as well a canine from New York Office of Fire Prevention and Control. Over the first four months of its existence, the Strike Force was assigned a total of 59 arson cases, 37 of them, or ~63%, were cleared by arrest or other means. Every arrest made by the strike force has led to a conviction. (Fire Scene, 1997)

Literature review has been extremely helpful in writing this paper. It has illustrated why Task Forces/Fire Investigation Teams are formed, problems that must be overcome for success, and the benefits they provide. This information is very helpful in understanding how the ACFIT is operating as it relates to the key issues mentioned in the literature.

In larger cities, teams of local police and fire professionals work closely together in "Task Forces". These task forces increase effectiveness and efficiency by increasing the trust among team members eliminating or significantly reducing turf battles.

In smaller cities, the Task Forces/Fire Investigation Teams have been in existence longer due to the need to overcome the lack of resources. In this case, each city does not have the resources to conduct fire investigations. By pooling resources they can work together to ensure that each community will have their fires investigated properly.

According to the literature, the most significant obstacle to making the Task Forces/Fire Investigation Team concept work is team work. In order for these Teams to be successful, each member must think of himself or herself as a team player. The trust amongst members must be built for the team to become as efficient and effective as possible. In the past, the police service considered arson a fire problem, while the fire service considered arson a crime and referred it to the police department for investigation (Galvin, 1990). To investigate an arson event as a crime, other professionals must be involved in the effort such as prosecutors. The fire triangle of heat, fuel, and oxygen, has been used as a teaching tool for years to explain the three things needed for a fire to be sustained. In anti-arson efforts, a variation of the same principle holds true: without the new fire triangle – an investigative trio of police, fire and prosecutor – there is no successful investigation (Galvin, 1990). In Cincinnati, OH, they found the most successful means of interacting with a prosecutor has been a joint prosecution/investigation team. Under their system, prosecutors are assigned to handle arson cases. The key was to find a prosecutor who was willing to learn and understand fire and the basic terminology of the fire service. The prosecutor must train with the fire investigator to be educated in the chemistry of fire. Furthermore, it was very important for the prosecutor to visit the scene in death and murder cases where the defendant has been arrested and the case is deemed to be high profile (Heltman, 1993).

In addition to the published material used for this report, four, one-on-one interviews were conducted to gather additional information. I first interviewed Steve Wells, Police Chief for

the City of Coon Rapids, to find out what other multi-agency groups exist in the law enforcement community and how they handle sending city resources to other communities. Currently, there are four Bomb Squads in the State of Minnesota that respond to requests for service within the state. Steve indicated that State allocated funds pay for the services, resulting in no charge to the community. Steve stated that officers from the Coon Rapids Police Department routinely assist other communities, at times assisted by their canine force. When President Bush was in town officers from many different communities worked together to host the event. In the Summer, 2004, there was an incident involving 50 Hell's Angels that required 50 officers from various communities to control. There is a Drug Task Force in Anoka County which includes Coon Rapids officers. Steve indicated that some communities in Anoka County do not have the resources to contribute members to the team. Steve believes that these examples illustrate the common goal of meeting county needs despite the City of Coon Rapids not receiving compensation for services rendered outside its geographical boundaries. In turn, the City of Coon Rapids receives services from other agencies when help is needed. Steve said no score card is kept regarding who helps who more often, helping each other without compensation is the way it has been done for years. In addition, these examples are congruent with ACFIT goals. Steve indicated the Arson problem is countywide and therefore a countywide approach is logical and necessary.

My second interviewee was Tim Farmer, Coon Rapids Fire Chief. The interview focused on discussing other multi-agency groups that exist in the fire service locally. He stated that the Anoka County Fire Protection Council is an organization consisting of all county fire departments. They work together for the betterment of all fire departments in the county on programs such as establishing a Structural Collapse Team, Juvenile Firesetter Program,

Chemical Assessment Team (CAT), and sponsorship of an annual fire school. Tim felt the ACFIT is approach is analogous to the Juvenile Firesetter Program in that a countywide problem is addressed with countywide resources. The Juvenile Firesetter Program was established to address an identified need of dealing with arsons set by juveniles. The program has been extremely successful in reducing the rate of juveniles fire starting. Tim said he has similar expectations of ACFIT to reduce the volume of arsons. Tim feels that aggressive arson investigation followed by prosecution will raise public awareness and act as a deterrent to potential arsonists. Tim would like the City of Coon Rapids, due to its size, to act as a leader in the ACFIT. In the case of the CAT, federal funds support all equipment and training costs.

Currently, each member department of the ACFIT covers its own expenses. After hearing from Chief Wells that the bomb squads recover their expenses for services rendered outside their jurisdiction, I wanted to learn the mechanism used. In the event expenses to ACFIT member departments become an issue, the information would be available to explore reimbursement options. For this I contacted Wally Krueger, Bomb Squad Commander of the Minneapolis Police Department. He stated that the State of Minnesota has a joint powers agreement with the four bomb squads in the State. When a bomb squad goes on a call, they submit their expenses to the State for reimbursement, which he said is fair compensation to the city and basically is a break even situation. He said this program has been in place for eight years and works well. Prior to the program's existence, the bomb squad charged \$150 per hour for their services which was a significant charge for smaller departments. Additionally, when members of the bomb squad leave their city, they become agents of the state. They are then covered by a state purchased workers compensation policy, thereby relieving their city of that liability.

My final interview was with Jerry Splinter, City Manager, City of Coon Rapids. I wanted further input from him on his feelings, from the perspective of a city manager, of the cities' involvement in the ACFIT. He felt it was very important for communities to help their neighbors when needed. This includes departments such as public works, building inspections, police and fire. Jerry felt that this needs to be a mutual relationship so that the city gets help in return when needed. He believes that ACFIT is a good way to keep Coon Rapids investigators energized and interested in performing fire investigations. Jerry felt that the additional calls and training received outside of the city would benefit the City of Coon Rapids. His concerns are that Coon Rapids, as the largest member city could be perceived to be 'taking over' or services could go unappreciated. He felt that by being humble and cooperating with the other cities that neither of these concerns should be an issue.

The benefits of the Task Forces/Fire Investigation Teams were numerous. They allow cities large and small to conduct competent fire investigations for all fires and provide the needed cohesiveness of all members to take the case from the scene to the court house if necessary. By working together on a regular basis, members can truly become a 'Team' and become a very effective and efficient organization. This allows the team to accomplish its ultimate goal of increasing the number of successful arson prosecutions. The literature suggests that a prosecutor is crucial as a member of the team. Two of the articles indicated that the Task Force concept dramatically increased the percentage of successful prosecutions of arson cases.

The interviews suggested the function of ACFIT is consistent with the historical and current practices of both law enforcement and fire service, helping neighboring communities as needed at no cost to the receiving community. The bomb squad funding mechanism is a model

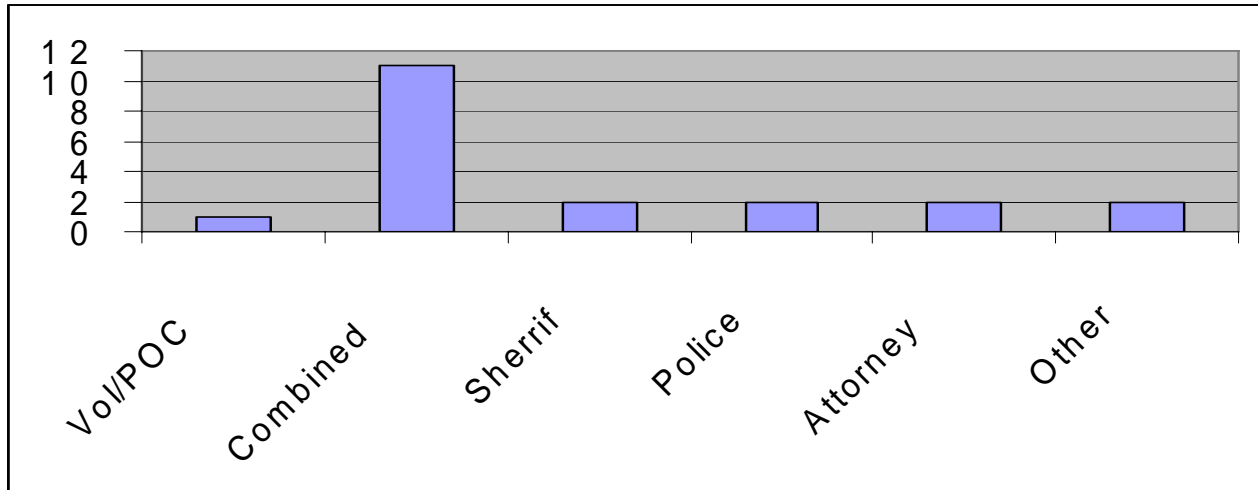
which could be duplicated or modified to meet the needs of ACFIT if the need arises, such as city budget cuts forcing employee reductions.

### **Procedures**

The first part of this research began with a literature search at the National Fire Academy (NFA) Learning Resource Center (LRC) beginning in March of 2005. The goal was to learn about other Task Force/Fire Investigation Teams, understand their organization, and review the impact on specific jurisdiction(s). In addition, concerns were noted regarding the challenges of team formation and function. On a positive note, it also demonstrated the successes which resulted from the efforts such as team work and increased arson prosecution. Also, the Fire/EMS/Safety Center Library in St. Paul, MN was an excellent resource for written materials to this research paper.

The major effort was to gather accurate, local data to determine the impact to the CRFD of participation within ACFIT. A survey was developed to obtain the data necessary to answer the four research questions. The survey was given to all team members to gather input on the effect the team was having on their respective organization. Additionally, to obtain a countywide management perspective, the survey was given to the County Sheriff and the Anoka County Attorney. And finally, to get the local management perspective, the survey was given to the City of Coon Rapids Mayor, City Manager, Police Chief and Fire Chief. There were 20 surveys returned to provide the information for this research. The population served by the individuals completing the survey varied widely. The population of Anoka County is 313,000 and is the reference for the Sheriff and County Attorney's Office. The population served for local police and fire officials varied from 19,000 to 87,000, with the size of the organizations varying from 9-

238. The narrative responses to the survey questions are included in the answers to the four research questions. The following bar graph indicates who filled out the survey:



After gathering and reviewing the aforementioned information, I conducted four interviews to complete the research. Three of the interviews conducted were the City Manager, Police Chief, and Fire Chief. They were chosen since they ultimately control the City of Coon Rapid's participation. The fourth person interviewed was the Bomb Squad Commander of the Minneapolis Police Department. He was chosen to learn how the City of Minneapolis recovers its expenses when the bomb squad operates outside the City of Minneapolis. This interview was completed to determine if it was a feasible method of recovering expenses incurred by team member cities.

These interviews were conducted on the following dates/times.

City Manager	August 5, 2005 at 4:00p.m.
Police Chief	July 6, 2005 at 9:30a.m.
Fire Chief	August 5, 2005 at 2:00p.m.
Bomb Squad Commander	July 19, 2005 at 2:00 p.m.

## Results

This descriptive research, including written sources, a survey and interviews with the key stakeholders of the City of Coon Rapids, elucidated significant information to answer the following four research questions.

Question #1 What are the benefits for an organization when participating in a group consisting of many different organizations?

The written sources indicate that a group allows smaller organizations to access resources they do not possess in their own community. In the case of ACFIT, many communities pool their resources to provide a quality fire investigation team to which all cities in the county have access when needed. By working and training together on a regular basis, team members get to know and trust each other and work together as a team. The larger communities benefit from the strong relationships formed by the same investigators working hand in hand on a regular basis. The trust amongst members will increase and the turf battles will decrease or become non-existent.

The surveys provided a wide variety of answers to this question. There were a number of different answers regarding how different member departments determined the impact of their participation. The cooperative efforts were viewed as a way to be more productive. This allowed for better backup capabilities to each member department when investigations were needed. By working together, the team members established better communications and fostered networking. This allows each community to be aware of the resources in surrounding communities in both expertise and equipment. It was felt that exposure to outside perspectives improves the way things are accomplished by bringing in fresh ideas to the organization. This could show that even though you may have been doing something the same way for years, it may not always be the best method. It allows each team member to make changes to the way he/she has been doing

things if they so choose. The group effort also shares training costs and results in higher quality training. By bringing together a group of people, varied expertise is brought into the organization which otherwise may not be present. For the smaller departments, being a member of the team allows the investigator to improve his/her skills by responding to a larger number of investigations, thus allowing them to work with more experienced investigators. Having both fire and law enforcement on the initial call affords all aspects/concerns of the different entities to be covered immediately, rather than having the fire investigation completed and then turned over to law enforcement for further work.

Question #2 How do other fire departments determine their participant role in a regional team?

The survey offered many different options for determining the role, such as fire scene investigation, documentation and prosecution. The time involved to conduct the fire scene investigation should decrease due to the number of investigators and the distance he/she needs to travel. The documentation should improve due to the increased training and number of fires the investigators conduct. By evaluating the number of cases referred for prosecution and the number of successful prosecutions. By having members of the department respond to scenes as team members shows that the city truly cares about helping in the team effort and therefore are making an impact. At the scene, if it is processed completely and a final origin and cause are determined, a positive impact has been achieved. It was also felt that feedback from the team chairperson would be a good indicator of influence in the regional team. The team chairperson oversees the entire operation, including assigning team leaders and record keeping. Satisfaction is derived from having members on the team who are able to conduct investigations in surrounding communities that do not have qualified investigators to conduct their own investigations. By having the investigator participate within the team and using his/her

experience to benefit other team members when called to help. With this in mind, watching for experienced investigators conducting efficient, well performed investigations, as well as helping 'rookie' investigators gain skill and confidence. One Deputy Fire Chief felt that after using the team three times, with excellent results, their participation was well worth the effort and they were making an impact. One Fire Captain felt that by watching members of his department take on additional roles within the team truly showed the impact his organization was achieving within the team. Not only did all three department members do the basic investigations, but by taking on the additional roles they had a team impact. For example, a team member may take a role as team leader or organizational secretary to help the team grow.

Question #3 What do the key stakeholders for the City of Coon Rapids feel the impact/influence is?

The key stake holders for the City of Coon Rapids are the Mayor, City Manager, Police Chief and Fire Chief. The Mayor felt that since Coon Rapids is the largest city in the county, ACFIT benefits would be minimal to the city. He did feel that the smaller cities in Anoka County will see significant benefits from ACFIT. He felt the real advantage of the team was the pooling of personnel and resources combined with fresh ideas and stronger communication among member organizations. Tim felt that the disadvantage of the team was the stronger personnel commitment (four members) the city has made to the team which in turn meant a larger financial commitment. Tim felt that if the state is cutting investigators, then the county should provide the investigators rather than the various cities.

The City Manager felt that the benefits to the City of Coon Rapids were numerous. Jerry felt a group such as ACFIT provides for cooperative efforts which are generally more productive than each city trying to do it alone. By having the group in place, there are back-up capabilities

to ensure that fire investigations can be conducted in a timely manner. Jerry also indicated that having a group like this provides for better communication and fosters networking amongst the various organizations that make up the team. By working with many other groups, he felt there is exposure to outside perspectives which may show that the current way of doing things is not always the best way. From the training perspective, he felt that the advantages were shared costs and a higher quality of training. Jerry's concerns of belonging to the team were similar to the Mayor's. Jerry felt because Coon Rapids is the largest city, the amount of resources committed to the team may be too great a share from a City Manager's perspective. The other concern he had was the size of the organization. In the past, he has seen these types of groups become too large and then become cumbersome. Jerry felt that if this occurs in the future, the team should divide.

The Police Chief felt the additional resources and personnel from ACFIT as well as increased training opportunities were a real benefit to the city. He compared ACFIT to the Anoka County Joint Law Enforcement Council, formed 30 years ago, which consists of county law enforcement agencies working together as a team on various issues. It has been his experience that this type of group is a highly effective method to take advantage of everyone's resources. Although not a great concern to him, he also mentioned that the Coon Rapids resources could be used more often in smaller communities than the city gets in return. The one thing he felt would improve ACFIT would be having the Department of Homeland Security join the team due to the numerous resources the duty officer has available.

The Fire Chief felt that ACFIT was a benefit to the city due to the amount of expertise, equipment sharing, trained investigators, varying points of view and better cooperation throughout the process. He also felt that the team provided City of Coon Rapids personnel on the

team an opportunity to improve their skills. This involvement provides additional practical experience by investigating fires beyond their city limits. The ability to have experienced investigators available 24 hours a day was perceived as an additional advantage to the city. The only disadvantage he cited was the overtime costs associated with sending off-duty personnel to complete an investigation. This is currently being done in the form of mutual aid agreements with departments within the mutual aid groups for fire suppression activities. The difference from the historical mutual aid agreement is that ACFIT members of the department are now responding to different communities to conduct investigations, in addition to fire suppression activities which city firefighters have been doing for many years.

Question #4 What do the Sheriff and County Attorney feel the impact/influence is?

The Sheriff felt that any multi-jurisdictional or multi-disciplinary group carries the distinct advantage of having differing areas of expertise within the broader group. Training and experience can be shared and utilized across the team. This sharing of expertise makes the unit more effective. It also creates greater cooperation and understanding amongst members. He felt that the greatest advantage of the team was the sharing of expertise among member agencies. Secondly, joint efforts create confidence with law enforcement and the fire service with regards to large investigations. That comfort leads to greater cooperation and sharing of resources and knowledge to accomplish a common goal. He indicated that the only perceived concern to this type of cooperative effort from the law enforcement perspective would be to control the contamination of physical evidence relating to the investigative process. He feels there has been good dialogue and sound policy which will safeguard the evidence collection and custody process. He is also very confident in the current command and leadership structure of the team.

The County Attorney determines the impact of ACFIT by the quality of the cases submitted and by the positive relationships among member fire departments. He feels that the primary benefits of the team are a better work product and relationships.

### **Discussion**

Through interviews and surveys of local personnel, this research found that many of the issues in Anoka County are substantiated by what was found in the literature review. The literature review illustrated that the task force approach has been used in small jurisdictions for years, a necessity created by limited manpower and expertise (Meehan & Fry, 1987). For the smaller communities within Anoka County, it is not practical for each city to maintain necessary resources to complete fire investigations and successful prosecutions. Prior to the cutbacks of State Fire Marshal Fire Investigators, the smaller communities could rely on the state investigators for the origin and cause portion of the investigation. The state fire investigator would then take the results of his/her investigation and work with the local police department or sheriff's office for arson cases. If, after reviewing the case, both agencies were in agreement to move forward, they would contact the County Attorney's Office to be assigned an attorney to handle the case. Arson cases were not handled by a specific attorney trained in arson, but rather by whomever was available. With ACFIT, a specific Assistant Anoka County Attorney is assigned to the team. I believe this will be very helpful in increasing the arson conviction rate. In the past, I have found that it is difficult to get an attorney to take an arson case due to its complex nature. In many arson cases the evidence does not meet the standard sought in criminal cases. Without overwhelming evidence, many attorneys will dismiss the case. I believe this is due to a lack of understanding of the fire investigative process. With an arson trained attorney assigned to the team, this person will be working closely with police and fire investigators. This allows for a

better understanding of the processing of the scene and why the conclusions of arson have been drawn. Additionally, this attorney will be able to attend a seminar for prosecuting attorneys sponsored by the International Association of Arson Investigators (IAAI) and learn about arson prosecution from their peers. Additionally, the literature review indicated that the prosecutor must learn and understand the chemistry of fire and train with fire investigators for success (Heltman, 1993). The prosecutor for ACFIT is active in the organization and regularly trains with the team to accomplish this goal.

The literature stated that typically, participating agencies cover the costs of the personnel, equipment and resources they supply to the task force (Seidel, 1991). In the case of ACFIT, each department pays the cost of their staff's participation on the team. Items such as wages, workers compensation, tools, etc. are covered by the members own department. Currently, the Anoka County Fire Protection Council, of which all Anoka County Fire Departments are members, is providing funding for a trailer and some investigative equipment. As additional funding becomes available, the goal is to completely equip this trailer for use by ACFIT.

According to the literature, a county fire investigation team mission is to provide assistance to any member fire department when needed. It provides a pool of experienced investigators to assist with the investigation, however it should not assume control of an investigation (Meehan & Fry, 1987). In the case of ACFIT, at no time does the team assume control of the investigation. The team is there to assist the requesting agency. Depending on the community, the needs vary based on the resources they have available. In a larger community, the only resource that may be needed is an additional investigator to help dig a large scene, while in the smaller communities they may need all the resources that ACFIT offers.

The literature supports the idea that teamwork is extremely important for a task force to function. For this to happen, each member of the team has to respect the other members of the team and the qualities they bring to the team. It also indicated that political boundaries must be set aside to recognize the need for the Arson Task Force (Larson, 1997). The survey results have indicated that members of the team are very pleased with the cooperation among members. No one indicated a concern of any existing turf battles among participating members or agencies.

A major goal of any arson task force is to increase the arson conviction rate. For example, nationally, the conviction rate for arson is 2 percent. In contrast, DuPage County Illinois, has achieved a conviction rate of 47 percent after the formation of the Arson Task Force (Rogers, 2002). Furthermore, the formation of the Strike Force in Utica, NY resulted in sixty-three percent of the cases cleared by arrest or other means. Finally, every arrest made by the Strike Force has led to a conviction (Fire Scene, 1997). It is too early to know what the conviction rate for ACFIT, but I believe the number of successful arson convictions will increase significantly due to the cohesiveness of the team as experienced in DuPage County and Utica.

It is clear from the research that the City of Coon Rapids has considerable influence on ACFIT. By providing four investigators, three Firefighters and one Police Officer to the team the city is exhibiting its commitment to making this venture a success. It also illustrates the city's view that arson is a county problem and, as the largest city in the county, is willing to help the smaller communities. The benefits to the city are as follows: an increased skill level for its investigators, increased respect within the law enforcement and fire communities, being seen as a leader in the public safety community and prompt investigations in the city when none of its investigators are available.

## **Recommendations**

I believe that the City of Coon Rapids should continue to be actively involved in ACFIT. Through my survey, I have found the team members and supervisors to be pleased with the cohesiveness and functionality of the team. The published documents I have reviewed confirm that this team has addressed the areas needing to be addressed by a fire investigation team to function efficiently and effectively. The structure of the team includes all professions required to function at maximum capability: law enforcement and fire personnel and a prosecuting attorney. The ongoing training will help each Coon Rapids investigator to expand his/her knowledge while allowing him/her to get to know each of the other members better to further the 'Team' concept. I believe this research has discovered that participation by the City of Coon Rapids has had a positive influence on the team, and likewise, the team has had a positive influence on the city. As noted by the Police Chief, arson is a countywide problem and addressing it with a County team is a logical approach. Although the city commits more time into fire investigation outside its geographical boundaries than it receives, it also benefits by its investigators gaining more practical experience, and additional knowledge from the ongoing training with other local investigators. The City of Coon Rapids has used the team when its investigators were unavailable. Thus, it is important for City of Coon Rapids administrators to realize that team participation is for the greater good of the county. To keep the costs allocated equitably the team needs to continue to distribute the work evenly so that all participating cities share the costs. Currently, the City of Coon Rapids makes every effort to send an on-duty investigator when help is requested to keep the overtime costs to a minimum. If the cost of being part of the team becomes an issue, ACFIT could explore other funding mechanisms to reimburse cities for the costs of having their investigators working outside the city. The example of the bomb squad

reimbursement program cited in this report could be modified to achieve this. A possible approach to accomplish would be for the police and fire chiefs of Anoka County to approach the Anoka County Commissioners and ask for a fund to be established in the county budget. This could then be used for reimbursement to the local cities similar to the management of bomb squads at the state level.

It is my recommendation that Task Force/Fire Investigative Teams be established in more communities given the documented benefits. The most significant concern is the funding method. This is understandable given the perspective of city administrators like the Mayor in his/her role of budget management. The financial commitment reaps many long and short term benefits. The City of Coon Rapids, as the largest city in the county, needs to play an active role in this venture.

Further recommendation is that ACFIT annually monitors the percentage of successful arson prosecutions in Anoka County. With a successful team, the number of convictions should rise dramatically as evidenced in the literature cited in this report.

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## Appendix A

### ANOKA COUNTY FIRE INVESTIGATION TEAM (ACFIT) SURVEY

The following survey is a data collection tool being utilized by Fire Marshal John Piper (Coon Rapids Fire Department, Coon Rapids, MN) to obtain data for the Applied Research component of the R123 Executive Development course within the Executive Fire Officer (EFO) program at the National Fire Academy.

1. Please list the population your organization serves.
2. Please select the option below that best describes your department's composition:
  - Volunteer/Paid-On-Call Fire Department
  - Combination (Volunteer/Paid-on-Call with Paid Personnel) Fire Department
  - County Sheriff Department
  - Local Police Department
  - Anoka County Attorney's Office
  - Other
3. Name of organization (optional):
4. Rank/position within organization:
5. How many members do you have?
6. How do you determine the impact of your participation within this team?
7. In general, what are the benefits to your organization when participating in a group made up of many different organizations?
8. Please describe the advantages (if any) of the ACFIT.
9. Please describe the disadvantages (if any) of the ACFIT.

10. Do you feel any other organizations should be asked to join to make ACFIT more efficient/effective?