Executive Development

Investigating the Potential Benefits and Drawbacks to
Fire Department Self Assessment and Accreditation
for the Larkspur Fire Department

Robert B. Sinnott
Larkspur Fire Department, Larkspur, California

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Abstract

The problem was that the Larkspur Fire Department recognized that participation in the fire service accreditation and self-assessment process was becoming more widely recognized in agencies within our region, however a long term budget crisis coupled with a lack of administrative staff were roadblocks to allocating funds or staffing towards these processes. The Larkspur city manager was concerned about our hesitation to participate, and thus directed us to conduct a research and feasibility study. The research questions addressed were:

1. What is fire department self-assessment and accreditation?
2. What staff time and budget commitment will be necessary to complete the process?
3. Are other nationally recognized programs available that could produce similar benefits with less staff time and financial commitment?
4. What are the potential benefits that can be achieved?
5. What possible ramifications might occur from not participating?
6. What useful information can be obtained from agencies already participating in or complaint with this program?

The procedures utilized include a literature review, fact finding within participating agencies, and interviews with key individuals. The descriptive research method was utilized to answer the important questions and discover the elements of the programs to determine estimated staff time and program costs. From this study, it was determined that the organization should embrace the concept of strategic planning, utilize key
components of self-assessment, but not commit the time, staffing, or funding needed for formal accreditation.
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Introduction

Strategic planning can be an important planning tool for a fire agency regardless of size or geographic location. A common fiscal tool for public agencies is to utilize one-year budgeting cycles with annual goal statements. This seems to be an effective and universally recognized method of fiscal management, and for short to medium range planning and resource allocation. However innovative public leaders are now expected to be visionaries, thus being able to plot a course three to five years ahead. Some fire chiefs, including this research student, consider this to be outside the comfort zone of their managerial function. In Larkspur, all department heads submit one year budgets with annual goal and objective statements. Goals are to be fiscally linked to the budget submittal to ensure funding. The concept of annual budgets fits within the incremental policy design model of government, thus changes occur in small steps with an emphasis on an extension of past policies and existing programs (Jun, 1986).

As a department head for the City of Larkspur, I was promoted and have spent over ten years functioning within the incremental design model. Because the community is fully developed, budget revenues fixed, and fire stations and staffing levels static, long range planning seems beyond the scope or need of our fire agency. The incremental model, utilizing the annual budgeting and goal setting process seems practical and reasonable for the organization.

However, a new trend of strategic planning, utilizing models and materials developed by the Commission of Fire Accreditation International (CFAI) is becoming widely recognized and utilized in our region and across the nation. Even agencies similar in size to the Larkspur Fire Department, with fully developed communities and static resources
are embracing the programs offered by the CFAI, to ensure service levels are adequate, funding estimates for future programs and equipment are established, and possible organizational changes due to community demographic shifts are identified.

Commitment to strategic planning processes, particularly comprehensive ones such as those designed by CFAI, call for a long-term organizational commitment. Key staff members need to be identified, trained and subsequently immersed in the process of strategic planning. Funding for staff training, the procurement of materials and accreditation program costs also have to be allocated. For a small, eighteen member fire agency with two chief officers, no prevention staff, no training staff and no administrative support staff, the notion of a long term commitment to strategic planning, particularly one as comprehensive as the CFAI model, appears unrealistic.

The problem is that the Larkspur Fire Department is immersed in annual budgeting and goal planning while a trend of formal strategic planning is gaining momentum in the fire service industry. The incremental design method with annual budgeting and goal statements, which has worked well in our fire agency and meshes with the budgeting program of our parent agency – The City of Larkspur, now seems to be threatened. A well-established theme of only utilizing tried and true technology, a practice of not being experimental or on the cutting edge, now appears contradictory to other fire agencies. This is a troubling scenario as the Larkspur Fire Department, under my leadership, has always strived to maintain formation with our neighboring fire agencies while meeting the objectives of our parent organization.

The Larkspur city manager is an effective, well-informed and extremely popular leader. She has the respect of the city council, her executive staff, key members of the
community, and industry colleagues. Along with her administration of the municipality, she seeks to promote partnerships within public and private agencies within the region and she participates in the Marin City Manager’s Association. Through her contacts and affiliations, she is aware of the key issues impacting local government, including such programs as the sweeping trend of CFAI self-assessment and accreditation. Thus, she has directed me to conduct a research and feasibility study to determine if we should commit staff and funding towards these processes.

Examination of these issues will be accomplished through the descriptive research methodology. The processes of self-assessment and accreditation will be defined, and costs identified. The project best fits within USFA Operational Objective #5, responding appropriately in a timely manner to emerging issues. Key research questions include:

1. What is fire department self-assessment and accreditation?
2. What staff time and budget commitment will be necessary to complete the process?
3. Are other nationally recognized programs available that could produce similar benefits with less staff time and financial commitment?
4. What are the potential benefits that can be achieved?
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The purpose of this applied research project (ARP) is to discover the benefits, potential limitations and overall organizational commitment of the fire department self-
assessment and accreditation program so that the fire chief and city manager can make an informed decision on how to proceed.

Background and Significance

On October 27, 1988 and December 8, 1998, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) Executive Boards signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that committed both organizations to the development of a voluntary national fire service accreditation program (Commission, 2002). This landmark decision to form a venture partnership was the result of several years of discussion with the objective of developing a universally recognized evaluation program of how fire departments define their local risks, allocate their individual resources, and achieve the objectives of their emergency service delivery system.

Although other nationally recognized programs were in place that provided for an evaluation and classification of individual fire agencies, this group of fire executives, city managers, and county administrators saw the collective need to establish a process of fire agency self-assessment and industry recognized accreditation. At the time, the Insurance Service Office (ISO) and the Commission on the Accreditation of Ambulance Services (CAAS) were the only viable options available for the measurement of the deployment of fire and emergency medical services. Although each served a specific and useful purpose, neither provided the function of determining the agency’s value to the community being served (Creating and Evaluating Standards of Response Coverage for Fire Departments, 2001, p. 74). ISO was a tool that did and still does serve the insurance industry. CAAS, though vital in further professionalizing and standardizing emergency
medical transport, was and continues to focus on the hundreds of private ambulance providers within the United States.

Until the early 1980’s, the ISO classification system was the universally approved and recognized rating tool for fire agencies across the nation. In fact, ISO drove how cities located fire stations through its Fire Protection Grading Schedule (Gary, 1995). As a general rule, ISO wants fire agencies to locate stations so that no developed area of a community is beyond 1.5 miles from the facility. Although this might appear to be a goal that many elected leaders would like to achieve, in many cases it is excessive and beyond the economic means of the municipality or fire district (Gary, 1995). For the impracticalities of measurement criteria, fire and elected officials were growing increasingly dissatisfied with the ISO grading schedule, as it didn’t provide a clear picture of what kind and level of services were being provided to the community (Lam, 2001, p.2). The ISO public protection classification system is intended to measure the effectiveness of municipal fire suppression efforts around the country against a uniform standard (retrieved on September 24, 2004 from http://www.isomitigation.com). It is specifically designed to assist insurance companies determine premiums for property owners in each respective community. In general terms, the price of fire insurance in a community is determined by the ISO public protection classification rating (Straw, 2004, p. 70). Fire chiefs were often frustrated at the snap shot approach of the ISO that places significant emphasis on systemic and infrastructure components but fell far short on important organizational contexts. To evaluate a community, ISO representatives would collect information about municipal fire suppression efforts and based on score would assign a public protection classification – a number from one to ten. One represents the
most effective level of public protection, and ten indicates minimal, substandard problematic, or even non-existent levels of protection. Along with response distance, the ISO examines the following agency fire protection components:

1) Built in water supply (water mains, water storage facilities, water pressure and volume, hydrants and hydrant maintenance programs).

2) Fire alarm and communication systems (dispatching facilities and staffing, alarm sending methods such as 9-1-1 and street boxes).

3) Fire Department staffing levels and training.

4) Apparatus fleet and pump capacity.

5) Fire department equipment and testing.

Former Alto Fire Protection District Chief Michael Kildow was retired prior to CFAI becoming widely known and recognized. He recalls three ISO evaluations over the course of his career and in an interview conducted on September 26, 2004, provided the following oral summary:

“The fire chief’s goal of the ISO visit was to maintain or improve the district’s ISO rating. Towards the end of my career, it became apparent that the ISO rating was meaningless, unless it was worse than a seven. Before the 1991 Oakland-Berkeley Fire Storm, ISO wielded some power, and chiefs were scared to see a rating slip. After the 1991 conflagration that consumed over 3,000 homes, wildland interface issues – brush clearance around homes, fire department access and water supply, and the phase out of combustible roofs -- became paramount, and my concern for an ISO rating diminished remarkably. This held true for many of my
colleagues as well. Insurance companies were canceling or non-renewing scores of homeowner insurance policies in California. City managers, mayors, council members and county supervisors were all in a panic and they were placing pressure on fire chiefs to mitigate the crisis. The real estate industry was reeling as well. There was unbelievable pressure to improve fire prevention strategies to minimize the effect the insurance companies were having on our homeowners and perspective buyers. From that point, ISO became almost a non-issue and in fact, many chiefs began to realize how ineffective and outdated the ISO classification system really was.

Prior to 1991, the pressure of the ISO classification system was the embarrassment a chief could suffer if the rating slipped. Additionally, it was an awkward report to the fire commission to announce that a recent ISO evaluation had resulted in a reduction of the agency’s rating. But beyond that, it didn’t have any impact on the department or the property owners in the district. In order to ensure that we maintained our ISO rating, chiefs would often trick the system. I’ve heard of stories where training, equipment or water system records would be updated just before the visit; vehicles or equipment could be borrowed from neighboring agencies to show fleet levels that actually exceeded what were in place. I even heard of one unnamed local agency that moved vehicles between stations while the chief and ISO inspector were at lunch, in order to make the size of the fleet look larger that it really was! A form of political
logrolling would occur between neighboring agencies during an ISO inspection so that chiefs could maintain their ratings. Or, I’ve heard stories where fire chiefs would spend significant sums of public funds to improve certain systems in order to improve an ISO rating. This was often done for nothing more that ego. It didn’t improve the performance or operation of the department nor did it reduce the cost of insurance premiums to property owners. Sure ISO assessed the number of firefighters, pump capacity of engines and the community’s water system, but so many critically important factors were not assessed.”

This interview highlights the focus of the ISO public protection classification program and its emphasis on the insurance industry. Sure, it is a universal rating schedule that chiefs can use to compare their agencies to others, but it speaks nothing to the effectiveness of the organization. There are examples of fire departments with minimal staffing, outdated equipment, and inadequate funding can deliver effective community fire servicing through modern and effective leadership, high levels of morale, and a commitment by the members of the department to do what is necessary to protect and serve the district or city, versus fire agencies that have ample funding and staffing. Ross Valley Fire Chief Michael Groshong is an example of how effective leadership can yield impressive results in an agency with extremely limited funding and staffing. On August 25, 2004 I interviewed Chief Groshong. I requested him to speak to the issues of service delivery, his current ISO rating and what future actions he might take. Here is the statement provided by Chief Groshong:
“My agency has three stations, each with a single two person engine. We have no full time training or prevention staff and we provide protection to three separate communities with a combined population of almost 20,000 through a joint powers agreement. We deliver EMS with engine medics and firefighter emergency medical technicians and handle most fire events with in town resources. We offer CPR training, community disaster preparedness training, and we have a full schedule of community public education programs. In addition, our engine crews perform all the fire inspections, and conduct plan checks and inspections for fire protection installations including sprinkler systems, Class A roof systems, and fire alarms. We even have a local AM radio station to broadcast informational, public education, and emergency messages to our citizens. I employ an inversed pyramid of organizational management. My role is to facilitate the needs of the department; to get them the resources or training that they need to do their jobs. There is a high level of trust in this department; I don’t micromanage or look to catch people not working. We are focused on the mission of the department and we collectively strive to meet our goals. However, most of this means nothing to an ISO rating. Our rating is not terribly impressive – currently a four, but our organization meets the needs of the community as well as fully funded fire districts that have an abundance of staffing and state of the art equipment. However, I struggle to maintain the rating of four. The current California budget crisis has hit my three communities very hard,
and my budget continues to get trimmed. I’ve received some materials
from the ISO office, which seems to be an indication of a pending visit.
Although the managers of the towns I serve aren’t concerned, I do not
want our rating to drop to a five.”

In an impressive step, recognizing the importance of ISO and its historical emphasis,
CFAI and ISO entered into partnership in 2003. This, I feel, is of professional
significance as CFAI does not want to undermine or diminish the contributions of the
ISO towards fire safety. Through the execution of a memorandum of understanding
(MOU), the two agencies have resolved to establish a working task force that will
develop and expand upon the relationships between self-assessment and the ISO
evaluation criteria. The goal is to continue to improve upon the appraisal and planning
processes for contemporary fire organizations (retrieved on August 4, 2004 from
CFAI Board Chairman Ron Coleman, the ISO has been working with CFAI to promote
the sharing of information between the two organizations and with fire departments,
allowing for improved fire protection planning and risk analysis. With the seemingly
diminishing importance of the ISO rating on the true effectiveness of fire organizations,
comes the emergence of accreditation. Although the fire department self-accreditation
program developed by the CFAI is new, accreditation is not a new term in the emergency
services. Both the police and ambulance providers have utilized accreditation programs
to help advance the professionalism of these industries, and to set forth systematic
national comparisons for individual agencies. At this time, it appears important that the
term accreditation as well as its history and applications be detailed.
In March 1982 the American Ambulance Association sponsored a needs assessment workshop to analyze the status of the EMS industry (retrieved on September 12, 2004 from http://www.caas.org/standards/history.html). This workshop was the seed that led to the development of the Commission on Accreditation of Ambulance Services (CAAS), which was incorporated in 1990. According to the CAAS website (retrieved on September 12, 2004):

“It is the intent of the American Ambulance Association, that these accreditation standards shall define a "gold standard" of higher caliber than that typically required for state or local licensing. Accreditation shall mean that "this organization has stood the test" of professional peer review which this program represents. Accreditation shall indicate with credibility that the organization has met the standards determined by other professionals within the industry as those attributes considered essential in a modern emergency medical services provider (http://www.caas.org/standards/history.html).

Police agencies across the nation also have the opportunity to become accredited. The Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA) offers accreditation programs for law enforcement agencies, public safety communications centers and public safety training academies. CALEA was established in 1979 by the nation’s four major law enforcement membership associations: International Association of Chief’s of Police (IACP), the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE), the National Sheriff’s Association (NAS), and the Police Executive Research Forum. CALEA obtains its general authority from the four key
associations listed above. As with the program offered by the CFAI, participation in the CALEA accreditation program is entirely voluntary. The overall purpose of the program is to improve the delivery of law enforcement services by offering a body of standards developed by law enforcement practitioners. According to the website, besides the recognition of attaining international excellence, the primary benefits of accreditation include administrative improvements, greater accountability from supervisors, and increased governmental and community support (retrieved Sept. 13, 2004 from http://www.calea.ord/html).

More significant and having far greater ramifications to the fire service is the creation and implementation of National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Standards 1710 and 1720. These standards, passed at the World Fire Safety Congress held in Anaheim, California in May, 2002 and have been heavily contested by organizations such as the National League of Cities, The United States Conference of Mayors, the National Association of Counties, the ICMA, The Public Risk Management Association, the National Public Employer Labor Relations Association, The International Personnel Management Association, The Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, forty other state municipal leagues representing the interests of a total of over 15,000 cities, and numerous cities, towns and fire districts (retrieved on September 23, 2004 from http://www.nvfc.org/news./hn_nfpa1710_approved.html). NFPA 1710 establishes requirements for the deployment of fire suppression operations, emergency medical operations, and special operations to the public by career fire departments. NFPA 1720 is the standard for the deployment of fire suppression operations, emergency medical operations, and special operations to the public by volunteer fire departments. Primarily,
opposition to NFPA 1710 and 1720 is due mainly to staffing and on scene requirements set forth in these standards. Many communities simply do not have the financial resources needed to meet the standards. Additionally, significant opposition exists as community leaders, agency officials, and many fire chiefs do not feel that either standard is justified nor can it be used as a blanket standard for all fire agencies. In addition, the standards do not take into account such factors as existing fire prevention programs, community density, fire safe construction, or whether built in fire protection ordinances are in place (retrieved on September 16, 2004 from http://www.tml.org/legis_update102202b_NFPA.htm).

The authors of NFPA 1710 and 1720 added language that fortunately includes an equivalency clause. This creates the opportunity for agencies to use other recognized approaches to fulfilling the intent of 1710 and 1720. The International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) notes in its 1710 Decision Guide, that equivalency must be based on reasonable and sound principles that could be explained to a courtroom jury. The Decision Guide provides the statement that the analysis of resource deployment in relation to risk, which is a component of the voluntary accreditation process of CFAI (www.cfainet.org), is an option to consider in order to meet the equivalency clause. Another related approach for agencies not able or willing to pursue full accreditation could be to use the Risk, Hazard and Value (RHAVE) Standards of Response document also published by CFAI. The programs created by CFAI are available options to consider compared to the financially crippling effects of NFPA Standards 1710 and 1720.

Another significantly different and somewhat drastic approach is being taken by at least one community, the Town of Ross, California. This community reviewed the
process by which 1710 was promulgated and concluded that the process was biased, that special interests dominated, and that the process was not adequately supported by relevant scientific studies. The council of that community then passed a resolution indicating it did not recognize the validity of NFPA 1710. The factual information to support such a resolution is contained in the appeal presented to the NFPA Standards Council by the Local Government Coalition (retrieved from http://www.firehouse.com/news/2001/1/13_FH1710.html). A key dilemma, however, is that fire agencies will have a difficult time enforcing other NFPA provisions, such as sprinkler and fire alarm system requirements, without self-enforcing sections 1710 or 1720 upon themselves.

Key to the issue of whether to move forward with CFAI Accreditation is the NFPA 1710 compliance issue. The City of Larkspur utilizes the Uniform Fire Code (UFC) and NFPA Standards, which are cited throughout the UFC. How can the enforcement agency utilize the NFPA Standards, without self-enforcing the appropriate provisions? Regardless of whether the agency agrees with the standard, NFPA 1710 has been approved and is now a valid document. This in fact elevated the significance of CFAI due to language being inserted into the standard that allows for alternate methods of compliance (Commission Pamphlet, p. 3). This important language inserted in the final stages of the committee process enables individual fire agencies to utilize industry recognized alternate programs.

In the private sector, many accreditation programs are in place. Industries and institutions that predominate accreditation include the rating and certification of academic institutions, mainly colleges, universities, private grammar, middle and high schools. For
independent colleges and universities, the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools posts the following information on their official website:

The Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) is listed as a nationally recognized accrediting agency by the United States Department of Education. Its accreditation of degree-granting institutions and universities is also recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (retrieved on September 27, 2004 from http://www.uat.edu/about/subpages/accreditation/).

ACICS cites the following attributes of accreditation (2004): “Accreditation is a status granted to an institution that meets or exceeds the stated criteria of educational quality. The purposes of accreditation are to assess and enhance the educational quality of an institution, to assure consistency in institutional operations, to promote institutional improvement, and to provide for public accountability.”

According to the ACICS website, academic accreditation functions to:

* Evaluate whether an institution meets or exceeds minimum standards of quality.
* Assist students in determining acceptable institutions for enrollment.
* Assist institutions in determining acceptability of transfer credits.
* Assist employers in determining validity of programs of study and the acceptability of graduate qualifications.
* Assist employers in determining eligibility for employee tuition reimbursement programs.
* Enable graduates to sit for certification examinations.
* Involve staff, faculty, students, graduates, and advisory boards in
in institutional evaluation and planning.

* Create goals for institutional self-improvement.

* Provide a self-regulatory alternative for state oversight functions.

* Provide a basis for determining eligibility for federal student assistance (retrieved on September 27, 2004 from http://www.acics.org/accrediation/).

The medical profession including hospitals, laboratory research, nursing, convalescent, and rehabilitation facilities also have accreditation programs. An example is the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission (NLNAC). NLNAC is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as the national accrediting body for all types of nursing education programs. The NLNAC performs continuous monitoring of approximately 1700 nursing programs per year. Additionally, the commission provided initial and continuous accreditation of approximately 200 programs annually (retrieved on September 26, 2004 from http://www.ninac.org/org/home.htm).

These accreditation institutions, along with many others including CFAI share the general theme of ensuring program consistency, setting forth requirements that organizations meet minimum regional or nationally recognized standards, and that minimum levels of accountability are achieved. So although the process of fire service accreditation is a reasonably new concept, it joins a well-established industry that has either mandated or offered voluntary programs for both public and private sector agencies to increase the caliber of the product or service being delivered and ensure that a minimum uniform standard is being achieved. The process of self-assessment and accreditation created by the CFAI appears to create the next generation of fire service evaluation.
Fire service self-assessment and accreditation is admittedly a subjective process (CFAI Manual, section 2, p. 1). It provides a standard toward which all members of the fire service industry can work towards. The term accreditation is defined by the Commission as, “a process by which an association or agency evaluates and recognizes a program of study, or an institution as meeting certain predetermined standards or qualifications”. It applies only to institutions or agencies and their programs of study or services. Accreditation takes a lot of work (IAFC Staff, 1999). According to this article, the largest amount of time required to prepare an organization for accreditation is the self-assessment process, as it helps focus the agency on collecting and organizing the necessary references and exhibits to complement and demonstrate the services listed in the accreditation model. For each topic or subject area in the self-assessment manual, agency officials describe the department’s activities, and analyze the effectiveness and efficiency of each activity as it currently exists (IAFC Staff, 1999). One of the concurrent benefits of the accreditation process is the development of planning documents, including short-term action and long-term strategic plans.

The Commission distinguishes accreditation from the terms certification or professional designation as this applies to an individual and his/her mastery of a specific body of knowledge, or standardization – a process by which a service is assessed against some fixed standard of performance and quality (CFAI Manual, section 2, p. 1).

Those agencies wishing to participate in the CFAI programs must proceed along the following path:

1) Registered Agency: The fire agency that wishes to be involved in the activities of the CFAI becomes a registered agency by completing an application form and
paying a fee of $250. This gets the agency connected to CFAI, which provides the participating department with the Fire and Emergency Service Self-Assessment Manual and a compact disc entitled, Risk, Hazard and Value Evaluation (RHAVE). By registering, the agency is also notified of new information or updates pertaining to the accreditation and self evaluation process.

2) Applicant Agency: When the agency is prepared to pursue accreditation, the agency must request an application from CFAI. The agency submits the application along with the appropriate fee based on the population served. The agency receives an Applicant Agency Packet, consisting of a letter of agreeance, questionnaires pertaining to department demographics, a policy manual and supplemental information. The status of Applicant Agency allows access to CFAI staff and technical assistance.

3) Accreditation Candidate: When the agency has completed the assessment process and materials are submitted to CFAI, the agency enters the accreditation candidate phase. This must occur no later than eighteen months after signing the original application. A CFAI peer assessment team is assigned to the agency and an on-site review is scheduled.

4) Accredited Agency: A formal hearing is conducted before the eleven-member commission whereby the report from the peer assessment team is received. The commission can grant accreditation at this time. Accreditation from CFAI is valid for five years. Annual reports are required within 30 days of the anniversary and re-accreditation must occur upon the fifth year in order to maintain compliance.
Bellevue, Washington Fire Department has achieved the status of accredited fire agency from CFAI. The elected body of the City of Bellevue posted a statement of support of professional accreditation and the work of CFAI. Some of the key comments include:

Every day, local elected leaders, city/county administrators and fire chiefs face critical decisions concerning fire protection and emergency medical services for their community.

Now more than ever, these local leaders are faced with the constant pressure of doing more with less. There have been a number of authors advocating a wide variety of approaches, techniques and proposed standards to measure fire service performance. The time has come for the fire service to elevate its level of professionalism with a process by which citizens, elected and appointed officials, and fire and emergency service personnel can assess when they have achieved an appropriate level of professional performance and efficiency in the organization.

Many professional groups have developed accreditation systems to establish industry wide benchmarks for management and overall organizational performance. At a time when the fire service and government in general are being more closely scrutinized than ever before, it is critical that fire and emergency service agencies have a well defined, recognized measurement tool that can be used to evaluate effectiveness and measure performance. The answer is the Commission on Fire
Literature Review

Key literature on the subject of fire accreditation pertains specifically to the process, includes testimonials from participating agencies and comparatives to other industry evaluation, certification, and accreditation programs. As a foundation, it is first necessary to define the meaning of accreditation and relate it to other key terms that are applicable to this discussion:

1) **Accredit**: To give official authorization to or approval of; to provide with credentials; to recognize or vouch for as conforming to a standard; to recognize (an educational institution) as maintaining standards that qualify its graduates for admission to higher or more specialized institutions or for professional practice (American Heritage College Dictionary, p. 9).

2) **Certify**: To attest authoritatively, such as to attest as being true, accurate, genuine or as represented, or as a guarantee to meeting a standard (American Heritage College Dictionary, p. 230).

3) **Certificate**: A document containing a certified statement especially as to the truth of something; specifically a document that one has fulfilled the requirements of and may practice in a field (American Heritage College Dictionary, p. 230).

4) **Standard**: A degree or level of requirement, excellence or attainment (American Heritage College Dictionary, p. 1325).

According to CFAI staff (2003) the fire and emergency service accreditation process provides the following agency benefits:
1) Promotes excellence.

2) Encourages quality improvement through a continuous self-improvement process.

3) Assures the local government and the public that the organization has defined mission objectives and strives to meet them.

4) Provides for detailed evaluation of the organization and the services it provides to the community.

5) Identifies areas of strength and weakness within the organization.

6) Provides a systemic method to address those deficiencies, building on the organization’s strengths.

7) Offers a forum for the communication of organizational needs, both internally and externally.

8) Provides a mechanism for developing documents, including strategic plans and budgets.

9) Fosters pride in the organization when it’s recognized as a department committed to continuous quality improvement and excellence.

Key to the process of the CFAI process is the understanding and full explanation of the programs offered. Once the agency is registered, the agency may proceed to self-assessment/standards of cover and conclude at this level, or proceed to accreditation. The choice is based on the needs of the agency and the desire of the fire chief, city manager and the community’s elected officials (CFAI Manual, 2002, section 2, p. 2):

A) Self-Assessment/Standards of Cover. One of the major issues the fire service has struggled with in the past decade is defining levels of service. In order for a self-assessment program to work, it was essential to determine whether a fire agency was
prepared to provide a level of service commensurate with its responsibilities and risks (Gary, 2001). The concept that was developed for the self-assessment track is formally titled, Standards of Response Coverage, although it is also referred to in articles and publications on the subject as Standards of Coverage or abbreviated as SOC. SOC is defined as those written procedures that determine the distribution and concentration of fixed and mobile resources of an organization (Gary, 2001). According to Gary (2001), the term was adopted by CFAI from Western Europe and other countries where there are national standards for fire service deployment. A standard of cover policy describes the deployment of coverage for a given community or area. According to Coleman (2001), the diversity of fire service agencies and community make up has made it difficult, in the past, to develop standard methodology. The authors of the self-assessment/SOC program have utilized a systems approach to deployment, rather than a “one size fits all” prescriptive formula (Gary, 2001). NFPA 1710 and 1720, along the CFAI, share a similar theme: The arrival of a sufficient number of fire department resources within a sufficient time to control the emergency (Gary, 2001). The distinction between these programs is that NFPA 1710 and 1720 are mandatory if the NFPA codes are adopted and are utilized by the public agency, whereas the programs of CFAI are strictly voluntary. According to Gary (2001), the CFAI SOC has eight parts:

1) Existing deployment: The program makes the assumption that each agency has something in place at the present time.

2) Community outcome expectations: What is expected of the response agency from the community that it serves. Gary (2001) that in many cases, fire agency
officials have never had a discussion with elected officials or community leaders pertaining to the department’s capability or minimum expectations.

3) Community risk assessment: According to CFAI staff (Gary, 2001) this is a critical step in the SOC process. Agencies now respond to a wide variety of incidents, and some of those require additional or specialized deployment to achieve an acceptable outcome. Key to this step is analyzing how many people must arrive in what time frame, properly trained and equipped. It further analyzes the assets that are at risk in the community. Structure fire risk assessment is performed on the community’s building stock (CFAI, 2001). Common fire and life safety factors such as fire flow and code compliance for life safety, are used to determine a risk category – low, moderate, significant, and maximum risk classification. According to CFAI (2001), most communities in the United States are in the moderate, also called a “typical risk” classification. To assist in achieving standardized risk typification, CFAI in cooperation with the USFA, has developed a software program to evaluate and score building risk (Gary, 2001). The program, is entitled, Risk, Hazard, and Value Evaluation (RHAVE); it enables fire agency officials to collect date from existing sources or field surveys to generate maps that accurately display risk in a community.

4) Distribution study: This step identifies all first-due, all risk, initial intervention resources (typically engines). Distribution is measured by the percentage of the community covered by a first-due engine that can arrive within a specified period. CFAI provides an example of four-minute travel or six-minute total reflex time as a standard (2001).
5) Concentration study: The spacing of multiple resources arranged close enough together so that an initial effective response force can be assembled on scene with enough time to most likely stop the escalation of the emergency for a given risk type (Gary, 2001). CFAI indicates that in a moderate risk area, an initial effective response force shall arrive within eight minutes travel, or 10 minutes total reflex time, 90% of the time and be able to provide 1,500 gallons per minute (gpm) for firefighting, or be able to handle a five-patient emergency medical incident. According to Gary (2001), like a distribution policy, a concentration policy must have a fractal performance measure and a time measure. It must also state a service level objective. Gary states that the performance objective is clearly written so that policy-makers understand that the effective response force is sized and timed to stop incident escalation (2001).

6) Historical reliability: An SOC study must include a historical analysis of multiple call frequency also referred to as call stacking or queuing (Stewart, 2001). This step verifies whether there a history of multiple, simultaneous calls that can cause response delays. A history of queuing can indicate that the agency isn’t adequately staffed or equipped to meet the demands of the community.

7) Historical response effectiveness studies: What percentage of compliance does the existing system deliver? Critical issues such as rush hour traffic, railroad crossings over important access routes, or streets causing delays due to neighborhood traffic calming measures are included in this section. Investments in such equipment as traffic signal preemption, is typically cited to improve delays caused by traffic.
8) Overall evaluation: Proposed standard of cover statements by risk type are compared to actual and proposed performance using good statistics and geographic mapping tools. According to Gary, the engine company officer’s intimate knowledge with the community will play an important role in this step (2001).

According to Gary, the SOC process has worked effectively for agencies to understand and certify that they have a deployment system that works (2001). Gary states that he has been teaching an SOC course at the California Fire Academy for five years. Agency officials who have taken his course have used the process and either obtained more deployment resources or held off force reductions from their elected officials (2001). Gary states that by utilization of this program, elected officials and city managers will be able to truly understand fire deployment and have to either provide for adequate deployment or tell the community why they can’t afford to provide the staffing resources and equipment needed to effectively protect the community (2001). Gary goes on to stress that SOC isn’t a guarantee that completion of the program will provide for more resources, or be a successful last ditch effort to save resources from being cut, as each agency defines its own standard of cover. Agency officials must acknowledge where appropriate alternative methods, such as central station alarms, fire sprinklers, mutual or automatic aid and even building roads can improve response times (2001).

B. According to Gary (2001), accreditation is exposing the fire agency to outside investigation and scrutiny. Once the self-assessment phase has been completed, a peer review team, dispatched by CFAI visits the fire agency and conducts an audit. If the team is satisfied, a recommendation is made to the CFAI board of directors, who then
formally reviews the application. The chief of the department and other agency members
directly involved in the process, along with the peer review team present the findings to
the board. The CFAI specifically describes accreditation as “An Improvement Model
through self-assessment (Fleger, 2004).”

According to John Wolf, assistant dean for continuing education at the University of
Kansas who, in that role oversees the fire training and law enforcement programs, an
accrediting body should be a separate and at the least, a semi-independent organization
whose business is the investigation of requests from training organizations to be
accredited or re-accredited and the maintenance of the associated records (1999).

Accreditation clearly establishes accountability for performance; putting performance on
the record so it can be evaluated on the record. The accrediting body must be perceived
as being the best body to do the accrediting, one that is clearly impartial and which has a
reputation for fairness and objectivity. Dean Wolf stresses that objectivity and fairness
must be its hallmarks.

Dean Wolf (1999) states that accreditation permits organizations to respond to
changes in their environments much more quickly and with less overall stress on the
organization itself. Wolf also cites public trust, consistency, fairness and efficiency as
byproducts of accreditation.

Where ISO is rooted on the evaluation the fire agency’s ability to control a fire,
based on staffing, equipment and infrastructure, self assessment and accreditation
provides a comprehensive system of fire and emergency service evaluation that can help
local government’s determine their own risks and fire safety needs as well as evaluate the
performance of the organization, and subsequently provide methods for continuous
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improvement (Commission, 2004, p. 1). The commission was established as a non-profit entity in 1996 by the IAFC and ICMA. In fact, the roots of fire department self-assessment and accreditation reach back to as far back as 1987 when the IAFC formally endorsed the development of a voluntary fire service accreditation program. Here, visionary public leaders created a partnership thanks to a shared vision of improving the professionalism and the effectiveness of fire agencies by creating standards and benchmarks for fire organizations to strive towards (Commission, 2004, p. 1). The Board of Trustees of CFAI consists of five members (CFAI Manual, section 1, p. 8):

1) Two representatives of the International Association of Fire Chief’s (IAFC).
2) Two representatives of the International Association of City Managers (ICMA).
3) One miscellaneous representative.

CFAI has an eleven-member commission comprised of the following representatives:

1) Agency head representing a fire department serving a population of greater than 250,000.
2) Agency head representing a fire department serving a population of 100,000 to 249,999.
3) Agency head representing a fire department serving a population of 25,000 to 99,000.
4) Agency head representing a fire department serving a population of up to 24,999.
5) International fire service representative.
6) Consensus standards making organization representative.
7) CEO representing city government.
8) Labor representative.
9) Insurance industry representative.

10) Federal fire service representative.

11) CEO representing county government.

“It is the mission of the Commission on Fire Accreditation International to assist the fire and emergency service agencies throughout the world in achieving excellence through self assessment and accreditation in order to provide continuous quality improvement and the enhancement of service delivery to their communities (Commission, 2004, p. 1).”

According to Retired California State Fire Marshal Ronny Coleman who now chairs CFAI, the program is needed to address the following critical issues (Commission, 2004, p. 3):

1) Help fire managers with daily critical decisions concerning the deployment fire and emergency medical services.

2) Because fire managers are continuing to do more with less, and the demand and complexity of services increases and budgets continue to remain fixed or are cut.

3) A fire manager’s efforts are hampered by the lack of nationally accepted criteria that can judge quality and service levels of fire and emergency medical services.

4) At a time when the fire service and government in general are being more closely scrutinized than ever before, it is critical that fire and emergency medical agencies have a well defined, recognized measurement tool that can be used to evaluate the fire agency’s effectiveness.

According to the Commission, there are four key reasons why evaluation is needed (Commission, 2004, p. 5):
1) When the agency is trying to cope with change.

2) To provide for periodic organizational evaluation to ensure effectiveness.

3) When a change is to occur with key leadership positions.

4) To raise the level of professionalism within the organization.

Unlike ISO, there is a cost attached to an agency’s participation in the CFAI accreditation process. The fee is based on the population served within the jurisdiction and it should be arrived at by the last census performed in the community (CFAI Manual, section 1, p. 10). The fee structure is as follows:

1) Serving 0-9,999.................................$2,000
2) Serving 10,000-49,999.........................$3,000 (reflects cost for Larkspur)
3) Serving 50,000-99,999.........................$4,000
4) Serving 100,000-199,999.......................$5,000
5) Serving over 200,000...........................$6,000

Based on the cost to apply, the City of Larkspur could justify the expenditure. The Larkspur Fire Department’s 2004-05 operating budget is $297,267 (City of Larkspur Annual Budget Document 2004-05, p.29). Once an agency is accredited, the yearly fee for maintenance and re-accreditation is one-fifth the applicant fee, which continues for as long as the fire agency maintains its status. Based on this study, the application costs are not an inhibiting factor pertaining to the decision to move forward with accreditation.

For the report to the city manager, the agency can eliminate these costs as a barrier to move forward. The areas requiring additional research are those that will quantify the time and staff commitment as well as qualify the benefits that could be achieved.
Mike Ridgway is the chief of the Ross Public Safety Department. He is actually on contract from the Marin County Sheriff’s Department where he holds the rank of lieutenant. Due to its size, the town had been a training ground for chiefs. Over the past ten years, four chiefs have left for opportunities in other organizations. Chief Ridgway is the first Sheriff’s Department manager to hold this title, however due to a pending promotion, he will rotate back and another lieutenant will be assigned. The Town of Ross has a population of 2,310. The agency has a single fire station with one captain and one firefighter on duty per day. In 2003, the department handled 268 calls for service. 73% of these runs were for medical related emergencies. Chief Ridgway was asked, in a tape-recorded interview conducted on September 3, 2004, to comment on his agency’s plans pertaining to CFAI self-assessment and accreditation or other NFPA 1710 compliant efforts:

“This fire agency depends on assistance from outside agencies on almost every emergency. On medical aid calls, we utilize the regional ambulance. For fires, Kentfield and Ross Valley Fire Departments provide automatic assistance. Kentfield’s fire station is less than one mile from Ross’ fire station and the center of our town. Ross Valley’s main station is 1.25 miles from our fire station but under one half mile from our city limits. That Ross has a full time fire department is almost ridiculous. We could contract for fire protection from neighboring agencies, close our doors, and the public would see no noticeable decline in service. The only reason Ross has a fire department is because of the affluence of the community and because Ross, like many other towns and cities in Marin
(County) are entrenched in the notion of local control and power. Ross is 100% built out to our borders and we are 95% housing; there is no expansion that can occur. Our call volume will decline as our homes continue to be remodeled or even razed and rebuilt. Residential sprinkler systems and the elimination of such factors as outdated wiring, the installation of sheetrock, and fire resistant roofs continue to reduce fire frequency and magnitude. Ross utilizes a two-year budget cycle. Performance goal statements and planned capital expenditures are incorporated into the document. The process includes extensive planning with fire department staff, the town manager and two council members.

Although I am impressed with the accreditation process, it is not going to be utilized in Ross. There is no need. This agency will neither expand in size or be reduced. You cannot reduce in size a two-person engine company! In April 2004, the community voted to increase the parcel tax for police and fire services to $960 per year (per parcel). This enables us to maintain our equipment and facilities to state of the art status. We are also able to keep our employees compensated to above County median. In the future, the only major decision that our council will be faced with is whether or not they want to continue to fund their own fire agency. They can maintain existing levels by contracting, if neighboring agencies would be interested. However, this doesn’t appear to be an option the council or the community would be interested in, any time in the near or distant future. This community wants to see firefighters in its firehouse, and a
fire engine that has Town of Ross written on the side in gold leaf. Therefore, it’s an agency that will continue to deploy one captain and one firefighter on duty and maintain our automatic aid relationships. CFAI accreditation and self-assessment is not an option. Not only are there no 40-hour per week administrative staff to administer, there really is no need. We’re not going to immerse ourselves in a process that will produce little, if any benefit. Yes, it might be impressive to receive accreditation; our council and community might see this as an accomplishment, but we could continue to be the same organization. It would produce no changes.

The enormity of the project, along with on going administrative effort to maintain accreditation status appears not worth the effort for this agency. However, additional research and input from agencies involved in the process or recognized as an accredited agency must occur. As to my concern raised earlier in this paper about selective enforcement of NFPA provisions, Chief Ridgway stated that the Town of Ross is in the process of amending the NFPA Fire Protection Standards with specific deletions of standards 1710 and 1720. Ross Fire Department, with a single two-person engine company will never be expanded, certainly to levels prescribed by NFPA 1710. According to Chief Ridgway, by Town Council action, “NFPA 1710 and 1720 will cease to exist”.

To achieve alternate compliance to NFPA, SOC is becoming the norm. This is the foundational component of the CFAI program that is required in order for a fire agency to become fully accredited. Four agencies in Marin County – Ross Valley Fire Department, Corte Madera Fire Department, San Rafael Fire Department, and Novato Fire District are
currently participating in the Standards of Response Coverage. Presently, only one Marin
department, the Novato Fire Protection District, is planning to proceed towards full
accreditation. This EFO student sees a correlation with research question #2 pertaining
to staff time and budget considerations. The Novato Fire Protection District is a large full
service fire agency that, thanks to a generous local parcel tax has an abundance of
suppression, prevention, training and administrative staffing. The numbers of 40-hour
per week staff – chief officers, administrative captains, administrative support, far exceed
those in other fire agencies in Marin County.

On September 7, 2004 an electronic analysis was distributed to the fire agencies in
Marin County seeking data on staffing (primarily administrative), budget, and population
served. Based on this analysis, the agencies participating in CFAI programs are those
with 40-hour per week command and/or administrative staffing capable of moving these
processes forward. The agencies in Marin that lack key sufficient administrative staff
positions are generally not inclined to implement formal CFAI or other similar programs
that would be considered NFPA 1710 compliant.

Tom Roach is the fire chief of the Marinwood Fire Department. Marinwood Fire
Department is a single station agency with ten full time firefighters and one chief officer.
The agency has no training or prevention bureau nor does it employ any administrative
support personnel (retrieved on October 5, 2004 from http://www.marinwoodfire.org)
Marinwood is a community of 6,357 full time residents covering an area of 5.6 square
miles (retrieved on October 5, 2004 from http://www.city-data.com/city/Lucas-Valley-
Marinwood-California.html). Chief Roach was interviewed on October 4, 2004 about
CFAI accreditation and his plans to implement CFAI self-assessment, accreditation or
other NFPA 1710 compliant programs. Chief Roach stated to me that his agency has no plans to implement any such program based on a lack of staff, lack of funding, and lack of need based on the direction given by his board of directors. Chief Roach has been suffering from a severe budget shortfall. He explained that his agency is part of a community service district for a small unincorporated residential community. A parcel tax is shared between the fire, recreation and public works departments (The County sheriff’s department provides police services). He notes that it would be for the best overall for the community if his agency were absorbed into either of the larger fire departments (Novato Fire Protection District on the northern boundary; San Rafael Fire Department on the southern boundary) that border Marinwood. Unfortunately, the Marinwood Community Services District Board of Directors is opposed to consolidation. The board has an embedded local control culture. Chief Roach states that it is the Board’s intention to maintain a small, minimally staffed single engine and rely on mutual aid for large-scale events. Chief Roach sees this as highly inefficient as his primary concern is that if simultaneous major events in the County, it would seriously erode the effectiveness of mutual aid. He fears that his single engine will be on scene of an escalating emergency and that back up reinforcements will not be dispatched due to unavailability. Chief Roach states that Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) two in/two out requirements will be sacrificed, as his single engine crew will be forced to make interior rescue attempts without the needed back up staffing arriving in an acceptable time frame. [In 1997, OSHA placed into effect 29 Code of Federal Regulation (CFR) 1910.132. This section established general requirements for the employer to provide, test, inspect and maintain personal protective equipment for employees exposed
to workplace hazards. The regulation also requires that at least two employees enter hazardous atmosphere and remain in visual or voice contact with one another at all times, and that at least two employees are located outside the hazardous atmosphere and be ready to perform assistance or rescue activities (retrieved on October 12, 2004 from http://www.nvfc.org regs03.html).] Chief Roach’s staff would like to be absorbed into one of the two adjoining agencies to improve salary and benefit packages as well as provide for additional career opportunities. He too thinks that working for one of the neighboring fire agencies would add to his personal growth. [Chief Roach is 38 years old and was internally promoted in 2001 from the rank of fire captain to fire chief.] He desires the ability of becoming a mid level chief for a larger fire organization. In concluding, Chief Roach states that under present circumstances, his single engine will always be located in the existing location. Response time issues are clearly established and a structural analysis and risk assessment is complete. [Marinwood is located in a valley that is approximately one mile wide and six miles long. Approximately 95% of the structures within the community are single-family dwellings. The remaining 5% are light commercial and low-rise multi family. The threat of wildland fire impingement is significant during the summer and early fall months as the hillsides that border the community consist of light fuels, such as native grasses, scotch broom and chamois.]

On Monday, October 11, 2004 I interviewed the new fire chief of a neighboring fire agency. Excerpts from our discussion along with materials obtained from an electronic mail questionnaire pertaining to the programs offered by CFAI are contained here: Bruce Martin has recently assumed the duties of fire chief of the San Rafael Fire Department located in the heart of Marin County. San Rafael is considered the hub city in Marin, due
to its central geographic location and because it is the largest municipality in the County
[San Rafael, Ca. has a population of 56,063 and is 7.3 square miles in size (retrieved on

Chief Martin assumed the new role replacing a fire chief who had worked for San Rafael
Fire Department for 40 years; 30 as fire chief. The new chief was hired from outside the
agency, moving up from the rank of battalion chief in a similar sized city approximately
25 miles south of San Francisco. Chief Martin is considered a progressive leader,
shedding many of the traditional management and operational fire service methods. He is
a proponent of CFAI and seen to it that his agency is underway with the SOC process.

Chief Martin assumed his new role at the height of the California State budget crisis.
Soon after being hired, the City began the processes of implementing layoffs, positional
freezes, wage reductions, furloughs and random closure of city offices, parks and the
public library. In fact, less then six months after assuming his new post, Chief Martin
was hit with a 10% cut in his annual salary and was forced to assume the role of duty
chief on the days his mid management staff were furloughed. The chief indicated to me
that he was unaware a city such as San Rafael would be impacted to such a devastating
degree. His former agency (Palo Alto, Ca) wasn’t going to feel the impact of the budget
crisis, as the city has many locally protected revenue sources (primarily sales tax from
key sources such as automobile dealerships and high end retail, as well as transient
occupancy tax ((also referred to as hotel tax)) from many of the areas hotels and motels).

Although San Rafael has an impressive number of auto dealers, hotels and motels and
high-end retail centers, (San Rafael contains 199 food and accommodation
establishments and 411 retail trade stores ((retrieved on October 14, 2004 from
the community is still quite dependent on property tax, of which now his agency, and all other cities in California, receive a share of only 11%. Chief Martin exclaimed that the CFAI SOC program was vital for his agency. The chief stated that due to natural geographical barriers (undeveloped hillside areas, a peninsula approximately 6 miles long and two miles wide, and the city being bordered entirely on the east side by the San Francisco Bay), his agency has too many stations, some of which are in areas that create call queuing conditions, and others that receive less than 200 calls per year within its primary response district. In addition to this, four of the six stations are in need of major seismic retrofitting and remodeling. But before any decisions about upgrading can occur, they are forced to examine the station location issue. Presently, two stations located one mile apart, receive 60% of the total call volume. Station five located at the end of the peninsula is under utilized due to the low frequency of calls. Along with these issues are other operational and staffing concerns. Currently, San Rafael operates a stand-alone fire dispatch operation. The city, prior to Chief Martin’s appointment, had already committed to a $1.2 million dollar facility upgrade. This was done during a regime where local control and stand-alone independence was the norm. Chief Martin quickly realized the error but it was too late to reverse the decision. Upon completion in January 2005, San Rafael will be burdened with an existing dispatch staffing deficiency (one dispatcher on duty working a 48 hour shift) in a new, state of the art dispatch center. Chief Martin expressed that CFAI SOC is vital to his agency. As the city continues to cut, he needs to protect what is in place from further reductions. “SOC is vital to our wellbeing as it explains in verifiable and quantifiable detail the resources that are needed based on
factors such as formal risk assessment, call volume and response times.” Chief Martin went on to state that SOC has halted the budget reduction process from degrading any further. Although his department must deal with the cuts that have already been made – and that no improvements are seen in the foreseeable future, further cutting will not occur. Chief Martin stated to me that this is due primarily to the SOC document. As described by Livermore-Pleasanton Fire Department Chief Stewart Gary, in a memo to the city council dated June 9, 1995, “it is the community through their elected officials, the community’s values and community economics that dictate each community’s standards of cover”. Based on this opinion, it could be stated that each community buys the level of fire protection that it needs and can afford. If additional resources are needed beyond what the city can afford, it is then up to the fire chief to create partnerships with neighboring agencies for additional equipment or specialized resources in order to meet the demand. The City of Larkspur has an 11-story high-rise retirement facility and approximately 35 mid-rise residential and commercial structures. The need for an aerial apparatus is apparent, but based on the community’s staffing and budget limitations, the department will never be able to acquire such an expensive piece of specialized apparatus. However, a neighboring agency has a crossed staffed quint rig with a 75-foot ladder. Through a strong alliance and a cooperative agreement, this aerial apparatus responds automatically with the initial first alarm dispatch assignment for all reported fires in any of these structures.

At this juncture, it will be reinforced that successful completion of CFAI SOC or accreditation appears to depend on the size of the agency. Novato Fire Protection District Chief Jeff Meston was contacted on October 18, 2004. Chief Meston was contacted
because of his response to my October 8, 2004 inquiry seeking agency information from Marin County fire chiefs who are participating in CFAI programs. Chief Meston heads a five-station agency with a total of 97 department members. Chief Meston and his staff commenced with the SOC process beginning in July 2002. The department’s primary objective was to define the level of protection, in order to “sidestep” NFPA 1710 requirements. Chief Meston stated to me that he was adamantly opposed to the requirements of NFPA 1710. However, in lieu of merely disregarding the provisions, Chief Meston set the objective to develop alternate methods of compliance as the Novato Fire Protection District extensively utilizes NFPA standards for fire prevention enforcement, in operational areas for the equipping of fire apparatus, and for personnel protective clothing and safety. However Chief Meston stated that approximately 850 internal staff hours were devoted to completing the SOC process. Chief Meston stated that he was the primary author, and personally devoted approximately 400 hours of his own time. A fire protection consultant was utilized for computer modeling and statistical analysis. The cost for this service was approximately $7,000. According to data supplied by the chief, the District has an annual budget of $16.5 million; 24 members work an administrative 40-hour workweek. It is the opinion of the author of this ARP that an agency the size of the Novato Fire Protection District has resources to devote to such a process.

Ross Valley Fire Chief Mike Groshong indicated to me in a follow up interview on November 9, 2004, that his fire agency has expended hundreds of hours over the past 18 months, towards the process of self-assessment. In fact, the CFAI process has been the primary focus of his battalion chief officers over the period. He made the decision to
commit to the self-assessment process due to some volatile political relationships
between elected officials in the three partner communities that make up the Ross Valley
Fire Department. Chief Groshong stated that he wanted to have sound documentation
justifying the need for his three engine companies utilizing a program that was nationally
recognized and considered an approved alternate to NFPA 1710. To date, Chief
Groshong indicates that his agency has spent approximately nearly $1,000 on materials,
and approximately $5,000 for a consultant to assist with the project. However, he noted
that material and consulting costs were insignificant compared to staff hours committed
to the project. He noted that his battalion chiefs have been compartmentalized while
working on this project, unable to commit any significant or quality time to other projects
or tasks.

San Rafael Fire Chief Bruce Martin stated to me on October 21, 2004, that this
agency expended “hundreds of hours” with administrative and specialized (analysts and
consulting personnel) on the project of SOC. “It was a project that immersed the staff
and consulting resources for several months”. He noted that overall costs are not
available, “but something in the neighborhood of $20,000 would not be out of line”.

Procedures

Descriptive research was the primary investigative method utilized, to unearth the
foundation and complexities of the CFAI SOC and accreditation programs. The primary
purpose of utilizing descriptive research was to assist with the process of discovery.
Prior to embarking on this ARP, the student had little knowledge of CFAI accreditation
and SOC programs. Because CFAI was established and became truly active in the
1990’s, historical research was not necessary. Because the Larkspur Fire Department is not poised to create a program based on this study, action research was not initiated.

Literature review was utilized to provide the bulk of the information presented in this ARP pertaining to CFAI programs and to explore accreditation programs in other industries outside the fire service. The literature review process was also instrumental in obtaining information from numerous articles from on line publications, primarily Fire Chief magazine and other journals. The programs of CFAI have not been the primary subject matter contained within numerous texts and this became a limitation of the research effort. Most critical program data was obtained from documents prepared by CFAI and related publications from those directly involved in program development and deployment.

Along with literature review, gathering information from key persons directly associated with CFAI, and fire service executives in other fire agencies, was of key importance. Interviews by telephone, in person and qualitative information obtained from questionnaires and electronic mail correspondence added personal reflection and professional insight to this ARP. I feel that the personal interviews conducted with retired Chief Terry Kildow, Ross Valley Chief Mike Groshong, Novato Fire Chief Jeff Meston, Marinwood Chief Tom Roach, and San Rafael Fire Chief Bruce Martin, along with key members of there respective administrative staffs, are extremely beneficial to this research paper.

Significant time was expended searching the web for information pertaining to CFAI programs. Because most of the published material is produced by CFAI, I felt it was
necessary to seek out fire officials from other agencies who could provide insight into their experiences with utilizing self-accreditation and SOC.

In early October 2004, I was able to locate the electronic-mail address for Ron Coleman, one of the founding members of CFAI and somebody who played a key role in the development of the self-accreditation and SOC processes. On October 15, 2004 I sent Chief Coleman electronic-mail correspondence introducing myself, explaining my NFA-EFO assignment objective, and making the following inquiries:

1. Could he point me towards important published materials that I might not as yet have in my reference collection.

2. If he could provide information, from his perspective, on the average staff time that is needed to complete CFAI self-accreditation and SOC programs.

3. After describing the staff and budget limitations of my agency, I asked Chief Coleman if he could provide insight on how I might be able to implement and successfully complete the SOC program.

4. If, based on the geographical size of the City of Larkspur, the fact that it is completely built out and because staffing configurations are at minimum but considered sufficient, did he think commitment to CFAI programs was in our best interest.

Results

Writing the ARP has enabled me to learn about a complex task that is an emerging issue in the fire service. As agencies face the enormity of NFPA 1710 and 1720, many fire chiefs see CFAI as the most logical choice to develop credible, industry recognized
alternate compliance programs to evaluate staffing and service delivery functions. Prior to my arrival at the National Fire Academy in the summer of 2004, the Larkspur city manager had directed me to develop an opinion paper on the process of self-assessment. City Manager Bonander, through her involvement with county and statewide city management associations with NFPA 1710 (due to the enormous budget implications that these provisions created), was also aware of CFAI. She understands that embarking on the self-assessment program could be considered an alternate means of compliance, thus dodging a huge economic bullet. However, she was also aware that non-compliance to NFPA 1710 was a legal gamble that she was willing to consider. She, and many of her colleagues as well as a majority of elected officials were already tired of the increasing trend of unfunded mandates that cities were forced to accept. NFPA 1710 was a mandate that many were willing to use as the “line in the sand”. City managers and elected officials were prepared to fight whatever battle might lie ahead by a willing and overt act of non-compliance. Soon after NFPA 1710 and 1720 became ratified, City Manager Bonander was already hearing of cities that were going to abandon the use of NFPA codes altogether. She and many of her colleagues were strongly dissatisfied with the voting procedures of NFPA, as only those members who are present are allowed to vote.

In order to provide the Larkspur city council with an informed range of options, City Manager Bonander directed me to evaluate the process of CFAI self-assessment, SOC and accreditation, and submit an opinion of whether the staff of the Larkspur Fire Department should commit to such an undertaking. She informed me that she already had formed an opinion that no significant action should occur due to the ratification of NFPA1710. She advised me that her preliminary decision was to expend no significant
staff time or budget allocation towards this issue. However, in order to be objective, a review and summary of CFAI was warranted.

Key to this project is a definition and understanding of CFAI self-assessment and accreditation. I have determined that self-assessment is an agency performance evaluation that focuses on specific operational elements to determine the level of effectiveness in ten categories. In is an in-house evaluation utilizing nationally and industry recognized criteria. Chief Bruce Martin referred to it as the “next-generation to, but not in place of the ISO Public Protection Classification System”. In fact, we’ve established that ISO and CFAI really are on two separate tracks. ISO focuses on capital investments in fire protection systems, equipment and infrastructure, whereas CFAI looks at the processes of the fire protection organization.

Accreditation through CFAI is through full utilization of the self-assessment program, opening the agency up to external evaluation by a group of peers (on-site peer review team) and ultimately by the CFAI Board, who ultimate decide if accreditation is to be awarded.

Through interviews and electronic mail inquiries, I was able to determine that a realistic commitment of approximately 400 to 500 hours of staff time would be needed to complete all phases of the self-assessment project. A budget of $10,000 would be requested for external consultants to assist with compiling the necessary data, application fees and office materials.

Presently, there are no other nationally recognized programs that would enable this fire agency to meet what is considered an alternate means of compliance to NFPA 1710. Therefore, three fundamental choices exist:
1. Compliance with NFPA 1710.

2. Completion and documentation of the CFAI standards of cover, self-assessment program.

3. A decision by the elected body of the fire agency to disregard NFPA 1710, thus removing the need to embark on the self-assessment program. The agency could then opt to commit to any level of strategic planning to evaluate existing programs and plan for future changes based on external conditions.

From this research, I can state that a primary benefit to CFAI self-assessment, and CFAI accreditation is to achieve an accepted alternate means of compliance to NFPA 1710. Since NFPA 1710 mandates specific crew levels on fire equipment regardless of a range of factors, including station location, number of or distance between stations, or call volume of response area, agency leaders not only feel that the provisions are far too restrictive but unaffordable as well. Bellevue, Washington Fire Chief Pete Lucarelli (2001) stated that NFPA 1710 offers a “cookie cutter” approach to firefighting that completely limits local control. He added, “there is no scientific basis for 1710”. Internally, CFAI enables the agency to embark on an in-depth quantitative analysis by formally reviewing critical components and systems.

The ramifications of not participating could be potential liability due to non-compliance with NFPA 1710 or an accepted alternate. The International Association of Firefighters has endorsed 1710. Failure to work towards compliance could result in labor action. Harold A. Schaitberger, President of the International Association of Firefighters stated that “there is no doubt that NFPA 1710 will advance the NFPA’s fundamental
purpose and mission by improving the methods of fire protection and prevention – and establishing proper safeguards against loss of life and property due to fire”. He went on to state in a speech to the NFPA Standards Council on July 10, 2001 that, “if this standard was in place a decade ago, I dare say there would be dozens of career firefighters who would still be alive today”. As noted previously, an option that agencies are contemplating is entirely suspending the use of NFPA codes, or amending the local adoption of the code to omit sections 1710 and or 1720 (depending whether the agency is full time professional or volunteer). However, labor action during the decision process or liability should an line of duty injury or death occur, could be the result.

Discussion

The literature review phase of this paper was narrow due to no previous studies on CFAI programs. Additionally, published data was limited to mainly resources provided by CFAI or articles published by fire service executives who are participating in or completed self-assessment or accreditation processes. The primary objective of the paper was to discover the important elements of CFAI programs, obtain an understanding of costs and personnel commitments, determining what the actual benefits are to participating in these programs and identifying potential ramifications. An important part of the process was to unearth enough information in order to provide an informed opinion to the Larkspur city manager, on whether we should commit resources over a long-term period to accomplish this task.

The self-assessment and accreditation programs are well developed and important tools for fire agencies that need to utilize nationally recognized, validated instruments to defend against personnel or operational reductions. This condition is becoming common
in many areas of our country, but in particular in California due to a statewide governmental fiscal crisis. The California legislature, through the legislative process, controls many local taxes (including property tax) and possesses the ability to redirect the funds to State coffers during times of fiscal crisis. Local governments currently receive 11 cents for each dollar of property tax. Cities have been forced to significantly cutback services (mainly by laying off employees) to balance budgets. Fire chiefs are utilizing CFAI to substantiate to community leaders that existing forces (which in many cities are below optimum levels) must not be impacted by further reductions.

Determining actual costs and staff hours was difficult, as materials from CFAI do not provide this level of information. Costs and time commitments are going to involve a number of factors based on agency make up, it’s size, and the ability of its members to collect the necessary data, organize the materials and implement the needed programs. Consultants would make costs rise, possibly substantially. Both Novato Fire Protection District and the Ross Valley Fire Department used the services of outside contractors for mapping, computer simulation, research and report writing. Additionally, the track an agency chooses (SOC/self-assessment or full scale accreditation) to take will determine staff time and over all costs. Internal abilities are another important factor that will steer the issues of time involvement and cost. Well-trained, highly educated staff will be able to negotiate the process in a more expedient fashion than an agency whose key staff lacks the necessary skills. Therefore, it is an accurate conclusion to assume that cost and staff commitment are going to be agency dependent.

Examples of agencies that can effectively utilize CFAI are those undergoing expansion, or station relocation. Cities, such as Vacaville, California where urban sprawl
or in fill of existing open lands force fire agency officials to plan for new stations, added personnel and capital equipment. According to the City of Vacaville website, the community has more than doubled its population in the past 25 years (http://www.ci.vacaville.ca.us). Since the 1970’s the fire department has not only had to expand to keep up with this growth, but has had to reinvent itself as well. What once was a small, combination fire department focusing on dwelling and vegetation fires, has evolved into a modern full service fire agency to include such operations as paramedic advanced life support and hazardous materials response. CFAI has assisted agencies, such as Vacaville, to keep pace with expansion and growth by identifying the resources that will be needed to match the problem.

However, the Larkspur Fire Agency is neither expanding nor concerned about catastrophic reductions. The community is essentially evenly split by a waterway. A station is located on either side. Two bridges located within the west and east regions provide access for back up units, but essentially ensure that neither station be closed. Engines in both stations are minimally staffed – a two person and a three person company, so employee reductions are not an option to elected officials. Automatic aid programs provide seamless reinforcement through a centralized dispatch center, enabling the city of Larkspur and the surrounding communities to quickly control most fire, medical and hazardous material incidents. Historically, the communities within Marin County California have opted to maintain independent services rather then regionalize. Although operational efficiencies and economies of scale could be created, maintaining small, independent fire forces and other community programs has been the long-standing practice and any significant change appears unlikely.
It is my opinion based on this research, that the programs offered by CFAI are extremely worthwhile and should be utilized, to some degree, by a significant majority of the fire agencies in the U.S. The Larkspur Fire Department has opted, at this time, to become a registered member. The level of participation enables us to receive all vital publications published by CFAI, including the Fire and Emergency Service Self Assessment Manual as well as the quarterly news bulletins and monthly electronic mail updates. I would strongly urge all fire chiefs to consider participating in the CFAI program at least to this degree, as it will be vital to have a basic understanding of CFAI as the programs inevitably gain in popularity.

Finally, it is with some disappointment that I did not receive feedback from retired fire chief Ronny Coleman, who has been a key figure in the development and deployment of CFAI self-assessment and accreditation. His input could have most likely greatly added to the depth and breadth of my knowledge and the quality of this applied research project. I have been informed by a close contact (on November 9, 2004 by Tom Forster, Ranch Manager and Director of Fire and Security for Skywalker Ranch/Lucas Films and Sound Works, Nicasio, California) that Mr. Coleman is often consumed by multiple, in depth tasks in various locations around the U.S., and is often, unavailable. Still, I hope to sometime in the future, discuss the programs of CFAI, his involvement, and to also share my insights based on this research. I hope to either correlate my findings with this expert, or from his knowledge and direction possibly take a new track from the one I’ve chosen in order to best serve my fire agency and community with the highest and most efficient level of fire protection and emergency medical services.
Recommendations

Having gained an informed understanding of CFAI has been the primary benefit of this research project. Prior to my project research implementation, the self-assessment and accreditation process was confusing and even intimidating. In fact, without using CFAI as the subject of my research study, I’m not certain when, or to what level I would have ever committed to some degree of involvement. What I have learned during this process has given me a level of comfort so that I can make informed choices and discuss the issues with my fire service colleagues with a reasonable degree of knowledge and professionalism.

Having completed the research process upon submission of the applied research project, I have the following tasks to accomplish:

1. Update the members of the Larkspur Fire Department as to my findings and final conclusions. Seek to achieve consensus and collective understanding with departmental members that my decision is acceptable based on my research and the needs of our agency.

2. Continue agency affiliation with CFAI through the process of maintaining the department’s registered agency status.

3. Begin to assemble the resources that will be necessary to implement a formal, 5-year strategic planning program. Staff orientation, task analysis and delegation of roles and assignments will be included in this step.

4. Submit a memorandum to Larkspur City Manager Jean Bonander, prior to December 31, 2004, briefly and succinctly summarizing my findings pertaining to self-assessment and accreditation. Contained in this
document will be my recommendation that the City of Larkspur Fire Department:

i. Continue our membership with CFAI as a registered member.

   Along with our membership, continue to remain knowledgeable and current on all CFAI programs and new developments.

ii. Utilize key and worthwhile components of the self-assessment program to assist with the implementation and ultimate completion of a formal, five-year strategic planning document. It will be my suggestion that this document remain a dynamic, working document with formal quarterly reviews and updates conducted by fire department staff with the assistance and oversight of the Larkspur finance director and the city manager.

iii. At this time, not commit the organization to formal self-assessment or accreditation activities. My recommendation will be substantiated on numerous hours of research combined with investigations of other fire agencies and interviews with fire agency professionals. It is based on multiple factors including the static level of staffing, the cost impacts associated with full CFAI commitment and the extremely lack of administrative staffing needed to carry out such a complex task.

iv. Seek her affirmation to my recommendation, or, accept further direction and act accordingly based on her instructions.
Additionally, I will continue to maintain contact with other fire service professionals, especially those individuals who manage fire agencies with a similar size and make up compared to the Larkspur Fire Department. Although, based on my research and development of this applied research project, a track has been selected, I feel it will be critically important to stay abreast of any new developments that might cause me to reevaluate our position and change course. Additionally, there might be an opportunity to partner with a neighboring agency through the sharing of information, personnel or outside contractors to assist with the development of more formalized self-assessment documents. Additionally, such factors as a severe decline in the fiscal condition of the agency, or the possibility of mergers and consolidation, form the nexus to higher levels of planning and fire agency analysis.
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