

Working in the Community



NFPA 1021 Standard

Fire Officer III

6.1.1 General Prerequisite Knowledge. Current national and international trends and developments related to fire service organization, management, and administrative principles; public and private organizations that support the fire and emergency services and the functions of each. (pp 69–76)

6.3 Community and Government Relations. This duty involves developing programs that improve and expand service and build partnerships with the public, according to the following job performance requirements. (pp 66–76)

6.3.1 Prepare community awareness programs to enhance the quality of life by developing nontraditional services that provide for increased safety, injury prevention, and convenient public services. (pp 66–76)

(A) Requisite Knowledge. Community demographics, resource availability, community needs, and customer service principles. (pp 66–76)

(B) Requisite Skills. The ability to relate interpersonally and to communicate orally and in writing. (pp 66–76)

Fire Officer IV

7.3 Community and Government Relations. This duty involves projecting a positive image of the fire department to the community, according to the following job performance requirements. (pp 66–76)

7.3.1 Attend, participate in, and assume a leadership role in given community events in order to understand and respond to community needs and enhance the image of the fire department. (pp 66–76)

Knowledge Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

- List the roles and responsibilities of a chief officer in working with the community. (pp 66–69)
- Discuss the roles stakeholders play in a community and in relationships with the fire department. (pp 69–76)
- Discuss the importance of networking at the chief officer level. (p 76)

Skills Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

- Perform the roles and responsibilities of a chief officer in terms of a community's needs. (pp 66–69)
- Communicate effectively with stakeholders. (pp 69–76)
- Network with other departments and officials to solve problems. (p 76)

You Are the Chief Officer



While sifting through your in-basket late one afternoon, you receive a call from the president of a local civic association asking you to attend their monthly meeting next Tuesday night. You quickly check your calendar and agree, then ask if there is any specific topic the members would like to discuss. The president says, “No, just a basic presentation about current events affecting the fire department.”

You thank him for the invitation and make a mental note to review your standard fire department presentation beforehand and to take along a laptop and projector in case the technology at the community center fails.

About 10 minutes later, your desk phone rings with another call, this time from an attorney who works with several land developers on projects throughout the city. She asks if you have time for a short meeting with a client to discuss the concept for an upcoming project. You check your calendar again and offer next Wednesday as an option; she hesitates for a few moments, and then says, “Is there any way we can make it happen before Tuesday night?” Looking again at your schedule, you feel confident you can move things around and make time for a brief meeting on Monday morning; she thanks you and hangs up.

As you walk to your vehicle to drive home that evening, your mobile device buzzes, announcing an e-mail from a city council member. Before getting in the driver’s seat, you read the e-mail and see the council member is asking about some development-related fire protection and life safety issues (street clearances, fire hydrants, and traffic-calming options) in the neighborhood represented by the civic association you will be visiting next Tuesday night.

1. Is there a pattern emerging in these communications?
2. What is the chief officer’s role in the interaction among these community stakeholders?
3. Are you still going to attend the Tuesday night civic association meeting and give your stock presentation about the fire department?

Introduction

Career, combination, or volunteer, full- or part-time, in counties, cities, towns, villages, districts, and other municipalities large and small, chief officers and their subordinate officers are always public figures and have a number of vital responsibilities in their communities. This chapter identifies some common roles that fire officers are often expected to play; it also describes the interaction between the chief officer and key community [stakeholders](#), individuals, and groups who can heavily influence the fire department’s mission.

Roles and Responsibilities

A chief officer’s specific community roles and responsibilities, and their relative importance, vary based on the type of department, its legal authority, its organizational structure, and the local political environment. Sometimes these roles and responsibilities are explicitly described in

charters, articles of incorporation, local ordinances, job descriptions, or other official documents. In other cases, chief officers’ roles and responsibilities arise from history, tradition, or past practice. Just because a responsibility is not formally articulated in a legal document does not mean it is not important. In fact, chief officers can often have a great impact on their communities through informal stakeholder interactions.

Depending on their fire department’s size and organizational structure, chief officers may or may not be directly engaged, on a daily basis, with fulfilling all the roles and responsibilities described in this chapter. In larger departments, the fire chief may have a number of subordinate officers whose primary duties encompass many of these roles. In smaller departments, the chief officer might have to interact with the [community](#) personally to fulfill all of his or her responsibilities. Whatever the specific daily arrangement, it is important to remember that although authority may be delegated, the ultimate responsibility for meeting stakeholders’

expectations always rests with the chief officer. Keeping this in mind, there are many occasions in which the community expects to personally see, hear, and interact with their fire department's chief officer; in these cases, there can be no substitutes.

Subject Matter Expert

Whether elected by their fire department's membership; appointed by a local board, council, or commission; or serving at the pleasure of a mayor or city manager, chief fire officers are generally expected to be the principal fire protection subject matter experts for policy makers, elected officials, local government administrators, and citizens throughout their communities. The role of subject matter expert is a critical one, and it demands that fire officers remain current with all aspects of their department's mission.

Because it is extremely difficult for an individual officer to develop specialized expertise across every area of a department's operation and administration—especially in all-hazards departments that deliver fire prevention and suppression, emergency medical services, hazardous materials, and technical rescue services—successful chief officers are usually generalists and focus on cultivating teams of specialists within their organization and community.

The chief officer's primary duty as subject matter expert is providing public guidance on community needs related to fire protection and emergency services, along with describing the resources available to meet those needs. In some cases, fire departments are sufficiently resourced to address the community's daily risk of fire and other emergencies, short of an overwhelming disaster. In these instances, chief officers often find themselves explaining why the current level of resources provided to the department should be maintained to support current service levels.

In jurisdictions where the available fire department resources are not sufficient to meet service demands safely, chief officers must be able to identify disparities between community needs and resource availability, along with the consequences of not filling those gaps. Simply sounding the alarm is not enough; chief officers must be able to create realistic plans for addressing limitations in their departments' capabilities. In some cases, this might mean not providing certain services or developing alternative funding sources such as emergency medical services (EMS) billing, cost recovery (e.g., malfunctioning alarm fees, utility responses, fire incidents), technical rescue and/or hazardous materials response fees, and even selling subscriptions for structural firefighting services. In others, it may be an agreement with a neighboring department to provide the service for a fee or other arrangement.

Citizens, working through their elected representatives, make the ultimate decision about what to expect from their fire department. They cannot effectively

make this decision, however, without substantial input and credible subject matter expertise provided by chief officers.

Consultant

Closely related to the role of subject matter expert is that of principal consultant for the community on matters of fire protection and emergency response. Chief fire officers are expected to provide proposals for enhancing their department's ability to address community hazards. Beyond maintaining existing services, chief officers must be attuned to changes in their communities with potential to affect service provision, such as citing a high-hazard industrial facility. In these cases, fire chiefs should provide substantial input on development and zoning proposals, where applicable, to ensure that services keep pace with community demand characteristics. It is also important for the chief officer to be thoroughly familiar with the municipalities' adopted fire codes and flexible with their application, while remaining within the intent of the code, to assist in locating new facilities.

Advocate

Organizing, deploying, and managing fire protection and emergency services resources is only part of the chief officer's job. One of every chief officer's critical roles is being an **advocate** for fire and life safety initiatives to address the community's unique risk profile, **demographics**, and related challenges **FIGURE 1**. Chief officers and other community members do not always appreciate the value of staying extremely involved with the overall life of the community; some chief officers, in fact, pride themselves on being completely removed from politics. A more successful approach is to remain politically savvy, without becoming politically aligned or partisan. Chief officers, like other public administrators, are generally expected to be apolitical technocrats who serve their communities without regard to political affiliation.

FIRE OFFICER IV



FIGURE 1 Fire chiefs are usually the principal subject matter experts and fire protection advocates in their communities.

Administrator

The fire chief's involvement in the business side of the fire department can range from serving as its chief executive officer, responsible for all facets of the department's operations and administration, to the chief operating officer, with primary responsibility for overseeing the fire and emergency services delivery component. An elected or appointed fire commissioner, board of directors, or president may handle the business aspects of running the organization. Regardless of the specific arrangement, community members generally expect the chief officer to be familiar with the administrative aspects of managing their fire department.

Incident Manager

Depending on the size and type of department, its geographical service area, and its organizational structure, some chief officers spend a great deal of time actually responding to emergency incidents. In larger departments, routine daily operations and incident command responsibility are delegated to subordinate officers. When major incidents occur, however, communities often expect the chief fire officer to be present and involved at the emergency scene. In these cases, communities often expect their chief officer to be an employee around the clock.

Fund-Raiser

Many chief officers are also chief fund-raising officers, tasked with overseeing their departments' efforts to raise money for operating expenses and capital investments. These fire departments are essentially organized as **not-for-profit** corporations with a mission to provide fire and other emergency services in their communities. The chief officer's role in managing a department organized in this fashion is much like the president of other community service organizations—identifying donors, conducting fund-raising campaigns, and seeking grants or partnerships. Some departments have very sophisticated fund-raising operations, such as telemarketing, gaming, or special event hosting; others rely heavily on food or beverage sales from pancake breakfasts, fish fries, carnivals, barbecues, and other events. It is the chief officer who must protect the integrity of the organization by ensuring that funds raised are used appropriately. For departments that rely on these types of fund-raising activities, a loss of community trust could be a major mistake.

Spokesperson

Chief officers are usually the primary spokespeople for their departments when communicating with stakeholders throughout their communities. Although this communication may be accomplished through a public

information officer, especially in larger departments, citizens and their elected representatives generally set high expectations for chief officers' visibility and community interaction. Chief officers are often expected to attend meetings of local/department governing bodies, as well as high-profile community events such as public meetings, parades, and festivals **FIGURE 2**.

As the department's spokesperson, a chief officer should be skilled in both the verbal and written forms of communication. Responding to community concerns through the use of letters to the editor or representing the face of calm on the local nightly news during an emergency can assist the chief officer with bringing credibility to both himself or herself and the organization.

Chief officers usually benefit from maintaining, as a representative of their fire department, high visibility in the community. Attending events and meetings also gives direct access to citizens and their elected representatives, allowing the chief officer to identify opportunities, community needs, and potential problems where a proactive response is needed. For instance, a new housing development being built far from the nearest fire station will tax the department's ability to provide service. Under emergency conditions, the presence of a calmly communicating chief officer can help instill public confidence and greatly benefit the overall situation.

One of the best ways to advance the fire service's overall mission of reducing life and property loss, while fulfilling a chief officer's multiple roles and responsibilities, is by planning and implementing community awareness programs that address various hazards. Many fire departments deliver fire prevention and fire and life safety education in schools or educational settings **FIGURE 3**. Others focus on target hazards such as high-rise buildings or high-hazard industrial occupancies. Others perform residential inspections. Communities with a large percentage of older residents may provide fall reduction programs or courtesy smoke alarm checks



FIGURE 2 Chief officers are often expected to attend community events.



FIGURE 3 Fire department members delivering fire and life safety education to schoolchildren.

in conjunction with services such as Meals on Wheels. Child drowning prevention programs are increasingly common in areas with a large number of swimming pools and other water hazards. Encouraging bicycle helmets, pedestrian safety, and the proper use of 911 are also methods of developing awareness about the fire department, while promoting safe behaviors that can meaningfully affect the community's overall fire and life safety profile.

Chief Officer Tip

Community Services

A common challenge facing fire departments is making the community aware of the various services provided by the department and how best to access them. Most people know to call 911 in an emergency, but do they know how to get a smoke alarm battery, courtesy fire inspection, and other nonemergency services? Many fire departments have Web pages that give a great deal of information, and some are using social media to expand their reach into the community. Others rely on flyers, handouts, and similar materials to spread the word about the fire department's role and mission. Regardless of the specific approach, developing and maintaining community awareness is a critical responsibility for all fire officers.

Addressing Complaints

At some point, all chief officers will have to address complaints from community members. The amount of complaint-driven activity is often influenced by how much, or how little, the fire department proactively cultivates positive relationships with its stakeholders. A department that emerges from the fire station only

to answer calls and quickly returns to quarters will not develop the same level of respect in the community as the department that is always visible in a nonemergency mode while attending civic events, mentoring children, and otherwise staying engaged with the community before the alarm sounds.

Before complaints are received, chief officers should be familiar with department policies and procedures for handling them effectively. Every complaint should be taken seriously and followed up in a timely fashion. Although complainants are not always permitted to receive information about every aspect of their complaint's progress (especially in matters where confidential personnel actions are taken), every complainant should receive feedback on the ultimate status and resolution of their complaint.

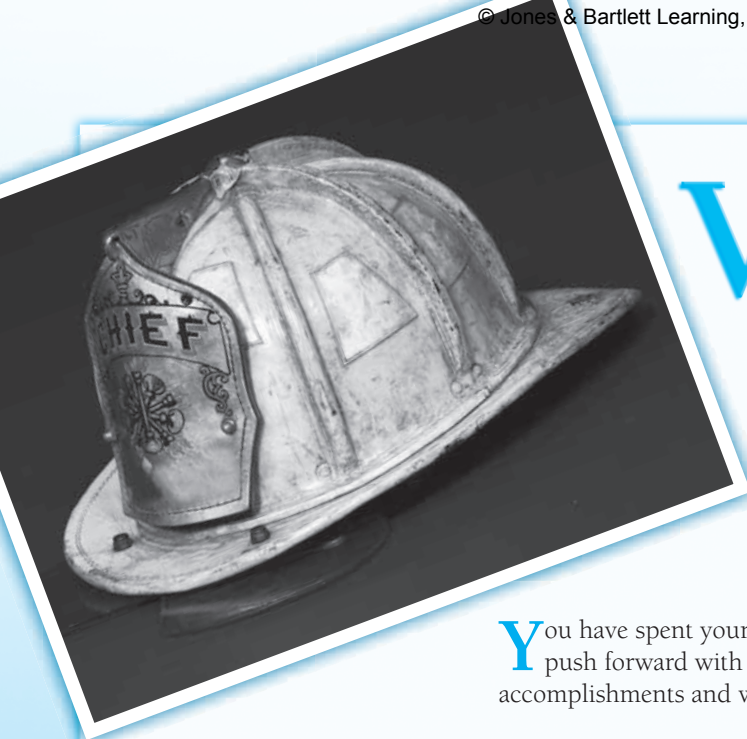
It is also important for the chief officer to keep his or her superiors informed as to the receipt and status of complaints. Matters such as these can become political time bombs; keeping the political leaders in the loop is best accomplished proactively rather than after the fact.

Realistically, not every complaint can be effectively addressed by the fire department, and some complainants are aggressive, rude, hostile, or simply unwilling to accept "case closed" as a final outcome. Keep in mind, however, that the way people are treated while making a complaint is often what they will remember about the fire department for a long time, even more than the final outcome.

Stakeholders

The specific nature of a chief officer's interaction with various community stakeholders depends on the fire department's legal authority, its relationship to its governing jurisdiction(s), and its organizational structure. Beyond these legal and administrative concerns, chief officers must understand the political, economic, and social dynamics of their entire community. Just like the continuous size-up process that occurs during an emergency incident, there are many ways to develop this kind of situational awareness; doing so is absolutely critical for the chief officer's effectiveness and sustainability. Chief officers can get a better picture of their community by combining information from multiple sources. As with size-up, however, there is often no substitute for getting on the ground, face to face, and directly interacting with stakeholders.

Chief officers are expected to understand their local, regional, and state political environment, but it is generally accepted that they should not engage in partisan politics or lobbying within their community. Recognizing the existence and differing (or similar) perspectives of local political groups, however, is vitally important for successfully navigating the broader public policy process. Regardless of the chief officer's personal beliefs,



Voices of Experience

“Our efforts met with resistance and were viewed as a covert attempt by the big four to influence the smaller departments.”

You have spent your career getting to this point. You’ve made it; now what? Do you push forward with reform at the risk of ruffling a few feathers? Or do you rest on your accomplishments and wait for the big retirement check?

Regardless of your intentions and subsequent decisions, your community will undoubtedly be a big influence in the mission of your organization. They will be the eyes and ears of reform and accountability. Your relationship with your community can provide for much-needed support during tough times and, if not managed well, can be an insurmountable source of contempt and, opposition.

Upon my promotion to assistant chief, I was assigned to attend several civic meetings as the liaison to the fire department. Although I had known many of the members of these civic groups for many years, a few were standoffish and distant during the meetings. After several monthly meetings, I approached one of the members who had many years of service and was well respected throughout the county. He was also very active in community outreach and special causes. I asked to speak with him privately about my observations and he obliged.

For the next 30 minutes he explained, as I listened, why he had such an indifference to the fire department. It seemed this discontent stemmed from an incident many years ago that was never reconciled. No one from my department ever reached out to him or his organization. It was a shame that it took nearly 15 years to discover, when a handshake or phone call would have made things so much better. I have to wonder: How many more missed opportunities have we had to make amends of soured relationships with our community partners?

This was the first time anyone from the big city fire department had even talked to him. From that day forward, we developed a very close relationship that generated other reconciliations with other groups.

One such group was the county fire chiefs association. Our county is predominately part-paid and volunteer with four larger combination departments. My department is the only fully paid department. As a chief fire officer, I started attending the monthly chiefs meetings, only to discover an air of indifference toward the chiefs of the four larger fire departments. Two of the more senior chief officers were particularly skeptical of our presence despite the fact we had known them personally for a few years. These two chiefs had been in the fire service for many years and were revered by the other chief officers. Many looked to them for guidance in their decision making.

Our efforts to standardize and regionalize incident management, training, accountability, and mutual aid response met with resistance and were viewed as a covert attempt by the big four (larger departments including mine) to influence the smaller departments. These covert fears had been propagated for years by both sides of the paid-vs.-part-paid mindset. I spoke to members of several departments, including mine, to understand this feud, but no one really knew what caused the animosities. Finally, I sat down with one of the senior chiefs from a volunteer department and he provided the historical background that had created the tension. He readily admitted that both sides had grown apart over petty differences.

Since that day, we have worked harder to develop a stronger working relationship with all county public safety agencies. In the past few years, we have developed a more regional approach to service delivery. We train together more often and have created a more diverse mutual and automatic aid response plan. We promote this cooperative message in our officer training programs and joint training efforts.

Today's chief fire officer must be able to strike a balance in his or her relationship with his or her community. You have a responsibility—a duty—to interact with your community on a level that is informative and educational and one that shows the fire department does much more than extinguish fires.

Chief fire officers who hope to survive scrutiny and budget reductions in the future must look beyond their walls and become more involved in the community. Thinking beyond conventional wisdom and embracing new opportunities are necessary to being a successful public safety steward. There is a need to reach out to community and civic groups, special interest groups, media outlets, and elected officials. You must be aware of and prepared for a broad spectrum of community concerns. It is imperative that the chief officer possess knowledge in a variety of areas and have the ability to communicate that knowledge.

The chief officer must promote safety, service, and survivability among the organization, other departments, and the community. It is a joint effort that requires commitment beyond the standard 8 to 5 workday. Being a good listener and offering an unbiased opinion, professionally and respectfully, must be a part of your skill set. Playing the role of subject matter expert, mediator, mentor, advocate, and consultant involve special skills that requires honesty, integrity, confidentiality, and compassion. The future success of your department depends on your ability to develop a quality community work ethic.

Paul E. Ricci, EFO, CFO
Chief of Department
Sandusky Fire Department
Sandusky, Ohio

it is also essential to remain neutral on political issues, focus on facts, and give everyone a chance to express their opinions and concerns openly. (This does not, however, always extend into the workplace, especially when certain types of speech are involved, for example, hate speech.)

However they are funded and organized, fire departments are almost completely dependent on their local economies for staffing (career, volunteer, or combination), facilities, equipment, and all the other resources necessary to provide the range of services desired by their communities (as expressed during the public policy process). At the same time, local economies heavily depend on fire departments to mitigate the potentially disastrous effects of fires and other emergencies on citizens, businesses, and visitors. Fatalities, injuries, and residential property loss from fires and other incidents, of course, also have negative economic consequences that (directly or indirectly) impact the entire community. Chief officers should understand the interaction among their local economy, [municipal](#) government(s), fire department, and those they serve. Chambers of commerce, economic development authorities, business and trade groups, and convention/visitor associations are key community stakeholders with different and important perspectives on the local economy.

Since its inception in the American colonies, the local fire service has been an essential thread in the social fabric of communities from coast to coast. Chief officers in departments large and small must seek to maintain this social connection as the United States undergoes major demographic shifts affecting the nation's entire population. Obtaining and continually analyzing local demographics is the first step. Demographic data for communities nationwide are available from the U.S. Census Bureau, state and county agencies, regional planning entities, academic institutions, and many other organizations.

Keeping up with demographic changes is essential for effective decision making about resource deployment, fire station location, mission definition, and almost every other aspect of managing a fire department. The continued advancement of [geographical information system](#) technology has made sophisticated modeling and mapping tools available to fire departments at relatively low cost.

Data and quantitative analysis aren't the only ways to understand the social character of the community—far from it. Just as important, if not more so, is the qualitative information that comes from regular social interaction with community stakeholders. A chief officer who sits in his or her office analyzing charts and statistical information about the community will have just as many shortcomings as a chief officer who spends all his or her time attending community meetings and events without regard for quantitative analysis. In fact, one of the principal challenges facing any chief officer is maintaining

an appropriate balance among the technical, political, economic, and social facets of the job; doing so requires a great deal of time and effort, as well as recognizing key stakeholders throughout the community.

■ Citizens

Generally speaking, the ultimate authority for a public (also known as “municipal”) fire department rests with the citizens/residents who provide its operating budget through tax payments and other funding mechanisms. This relationship among the chief officer, fire department, elected officials, and citizens is illustrated in

FIGURE 4

Citizens can influence their fire departments in a variety of ways—through interaction with the local government administration, by voting in referenda on tax rates and bond issues, and in the political process. There are some forms of local government in which individual citizens are directly involved with overseeing fire protection policy and operations; in most cases, however, they participate in the policy process through elected representatives serving on local governing bodies.

In addition to the ballot box, citizens also cast their approval of their local fire service through their own involvement. In many small- and medium-sized communities with volunteer or part-time fire fighters, the department's relationship with its citizens can directly affect its ability to recruit its next members.

■ Customers

The influence of the movement to reinvent government, which started in the 1980s, caused public agencies at all levels, including fire departments, to focus attention on customer service by applying strategies and tactics from the business world. These strategies helped improve the delivery of services geared to solve specific technical problems, such as structure fires, fire code violations, and emergency medical incidents. Fire departments and other agencies have launched efforts to measure customer satisfaction with their services and identify areas where improvement is needed [FIGURE 5](#).

There is no question that providing service with a smile is always a good idea, especially when fire departments are involved in helping people through their worst days. Customers will often remember how they were treated, much more than the specifics of what was or wasn't done for them. Consistently demonstrating a caring attitude, while providing excellent technical service, is perhaps the best way to build a positive rapport with the community. Fire departments that fail to provide this combination are often subjected to intense public scrutiny and are rarely considered successful in achieving their mission.

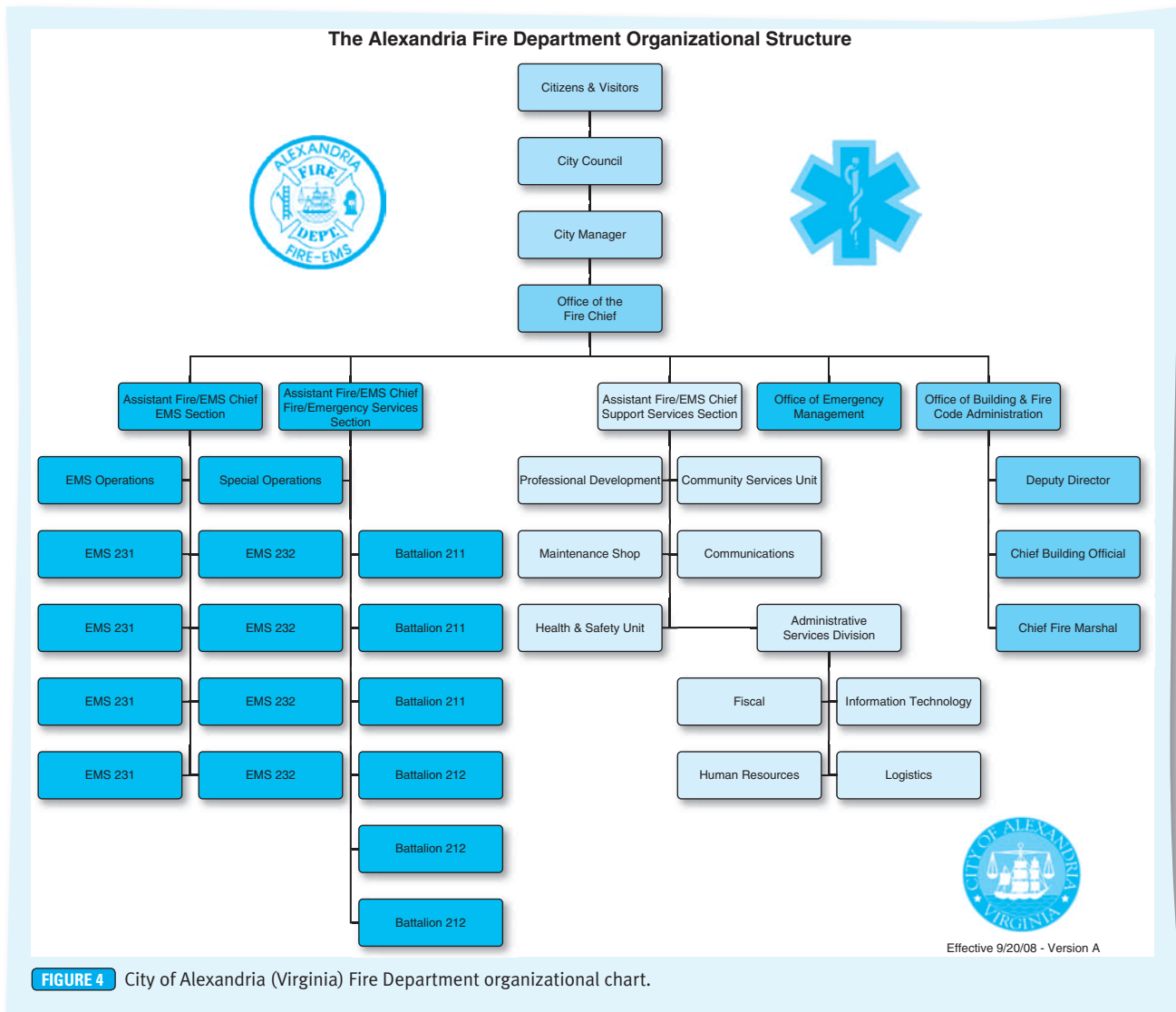


FIGURE 4 City of Alexandria (Virginia) Fire Department organizational chart.

Fire Marks

Rural-Metro Corporation

There are a number of privately owned and operated fire departments in the United States. Customers of these organizations often purchase subscriptions and are customers in the true sense of the word. Perhaps the most recognizable of these departments is the Rural-Metro Corporation, which provides fire protection in 25 U.S. communities.

As a public corporation listed on the NASDAQ stock exchange, Rural-Metro is primarily accountable to its investors, stockholders, and those who contract or subscribe to receive its services. In those communities served by Rural-Metro, however, fire officers generally fill the same roles as their municipal counterparts.

Governing Bodies


The relationship between chief officers and local governing bodies such as boards, councils, and commissions can vary widely. Some chief fire officers, especially those working in fire districts (or authorities) with independent taxing (levy) authority, report to a board of directors elected from members of the community at large. In other forms of municipal government, the chief officer may be appointed or confirmed by a city/county council, board of supervisors/aldermen, or other group of elected officials. An independent, not-for-profit, volunteer fire company will often have its own board of directors, elected by the membership.

Regardless of the specific reporting arrangement, chief officers frequently interact with a range of governing bodies that set overall policy goals, identify funding levels, and generally determine the fire department's ability to provide a given level of service.

Executives

Many chief officers are appointed by and serve at the pleasure of the local government's chief executive/administrative officer. In a strong mayor form of government, chief fire officers often report directly to an elected mayor who functions as the jurisdiction's chief executive officer. In the council-manager form of local government, the chief officer works for a city/county manager who is appointed by the local governing body (council, board, or commission).

Some fire departments have both a politically appointed commissioner and a chief fire officer selected through civil service or appointed from within the department's ranks. In these cases, the roles and responsibilities described in this chapter are usually shared between the fire commissioner and chief fire officer, with the commissioner generally responsible for overall administration and the chief officer directing daily management and operations.



Hampton Fire & Rescue

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Hampton, VA 23669
Phone: 757-727-6580
Fax: 757-727-6094

Fire Department Customer Service Survey

Welcome!

Hampton Fire & Rescue takes great pride in the service we provide to you and the community. We are constantly seeking ways to improve service to our customers. To assist us, we ask that you evaluate our level of service by completing this survey.

We thank you for the opportunity to assist you. As your fire department, we are always here for you!

Please tell us the following:

Date of Service: MM / DD / YYYY
 / /

Reason for Visit:

- Fire
- Emergency Medical Services
- Investigation
- Inspection
- Public Education
- Home Safety Survey/Smoke Detector Installation
- Other (please specify)

Name of representative(s) that assisted you:

Please rate each of the following:

	1 - Outstanding	2 - Good	3 - Fair	4 - Poor
Positive attitude:	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Appearance:	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Representative was courteous:	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Resolved issues:	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overall satisfaction:	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>

Please provide any additional comments / suggestions:

(Optional Information)

Name:

Address:

ZIP Code:

Email Address:

Phone Number:

FIGURE 5 Fire department customer experience questionnaire.

Civic/Community Associations

Local civic/community associations and philanthropic groups are often powerful stakeholders in the community. Civic associations can be organized around a particular geographic area but may also represent groups of citizens with common or charitable interests. Chief officers who proactively cultivate relationships with civic and community associations often benefit from their members' support for the fire department's mission **FIGURE 6**. As partners in prevention, civic associations can also be advocates for community risk reduction, both before and after a fire.

Homeowners Associations

Like some civic associations, homeowners associations and community associations usually represent a given geographic area. These associations often interact with their local fire departments around issues such as community covenants and restrictions, fire code requirements, code enforcement matters, and resource deployment. Some homeowners contract with private providers or neighboring communities for fire protection and EMS; others have even formed their own fire departments.

Special Interest Groups

There is almost no limit to the variety of special interest groups that can form in a community. Beyond those mentioned previously in this chapter, these include taxpayers' alliances, government oversight (watchdog) groups, environmental protection organizations, issue-based advisory councils, faith- and ethnic-based organizations, and labor unions or associations.

Other Departments and Agencies

Depending on their governance and organizational structures, fire departments have a number of essential partners in other departments and agencies, at



FIGURE 6 Fire departments can host events for civic groups at fire stations to help maintain connections with the community.

Fire Marks

Department Proximity to Neighbors

It is hard to imagine a closer partnership than a fire station with the neighbors directly overhead. That's exactly the situation in Alexandria, Virginia, where the Alexandria Fire Department is the largest condominium owner in a purpose-built, mixed-use building that also incorporates 64 residential units and a 1,400-ft² (130-m²) retail storefront. The building is run by a public-private corporation. The Alexandria Fire Department owns the largest condominium, the four-bay fire station on the ground floor, and co chairs the condominium association. A professional management firm is retained to oversee all aspects of the building's operation and maintenance.

This collaboration among the City of Alexandria, Potomac Yard Development, LLC, and Alexandria Housing Development Corporation has been a great benefit to the community. The development maximizes space, incorporates green building design, and offers affordable housing close to shopping, amenities, and public transportation.

multiple levels of government. Cultivating positive working relationships with these important partners is a responsibility for all fire officers. Rarely is a major incident handled by a single agency; most require a high degree of collaboration and coordination to achieve a successful conclusion **FIGURE 7**. Chief officers must set a positive tone for working with partner departments and must maintain regular, close contact with their peer agency heads, not just on the emergency scene.



FIGURE 7 Fire departments often interact with partner agencies, especially emergency management, law enforcement, building code agencies, public works, and neighboring fire departments.

Not-for-Profit Groups

Local not-for-profit groups such as the American Red Cross, Rotary Club, Salvation Army, Jaycees, Citizen Corps Council, and many other service-based organizations are often key community stakeholders. Fire officers can often partner with these organizations to accomplish things in the community that otherwise would not be possible. Many chief officers also participate in these groups as members or hold positions on their governance boards.

Networking

There are few truly novel challenges facing fire departments today. Networking is often the best way to identify potential solutions for problems that other departments have already successfully addressed. Regardless of their specific organizational positions, roles, and responsibilities, all chief officers benefit from professional networking within their local, regional, state, and national communities of practice. A chief officer who eschews participating in his or her regional and state chiefs' associations or committees risks becoming ill-informed or isolated when issues of mutual concern arise. Similarly, a chief officer who participates in developing state/national codes and standards can help influence best practices and, at a minimum, understand contemporary trends and issues.

Experienced chief officers know the value of providing subordinate officers with opportunities to interact with their counterparts in local partner agencies and organizations. Examples include the following:

- Attending police roll-call training
- Riding along with public works employees
- Conducting joint plan reviews with planning department officials
- Working through shared problems in emergency management exercises and real-world events

- Providing first aid, CPR, or other types of safety training to other municipal employees
- Holding regular informational sessions between organizations
- Holding regular training with other nontraditional organizations

The value of chief officers' local networking extends to attending civic association meetings and other stakeholder events (such as sporting contests, parades, block parties, and potluck dinners). It is rarely possible for a chief officer to personally attend everything that happens in even a small community. Some fire departments assign company or chief officers to work regularly with specific groups; these officers are an integral part of the community's conduit to the department.

Whether such arrangements are formal or informal, they are vitally important. At the scene of an incident or when dealing with a fast-moving public policy issue is not the best time or place to exchange business cards and start establishing a collegial working relationship. Furthermore, it is sometimes true that things the fire chief cannot accomplish at the upper levels of the organization can be swiftly handled by mid-level chiefs or company officers working with their colleagues in other agencies, departments, or stakeholder groups.

Conclusion

No matter a fire department's size and type, nor the area and population it serves, all chief officers are expected to play a number of important roles in their communities. Obviously, not all chief officers will be hands-on in every aspect of fire department command, operations, planning, logistics, and administration. It is critical to recognize, however, that a chief officer will always be held responsible by the community for ensuring every aspect of the department's mission is properly addressed.

You Are the Chief Officer: Summary

1. Is there a pattern emerging in these communications?

It is probably not a coincidence that you received communications, in close succession, from a civic association president, land-use attorney, and elected official all asking about the same neighborhood. Being able to anticipate and recognize such patterns in stakeholder communication with the fire department is an important skill. Depending on your department's organizational structure and reporting relationships, you might also need to give your board president, city/county manager, or mayor a heads-up on this developing situation. It may also be helpful to reach out to your jurisdiction's planning, zoning, and building officials to let them know you're getting calls and to identify any areas of mutual interest or concern, as well as get any additional background information.

2. What is the chief officer's role in the interaction among these community stakeholders?

The ability to recognize connections between stakeholder interests is critical for chief officers. Your role in this case is not to choose sides, but rather to answer each individual's questions with factual, complete, and accurate information. If there is a question you can't answer personally, direct the inquiry to the appropriate agency, department, or person.

Public administrators—including fire chiefs—can often add value to the broader public policy process by

helping facilitate a rational dialogue among stakeholder groups with mutual, or competing, interests. If you choose to act in this role, know the limits of your skill and authority; community meetings about land-use matters can become contentious, and it is critical to be ready for anything.

3. Are you still going to attend the Tuesday night civic association meeting and give your stock presentation about the fire department?

You should certainly attend the community meeting and deliver the generic fire department presentation requested by the civic association. Be prepared, however, for more specific questions from the audience and other interested participants. Do your homework beforehand by thinking about the various stakeholders' perspectives and trying to anticipate their questions. Become familiar with the technical aspects of the various proposals, your community's master plan, and any fire department-specific requirements.

Make sure you understand the scope of your authority to speak about matters under the purview of another agency or department; have complete contact information available to give participants for other officials you think might need to become involved. It is generally helpful to bring subject matter experts along to such meetings in case specific questions arise for which you need technical staff advice.

Wrap-Up

Chief Concepts

- A chief officer's specific community roles and responsibilities vary based on the type of department, its legal authority, its organizational structure, and the local political environment.
- Chief fire officers are generally expected to be the principal fire protection subject matter experts for policy makers, elected officials, local government administrators, and citizens throughout their communities.
- Chief fire officers are expected to provide proposals for enhancing their department's ability to address community hazards.
- A successful approach to advocacy is to remain politically savvy without becoming politically aligned or partisan.
- Chief officers are usually the primary spokespeople for their departments when communicating with stakeholders throughout their communities.
- The amount of complaint-driven activity is often influenced by how much, or how little, the fire department proactively cultivates positive relationships with its stakeholders.
- Chief officers must understand the political, economic, and social dynamics of their entire community.
- Networking is often the best way to identify potential solutions for problems that other departments have already successfully addressed.

Hot Terms

Advocate Vocal supporter of a cause.

Community A group of people linked together by geographical proximity and/or a set of common interests.

Demographics The characteristics of the human population within a given community; for example, age, educational level, or household income.

Geographical information system Equipment that analyzes and displays relationships between statistical data and geography.

Municipal Describes something belonging to a unit of local government, including a city, county, town, township, district, authority, etc.

Not-for-profit An organization that measures its success in outcomes that are not reflected in bottom-line economic profits.

Stakeholder An organization, group, or individual who can influence or be affected by the actions of another organization.

Walk the Talk

1. At the sixth anniversary of the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), a local elected official proposes that the emergency medical technician (EMT) certified CERT members be allowed to cover fire fighter positions that are vacant due to medical leave. The department has not had volunteer fire department members since they were legislated out of the city in 1889.

Budget restrictions eliminate overtime to cover those who are on medical leave, requiring fire companies to respond short staffed. Each day, 5 to 9 of the 11 engine companies are responding with one unstaffed position. What would be your response?
2. The text recommends chief officers to be “politically savvy without becoming politically aligned or partisan.” Who determines when an agency head is perceived as partisan?
3. The impact of the Great Recession is that chief officer advocacy may pit the fire department against other municipal organizations. Consider a budget consideration where the city can either maintain staffing for three fire companies or keep the Social Services office open. It is the fifth year of municipal budget declines. If the Social Services office is eliminated, hundreds of mainstreamed mental health patients will generate additional 911 calls, most of them handled by the fire department. What will be your approach when meeting with the city leadership?
4. An international corporation has selected your community for an industrial processing facility. To win this decision, the mayor waived property tax payments for the first decade. The chief officer identified significant hazardous material risks within the facility. The workload generated by this facility will require creation of a dedicated special hazards company with extensive specialized training. The mayor says there is no money for new personnel, training, or specialized equipment. How can the chief officer engage the community to improve the department's ability to protect the industrial processing facility?
5. Geographic information and demographic data can describe and analyze the community down to a house-by-house level. Predominately used to determine emergency service workload, how can a chief officer use this process to improve effectiveness in promoting the fire department mission to community decision makers?

Chief Officer *in Action*



Like many municipal governments, your city is experiencing very tight fiscal times. Development has slowed and tax revenues are substantially reduced while citizens demand further cuts and struggle to make ends meet. While the elected officials and city management are sympathetic to your concerns about reducing the fire prevention budget, you are forced to eliminate overtime for night/weekend inspections of vulnerable occupancies such as nightclubs, restaurants, and other places of public assembly.

As you consider your options for providing this essential service, you think about how you might engage stakeholders in protecting their community. A week after the budget is adopted, you invite several groups to attend an open public meeting about how the fire department's service level will change due to the overtime cuts, including the chamber of commerce, small business association, Rotary club, Jaycees, police department, fire fighters' union, and several others.

After framing the situation and inviting participants' ideas, several groups step forward to partner with the fire department to create a voluntary inspection program informed by subject matter experts from the fire prevention bureau. The police chief offers the opportunity for fire department instructors to deliver roll-call training, enabling officers to spot the top ten most frequent violations while on routine patrol. Suspected violations will be referred to the fire department for follow-up the next business day, or sooner if the severity warrants immediate action. Recognizing the importance of proactive fire prevention inspections for helping to keep fire fighters safe, the fire fighters' union suggests training and certifying some of its members as fire inspectors so they can address complaints/violations while working night and weekend shifts.

1. Which of the following is not among the fire officer's roles and responsibilities?
 - A. Advocate
 - B. Spokesperson
 - C. Lobbyist
 - D. Subject matter expert
2. The daily authority to address certain fire department roles may be delegated to multiple fire officers, but ultimate responsibility for the fire department's administration and management rests with:
 - A. the captains.
 - B. the contractors.
 - C. the fire chief.
 - D. nobody; it's shared among various stakeholders.
3. Customer service is not important for municipal fire departments because they are government agencies.
 - A. True
 - B. False
4. Which of the following is not a key stakeholder in a local fire department?
 - A. Civic association
 - B. Chamber of commerce
 - C. State fire chiefs association
 - D. Police department