

CHAPTER EIGHT

Public Safety

Within the context of municipal administration, “public safety” usually includes the functions of police, fire, emergency medical services (EMS), and civil defense. Police and fire usually are two separate departments in Texas cities. Many cities have assumed the responsibility for direct delivery on EMS in recent years, and that service has frequently been assigned to the fire department, whether paid or volunteer. Responsibility for civil defense varies widely.

Public safety functions involve the same basic managerial skills and techniques required by any other municipal activity. However, as with most other municipal functions, public safety activities are characterized by certain traditions and unique problems that require each to be examined separately.

In some respects, public safety is the most important function of the city. Each public safety activity has a direct and immediate relation to the protection of life and property. Consequently, all major public safety operations must be provided efficiently and effectively from day to day, and also make appropriate adjustments to respond during periods of crisis.

Since public safety activities usually consume a larger portion of the operating budget than any other phase of city government, it is appropriate that they receive special attention.

Differences Between Fire and Police Services

Many local officials tend to view their fire and police departments jointly, even when the two are completely separate. Though there are numerous similarities between the two, and though tradition suggests that both be considered the same for administrative purposes, there are at least two fundamental differences in their tasks.

First, the situations that typically face firefighters and police officers are basically different. In the case of the police department, the officer’s primary mission is to maintain order and protect life and property in the community, using state and local laws as his/her tools. The police officer is constantly interacting with people, and the people he deals with are frequently under considerable stress. His “business” requires a high level of person-to-person skills.

On the other hand, the firefighter’s basic mission is to protect life and property by quickly and expertly controlling and extinguishing fires and, to the extent feasible, preventing their occurrence. Sophisticated fire fighting equipment, coupled with growing varieties of new building materials, requires the municipal firefighter to be a highly skilled craftsman and technician. However, insofar as the basic fire fighting function is concerned, it is not necessary for most firefighters to be skilled in dealing with members of the general public.

The organizational function of firefighters and police officers also differs, especially at the lowest, or “street” level. Under most circumstances, the police officer is required to make critical decisions without having an opportunity to consult with his/her supervisor.

In other words, a police unit (a one- or two-man patrol car, or a detective) is required to make independent decisions.

Conversely, the basic fire fighting unit works as a team. When a fire truck reaches the scene of a fire, an officer and a two-to-five man crew usually arrive together as a single unit under the supervision of a superior officer who is physically present. Thus the fire fighting decision-making process is inherently different from that which characterizes the operation of the police unit, and must be evaluated on an entirely different basis.

State Police-Fire Civil Service Law.

Cities over 10,000 population operate under the provisions of *Texas Local Government Code* Chapter 143, formerly Article 1269m, V.T.C.S., the state Firefighters' and Police Officers' Civil Service Law. This statute is lengthy and detailed, and governs virtually all fire and police personnel practices in cities which have adopted the law. Chapter 143 is a "local option" law, which must be adopted at a referendum election call on the question.

The fire and police civil service law was enacted by the Texas Legislature in 1947 because of the abusive personnel practices of certain cities in the 1930s and 1940s. Every city should take extreme care that its personnel policies and practices are fair, reasonable, and just. Implementation of progressive personnel practices is the best way to prevent the demand for a formal civil service system or outside representation by unions.

The Police Function

There are various ways to describe the primary mission of the police department. The protection of life and property, enforcement of laws, and prevention of crime are the terms, that generally describe this function. These terms describe the police process as one, that includes the detection of crime and the apprehension of persons who violate ordinances and criminal laws.

In view of these common beliefs, it is not unusual that many surveys indicate that the average "line" police officer spends only about 15% of his/her time performing basic law-and-order functions. Most of the officer's time is spent on public service and regulatory duties. The public service and regulatory duties generally include such routine activities as traffic control, responding to calls involving family disturbances, prying crash victims out of wrecked cars, picking up runaway juveniles, and a similar and fantastically diverse array of other situations which the police officer is called upon to handle every day. Most of these duties are performed by police officers because no other public agency is readily available to perform the service. Another big drain on a police officer's time is the required completion of reports following most every action performed by the officer, though some departments have streamlined the reporting by use of tape recorders, civilian assistance, etc.

In performing its primary and secondary missions, the police department usually is subdivided by line, auxiliary, and staff functions. Police departments in smaller cities usually do not have special sections to handle each of the functions described below; however, all are performed by virtually every department, regardless of size, even though one person may perform two or more different functions by himself or herself.

“Line” functions ordinarily describe the primary mission of the police department, such as patrol work and criminal investigation. “Auxiliary” describes operations, which directly assist line personnel in the performance of their daily work, such as communications (dispatching), records, jail maintenance, and criminal intelligence. In larger departments, a crime laboratory frequently is included as an auxiliary function. The third classification, “staff,” is used to describe activities which generally support the line officer in an indirect manner. These include in-service training, personnel selection and recruitment, planning, research, and vehicle maintenance.

Police Organization

Origins

It is generally acknowledged that the military patterns of contemporary police organizations were copied from the world’s first police department, which was established in London, England, in 1829. At that time, London was faced with a staggering crime problem created by roving bands of robbers who operated freely across the city. The department was organized to do battle, in military formation, with these bands and seek control of the streets and sidewalks of London.

In that context, military organizational principles not only made sense, but probably were necessary to accomplish the task. Later, as cities in the United States began to develop formalized police services, the London model was extensively copied to the point that it is now used by virtually every municipal police department in the nation. Most departments utilize a military-like structure, subdivided into ranks (sergeant, lieutenant, captain, etc.) according to military patterns. Moreover, most police services adopt insignia and other characteristics of military organizations.

Military trappings have a significant effect on police administration. The heavy emphasis on power of command, maintenance of discipline through punishment, unity of authority, and relative inflexible chains of command, are military concepts that are deeply embedded in the police tradition. Except for major emergencies, when a police department operates as a single unit, there is no compelling administrative reason why police departments must follow the military structure or tradition. In fact, as stated earlier, “front line” police action usually is carried out by one or two officers with no supervisor present, rather than by the entire department operating at the same time toward one single objective.

Whether a municipal official agrees or disagrees with the military character typical of most police departments, he or she must face the fact that it does exist and that it has a definite impact on the manner in which police departments function.

Line Functions

Patrol is the police organization’s most basic function. The patrol unit deals with the widest variety of demands for police services. Since members of this unit almost always are in uniform and drive clearly-marked vehicles, it is this element which is the most visible to the general public and establishes the police “presence” in a community.

Although some departments have a number of specialized units, the only reason for having sections other than those assigned to patrol in a police department occurs when

the patrol officer, by the very nature of his job, cannot effectively perform a certain task by himself or herself. (A special vice or narcotics unit may be needed, for example, because a patrol officer cannot move unnoticed in the community or it is not possible for the patrol officer to concentrate on one or two major cases to the exclusion of other police service requirements.) As a general matter, though, most police authorities recommend against the organization of specialized units in departments of less than 50 employees unless some unusual condition requires it.

One of the most unpleasant surprises to newly elected city officials is the extraordinary expense of maintaining a 24-hour police service. Many municipal officials operate businesses, that are open to the public for eight hours a day, five days a week. This means the average businessperson is accustomed to thinking in terms of manning one post with one person, and providing vacation relief for two weeks during the summer. On the other hand, just adding one police patrol officer for continuous duty seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, means the equivalent of hiring four additional police officers, when days off, court duty, vacation, holidays, and sick schedules are considered.

Traffic Control is another line function performed by police officers. Traffic control involves the enforcement of state and local traffic laws, ordinances, and the investigation of accidents. Most smaller departments do not have a separate traffic section, so the patrol section enforces the traffic laws and investigates accidents as part of its normal duties.

Although it is true that accident investigation can become a specialty with respect to certain kinds of traffic accidents, there is little reason in most smaller cities for not assigning all traffic and accident duties to patrol units.

It should be noted that municipal police departments are authorized by state law to investigate any and all traffic accidents. However, contrary to popular belief, state law only requires the investigation of accidents which result in death or personal injury. It is left to local policy to decide whether or not the police will investigate property damage-only accidents. Although policies vary from one city to another, police departments in many of the larger cities have been moving away from investigation of property damage-only accidents occurring on public streets, but most smaller cities still conduct these investigations. Most cities will not deploy police personnel to investigate accidents that occur on private property. While state law does not require property damage-only accidents to be investigated, the law does require that a report of any accident investigated by an officer be forwarded to the Texas Department of Public Safety.

Criminal investigation (detective work) is another common line function, and most smaller departments have at least a few officers who have some experience and more or less specialize in this line of work. A separate criminal investigation unit is justified when a significant number of crimes in the community are of such a nature that patrol officers who respond to the initial call for service are usually unable to solve the crime or apprehend a suspect at the scene. A "detective" is often an officer who is released from general patrol duty for the purpose of following up on the patrol officer's preliminary investigation and hopefully making an arrest at some later time.

Time allotment is the determining factor in whether the city maintains a separate criminal investigation unit. If the city does not have a sufficient number of patrol officers to

permit it to take one or two out of service to investigate unsolved crimes, a separate criminal investigation unit usually is not justified. Should the city not have qualified investigative staff, it should, by either a formal or informal agreement, have a relationship with either a nearby larger city, the county sheriff's department, or the Department of Public Safety, that will enable the city to draw from the more experienced agency help with investigation or other detective type work.

Specialized vice control units are not commonplace in smaller cities. Vice control usually refers to the investigation of so-called "victimless crimes." These are crimes in which the participants are more or less willing parties, and there is no "victim" likely to report the crime. Unlawful gambling and prostitution are examples of such crimes. Obviously, the control of such activities involves the application of techniques different from those utilized in the control of other criminal offenses (e.g., burglary or robbery) the victim readily reports.

Juvenile crime is primarily a county and state responsibility, and the role of city government is not well defined. What is known, however, is that police officers spend a great deal of time dealing with juveniles. Of primary concern is the spread of juvenile gangs across the country. Originally presumed to be just a large city problem, it is now recognized that gang activity is spreading to the smaller cities.

Auxiliary Functions

All police departments maintain auxiliary operations and have certain units or personnel assigned exclusively to them. A number of these functions are listed below:

1. ***Communications.*** Quick and effective communications are the heart of every police department. The statewide adoption of the 911 system has made enormous improvements to most small city police communications. However, we now hear some personnel in some of the larger units clamoring for their own communication systems. The most often heard complaint is that the 911 dispatchers are not familiar with their *particular needs*.
2. ***Record maintenance.*** This job is usually performed by non-uniformed clerical personnel whose primary job is that of record keeping. Although a part of the police department, they ordinarily have no additional duties.
3. ***Jail Personnel.*** Although many cities maintain a jail for the temporary detention of prisoners, some smaller cities do not have a jail. They have found it more advantageous to develop a working agreement with another city or with the county to use its facilities. Maintenance of a jail is expensive, both in terms of dollars and in terms of the personnel needed to oversee its operation. While Texas cities are not regulated by the Texas Jail Standards Commission, each city that operates a jail or even a temporary holding facility needs to be aware of the necessity of appropriate facilities for detaining prisoners, even for a short period of time. The criminal justice system in Texas is such that it has become rare for detained persons to be confined in a municipal jail for any extended period of time. Therefore, if local conditions are conducive to an agreement with another governmental unit, the city might be advised to use their facilities whenever practical.
4. ***Criminal Intelligence.*** The criminal intelligence unit monitors the movements of criminals operating within the community. Ideally, the unit does not become directly

involved in line police work, but rather is an information gathering team which turns relevant information over to the appropriate line officers. As stated earlier, most small departments do not maintain separate intelligence specialists, preferring instead to leave these functions in the hands of another unit.

It is generally unnecessary, and may be wasteful, for small departments to assign personnel solely to vice or intelligence work. However, a smaller city in close proximity to a major metropolitan area might well require vice and/or intelligence specialists. Many professional criminals frequently operate out of smaller suburbs adjacent to the central city, with the knowledge that the smaller department is not likely to have the kind of sophisticated vice and intelligence units necessary to detect and monitor their presence.

5. *Crime laboratory.* The Texas Department of Public Safety makes its crime laboratory facilities available to local police departments. One possible drawback is that the demand for the services of the DPS, particularly in drug-related cases, is so great that the time required to process laboratory reports might present a chronic problem. If the city is near a metropolitan area that has a fully equipped crime laboratory, it may be possible to arrange an interlocal agreement under which the services of the lab can be purchased.

Staff Functions

Staff support functions in small police departments are usually combined. One civilian or uniformed officer often will handle personnel, purchasing, and supply matters. Budgeting is usually handled by the chief. Planning and research are also most often handled by the chief, although the chief may have an officer particularly suited for these responsibilities who is performing other functions also.

Recruitment, Training, and Certification of Police Officers

Recruitment

The Texas Commission of Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education (TCLEOSE) has established minimum requirements for law enforcement officers within the state, and every person serving in a law enforcement capacity must be certified as meeting the state requirements. Smaller Texas cities often recruit police officers who have already been certified by TCLEOSE, but they really need to check references very closely. It is not entirely unusual that an officer will have served another city, but because of problems in that city has been allowed to resign the position with the record indicating the officer resigned in good standing. We refer you to the Personnel Chapter of this publication relating to recruiting, reference, and background checks. Police officers are among the most visible and vulnerable employees of a city, and recruitment and checking on individuals for police service is very critical and must be handled with caution.

Training

TCLEOSE requires 320 hours of basic instruction in law enforcement as a condition for certification. Additionally, the Commission requires police officers to complete 40 hours of in-service training every two years. Training is offered in regional council of governments' law enforcement training academies and in junior colleges and universities across the state. Administrators should contact their council of governments for information regarding the location of the nearest training academy.

Police officers in small towns are sometimes deficient in in-service training, and it is often difficult for the officers to keep proficient and up-to-date on developments in police work. It is most important to take advantage of opportunities offered by the councils of governments, the Texas Department of Public Safety, and the various schools of higher learning. Smaller cities should also be alert to opportunities that may be available through working with the departments of larger cities in the area.

Certification

Basic certification allows a peace officer to serve in any city unless that city has adopted higher training standards and does not recognize the basic course as fully satisfying their particular demands. TCLEOSE also has available higher levels of certification, including intermediate and advanced law enforcement certificates. Completion of requirements for these higher level certificates in some cities will entitle an officer to be paid more than officers holding only the basic certificates.

Financing Police Operations

Although most local police activities are usually supported by general revenue funds, there are still some cities that rely heavily on revenue from the municipal court to finance their departments. This practice is almost universally condemned by authorities who say that it contravenes the basic American concepts of fairness and justice, and is degrading to both the law enforcement and judicial professions. To counter this tendency, the Texas State Legislature has established maximum percentages of the city's general funds that a city may keep of its revenue from traffic fines.

Still the temptation to finance the police department from fine income is sometimes made even more difficult by the police officers themselves. It is not uncommon to find a request for a police pay raise or an expansion of the police department backed by police officers using as one of their primary arguments the fact that municipal court revenues are an important source of income for the city. Administrators need to be very aware of the municipal court revenue, particularly that portion from police activities, as very often when complaints of lax enforcement of the traffic ordinances begin to rise, it will be accompanied by a drop in municipal court revenue. Administrators must always remember that *the purpose of the fine is not to raise revenue, but to reduce the temptation to violate the law.*

The State of Texas maintains a program of requiring a portion of court revenue to be forwarded to the State where it is used to fund a portion of the State Criminal Justice System. Part of these funds is returned back to the local governments through the Criminal Justice Planning system of the councils of governments. Cities need to work

closely with the council of governments and the criminal justice planners to take full advantage of opportunities of this funding possibility.

The federal government also, from time to time, makes funds available to address local crime problems. Cities that need help in addressing various crime problems are encouraged to study these programs carefully. Often these special programs are excellent for giving a shot in the arm for specific problems, but some of these programs are of limited tenure and may require the local government to commit to continue the program after the federal funds have played out.

Key Issues in Law Enforcement

Three key factors for success stand out above all others when looking at the police function in a smaller city. *First*, the importance of positive police-citizen contact should be stressed. In a small town where police officers are so visible to the downtown merchants, the housewife, and virtually all others, positive police-citizen contact is essential. Often the individual officers will be known on a first-name basis by most of the community. The best way to foster good community relationships is by doing a professional job and dealing openly with all of the citizenry.

Second, police must cooperate with others to get the job done. The county sheriff's office, the district/county attorney, the Texas Department of Public Safety, the Alcoholic Beverage Commission agents, and any other law enforcement personnel are all important to the officer and to the city police department to help it do a professional job.

Finally, we have mentioned good personnel practices by the city. The city must have good personnel policies and procedures and ensure that these are practiced from the top to the bottom of the organization. Equitable and "just" pay is essential to the police feeling a part of the city team.

Assessing the Police Department

How does an administrator evaluate the police department? This is a very difficult question, but there are general guidelines that can be followed, including the nine factors listed below. The weights given to each factor will have to be determined by the administrator, since particular ones will be of greater or lesser importance depending upon the city.

- **Corruption.** Nothing destroys a police department like the revelation that police employees are engaged in kickbacks, bribery, or other illegal acts to gain additional compensation, avoid work, or gain special favors. The administrator should normally look to the police chief to weed out corruption, but if he/she suspects the chief might be involved, he or she may have to go to the Texas Department of Public Safety or to the Federal Bureau of Investigation for help
- **Due Process.** The courts have addressed the subject of due process frequently in the past few years. The question remains: do officers use laws selectively in order to meet their own needs, or do they have a high respect for the rules of law and special procedures they must follow?
- **Policies.** A fundamental ingredient of organizational competence is the existence of written policies and procedures. While small towns may have difficulty in

committing time and effort to writing policies and procedures, this is a must. The administrator should require the chief to write down the key policies of the department to eliminate favoritism and ensure even-handed treatment of all citizens. Each officer must acknowledge that he or she fully understands the policies and procedures, and practices what is expected.

- **Discipline.** The State Firemen's and Policemen's Civil Service Act spells out disciplinary procedures very specifically. It also limits the police chief's discretion and management's ability to deal with disciplinary problems. Small cities that do not operate under the civil service law should utilize their freedom to develop clear and reasonable disciplinary regulations that protect police personnel, while giving the chief authority to deal firmly with disciplinary problems.
- **Tradition.** Police organizations have a tendency to be burdened by traditions, which makes it difficult to bring about change. On the other hand, many of these traditions are very important in maintaining morale and esprit-de-corps in the organization. In a sound organization, tradition is understood and appreciated, but is not followed blindly. In organizations with weak leadership at the top, tradition may be substituted for the direction and purpose the organization lacks.
- **Professionalism.** The ideal view of professionalism is individual responsibility and the ability to carry out basic roles. The city administrator must encourage professionalism in the department through training and educational programs for officers as well as organizational systems which lend themselves to creative thinking and action to accomplish the police function.
- **Training and Personnel Development.** Closely related to professionalism, training and personnel development must be encouraged by the administrator. This includes not only opportunities for technical training in the various aspects of law enforcement, but opportunities for training in the broader field of human relations and the skills necessary to work with citizens under a variety of circumstances.
- **Delegation of Authority.** The ability to delegate authority is important in a small police department just as it is in a large one. Young officers must be given an opportunity to advance in the department, or they will leave for other jobs.
- **The Planning Function.** Planning is basic in all organizations, regardless of size. In a small police department, the planning will be done primarily by the police chief and the city administrator. They will find help available from nearby departments, the local council of governments and the State Department of Public Safety.

The Fire Function

The primary mission of the fire department is the prevention and suppression of fires. Traditionally, the great majority of fire department budgets have been expended for extinguishing fires. Individuals in the fire fighting business are finally beginning to realize that the enforcement of modern building codes and fire prevention programs is worthy of much more attention and money than have been given to those activities in the past.

Fire fighting is one of the oldest municipal functions. It began with volunteers, and volunteers today remain the major source of manpower and personnel for fire fighting. In smaller towns, the fire department is likely to be either partially or totally volunteer.

The administrator's relations with this dedicated group of citizens may well determine his or her overall effectiveness in the community.

Fire Fighting Organization

Fire departments normally are organized along much the same paramilitary lines as police organizations. However, in the case of the fire department, its fire suppression activities make this kind of organizational structure rational, and perhaps even necessary.

A "company" is the basic unit of the fire department. One company usually operates one piece of fire fighting equipment. In the case of a fire pumper, the typical company consists of an officer, a pump operator, and two or three firefighters.

A fire company always operates as a single unit under the immediate supervision of a company officer. When more than one fire company is engaged in fighting a fire, a senior officer assumes overall charge of the operation. If a large number of companies are fighting the same fire, a higher-level officer will coordinate operations and direct multi-company officers, and so forth. This system makes it apparent that military organization and chains of command are logical and workable bases for the fire service.

One potential problem in a small community from an organizational standpoint is the relation of the volunteer to paid forces. Since both usually have ranks, -lieutenant, captain, and perhaps battalion chief,-the question sometimes arises as to whether a captain in the volunteer force should assume command at the fire scene over paid lieutenants and other lower ranking paid officers. Each community must work out these relationships for itself, but the administrator should realize the potential problems involved and be aware of the political implications when dealing with volunteer forces.

Prevention Services

Most cities have adopted fire prevention codes modeled after national or regional codes. These codes are usually stringent, and many businesspersons unfortunately find that strict compliance would pose an unacceptable level of cost or inconvenience; therefore, it has become common practice for such persons to pressure the city council to relax the fire code, or even worse, to encourage a policy of lax enforcement by fire inspectors.

To test the validity of this statement, it is suggested that the administrator read portions of the city's fire code relative to the location, identification, and access to fire exits, and then spend a few hours visiting businesses in the community. Many retail establishments, at any given time during the day, will not fully comply with this basic code provision, even though it has a direct relation to saving lives in the event of a fire.

This is not to say that the average businessperson has a callous disregard for the safety of his or her customers, but it is also true that many people have an "it can't happen here" attitude. Managers of business establishments are no exception. They all too often view the possibility of a major fire on their premises as being very remote. On the other hand, shoplifters who rely on fire exits to make their escape are a very real everyday problem, as is the lack of temporary storage space to place boxes of merchandise and the expense of wiring lighted exit signs to a separate circuit.

It is therefore necessary to carefully select fire inspectors on the basis of their diplomacy and general attitude, as well as for their knowledge of the local fire code. Experience

demonstrates that a fire inspector who rudely orders compliance has limited effectiveness. On the other hand, an inspector who is willing to take the time necessary to explain the purpose of a particular provision of the code or to explain the dangers it is designed to eliminate and, above all, who is willing to make concrete suggestions as to how a businessperson can comply with the code, can be tremendously effective.

In most communities, there are always a small number of uncooperative people. In these cases, veteran inspectors have achieved good results by writing a letter to the offender pointing out the specific fire code violations discovered, and a copy of the letter directed to the offender's fire insurance carrier. Fire insurance companies are aware that "it can happen here," and are in the position to take steps which can lead to compliance. After making this statement, in the early 1970s, a retired official of the National Fire Protection Association, in response to a question as to why insurance companies did not undertake major fire prevention investigations of their insured customers, responded, "Elementary, unless there are fires, the insurance companies cannot sell insurance." Except under unusual circumstances, attempts to enforce compliance by resorting to fines or other punitive measures generally are not effective.

Fire Suppression

The factors which determine the quality and efficiency of the suppression unit include quality of equipment, skill and training level of personnel, and speed of operations.

Most major pieces of fire fighting equipment require substantial expenditures. Second-rate equipment is seldom a bargain. Good equipment is characterized by a high level of reliability and good workmanship and materials. This is not to say that skilled mechanics cannot rebuild or "cannibalize" several pieces of equipment and fashion one good truck and engine. This has been done and in this age of fiscal scarcity, will continue to be done, but such work must be done with a great deal of skill and caution.

The importance of the fire department is often underrated by the general public. Watching a fire, the average citizen tends only to see a group of firefighters pouring large amounts of water onto a burning building. What the spectator is not aware of is that all fire fighting tactics are carefully selected by skilled supervisors who must be aware of the type and extent of the fire they are dealing with, the type of equipment available to combat it, and the type of material that is burning. An error of judgment on any one of these points can cause a minor fire to evolve into a major blaze and massive losses. Yet, the average citizen seldom recognizes the high degree of service being performed.

Speed is the third element in an effective fire unit. In most instances, a fire which is reached quickly enough can be rapidly extinguished. However, every fire, and especially one in an enclosed building, builds up what is known as a "head" of heat. "Head" indicates the degree of heat at which surrounding combustible materials burst into flame. In other words, an ordinary residential kitchen fire, for example, will burn at a relatively modest rate until at some point, the heat produced by the original fire reaches a high enough degree that the walls, ceiling, and other surfaces or materials suddenly catch fire and begin burning at a furious rate. This flash point usually occurs within a narrow heat range, which is why the time between the original ignition of a fire and the initiation of suppression activities bears a very direct relationship to fire losses.

Communications

As a general rule, communications is the most critical auxiliary function in the fire department. Since speed is essential in holding fire losses to a minimum, the dispatcher must have the capacity to think and act under stress. Although it is not necessary for the dispatcher to be an experienced firefighter, the dispatcher must have a basic knowledge of fire fighting techniques. Taking a few extra moments to ascertain what kind of fire is being reported, as well as the type of structure and contents involved, can save time in ensuring that the proper equipment arrives on the scene.

The 911 system, with its automatic locating capability, has eliminated one of the major problems of getting equipment to the right location. Having firefighters conducting periodic inspections of structures so that they know the structure and the layouts of larger structures also will improve the ability to address the exact location of the fire. Serving in the dispatcher's office frequently is looked upon by professional firefighters as disagreeable duty, but any 911 office or fire department which assigns dispatching to its least competent members, or as a disciplinary measure, automatically increases the potential for major problems.

Recruitment, Training, and Certification

Since 1969, minimum training standards for full-time fire fighting personnel have been mandated by State law. Officers appointed prior to September 1, 1972, were "grandfathered" in and did not have to take the training required by the Office of Fire Service Standards and Certification of the Texas Commission on Fire Protection. The State Commission on Fire Protection requires 335 hours of instruction in basic fire fighting. The training is offered in four different ways. Larger cities usually have their own training academy, and those cities also provide training for a number of individuals from surrounding cities. The third training opportunity is provided by Texas A&M University, which conducts basic training for about 25% of all firefighters. Finally, several colleges, such as Tarrant County Junior College and the San Antonio Community College, offer training courses. City administrators can contact the Texas Commission of Fire Protection for information on available training opportunities.

Fire Insurance Rates

Many practices of the city and its fire department have a direct effect on the fire insurance premiums paid by residents of the city.

Fire insurance rates for Texas cities are established by the Texas Department of Insurance. For many years the insurance rates for the various cities were adjusted by the "key rate." The key rating system is no longer used by the State, and the insurance rates are adjusted by the Insurance Service Agency. The agency still takes into account the city's record of property damage and the fire fighting capability of the city. Such factors as the availability of water and fire hydrants, the number and types of fire fighting equipment, the number and quality of training of fire fighting personnel, and the existence of a fire prevention code all play a part in the makeup of the fire insurance paid by residents of the city. The residents need to be aware that when we are talking about residential fire insurance rates, we are talking about just a part of the typical

homeowners' insurance package. The total package covers liability, comprehensive, theft, etc.

Key Issues in the Fire Insurance Services Today

Two key issues for success stand out above the others in looking at the fire service in a small city. First is the importance of personnel. Whether a city is served by paid, part-paid and volunteer, or totally volunteer personnel, a key issue is their utilization to prevent fires and to save life and property. The administrator's challenge is to shape the department to achieve maximum results with minimum expenditures.

The second issue is the same as that in the police service. Small towns under 10,000 inhabitants are fortunate not to be constrained by the provisions of the state fire-police civil service law. At the same time, it presents a challenge to the administrator to make certain that his/her city has implemented a positive set of personnel policies and practices which treat firefighters in a fair manner.

Assessing the Fire Department

Assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of the individual fire department is difficult. Certainly, the fire insurance rate status of a department is not a completely reliable gauge.

The administrator might well examine the criteria set out earlier in this chapter for assessing the police department. With the exception of the first two items, corruption and due process of law, the other six factors listed apply just as well to fire departments as they do to police operations.

In addition to those items that reflect the organizational effectiveness of the department, the administrator should examine fire deaths, injuries, and property losses, and constantly compare these figures to those for previous years as well as to neighboring cities.

Recent Innovations in Public Safety

At least two Texas cities under 10,000 population have proven that public safety departments, a combination of fire and police forces, can work and save tax money in the process.

Separate fire and police forces, which are folded into one department, have been discussed for many years and tried in a few jurisdictions. Most cities over 10,000 in population have had no opportunity to try this innovation due to the strict requirements of the state fire-police civil services law. But Highland Park (a suburb of Dallas) and Woodway (a suburb of Waco) have been operating consolidated public safety departments for many years.

In Highland Park, personnel are trained as both police officers and firefighters, and most are triple-trained, adding emergency medical services/paramedic to their qualifications. The city operates all three of these public safety activities.

The Public Safety Department in Highland Park is headed by a Director of Public Safety, with a triple-trained captain, lieutenant, and sergeant assigned to each shift. The shifts are worked similar to a traditional fire department: 24 hours on duty, and 48 hours off duty, averaging 56 hours worked per week. Officers patrol the streets for eight-to ten-hour shifts, then go to inside quarters to respond to fire or emergency medical calls.

Other officers on the shift then rotate out onto patrol duty. The department currently has 65 total full-time personnel, including 51 sworn officers, 36 of whom are certified paramedics.

The City of Woodway began its integrated program in 1976 and utilizes both paid and volunteer personnel. The Public Safety Department is headed by a director who oversees all facets of both paid and volunteer members. Public Safety Officers are required to become certified as both peace officer and firefighters. EMS in Woodway is supplied by a private ambulance company.

Woodway's Public Safety Officers work 12-hour shifts, with four days on duty and then four days off. They drive patrol cars, providing the normal police services, but carry fire bunker gear in the trunk. When a fire or rescue call is reported, officers proceed to the scene or to the station. Need determines their on-scene actions.

The city also has approximately 30 volunteers. When needed, both off-duty paid personnel and volunteers respond when paged. This system has worked very well to provide fire and rescue services to the citizens of Woodway for the past 23 years.

Emergency Medical Services

Emergency medical service has not been a traditional municipal function, but in many areas private ambulance services have been less than satisfactory, and rising costs are making it economically not easible for private companies to maintain the required services. Secondly, current medical techniques are de-emphasizing the role of speed as a factor in lifesaving and are placing increasing weight on emergency treatment of victims at the scene. In other words, most specialists consider a delay of fifteen or twenty minutes in reaching a hospital of little significance except in very rare cases. But professionals also agree that lack of competent on-the-scene first aid assistance by trained personnel is a critical health factor in most cases.

This kind of thinking has caused the state and many cities to require emergency ambulances to have certain minimum equipment and ambulance personnel to have certain minimum training and certification. These requirements, in turn, have caused the cost of emergency services to rise, thereby compounding an already critical economic factor.

In an effort to ensure the availability of adequate ambulance service, more and more cities have initiated their own EMS operations. The usual form of operation is through one of the city's existing departments. The fire department normally is selected because it is a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-per-week operation, and its members spend a large part of each day not engaged directly in fire suppression. But unless additional personnel are added to the fire department, the city will be gambling that its full emergency ambulance service and fire fighting complement will not be needed at the same time. This is an unwise risk; therefore, the operation of most municipal ambulance services will usually mean an increase in trained personnel who are on duty or on call at all times.

There is, of course, no statutory requirement that cities provide emergency medical services. Other governmental units directly involved in health care, such as counties or hospital districts, also can perform this function. Indeed, since public health is one of the traditional functions of counties and hospital districts, providing ambulance service

through these governmental agencies may be more logical than placing the burden on cities. However, experience generally has shown that officials of these other agencies are no more enthusiastic about providing this service than city officials, primarily as a result of the high cost of the service. In the meantime, residents of urban areas tend to look to city governments to provide any public service which has not been clearly allocated to some other entity. Other actors on the scene are rural fire prevention districts and emergency services districts. Both have the power of taxation and may operate fire prevention and emergency services within their bounds and by interlocal contracts with other entities.

The Texas Legislature has enacted laws which set forth stringent certification standards that are administered by the Texas State Department of Health. Detailed information on these requirements can be obtained from the Bureau of Emergency Medical Services in Austin, Texas.

Civil Defense

Only the larger metropolitan areas ordinarily have the resources to have separate civil defense departments. The day-to-day function of a civil defense department is that of planning. Its responsibility is to draft contingency plans and establish liaison with other governmental units that can be helpful to the city during an emergency. For example, most civil defense agencies have a detailed plan, to be implemented in case of a local crisis, which provides for an orderly process for bringing decision makers together in one place. These plans, in addition to plans to deal with anticipated disaster situations, ensure communications to and from that location, so that basic decisions can be made quickly and so that immediate expert advice will be available from department and division heads.

The State of Texas has established within the Texas Department of Public Safety a Division of Emergency Management. This agency coordinates preparedness and recovery from all types of disasters within the State. Local governments experiencing disasters from hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, etc., can call, through the DPS organizational structure, for assistance from the state. The legislature has given extraordinary authority to the mayors and to the governing bodies of the city to (1) establish and enforce a curfew; (2) limit or prohibit the sale of alcoholic beverages; (3) limit or prohibit the sale of gasoline, flammable or combustible products, explosives, and ammunition, (4) suspend competitive bidding for emergency items; and (5) establish temporary emergency housing on all municipal property without respect to zoning rules, deed restrictions, or other limitations on land use.

The city can also establish maximum retail prices for critical items and services for a period not to exceed 15 days. These include hotel and motel rents, the prices of groceries, construction materials, batteries, hand tools, gasoline and other fuels, restaurant meals, and medicine.

Every city is well advised to establish a detailed civil defense plan and to review it and update it annually. The Division of Emergency Management in the Texas Department of Public Safety can assist cities and other governmental jurisdictions in the development and maintenance of a plan.

Even if no crisis or emergency occurs, there is a practical, economic reason to maintain a viable civil defense operation. It is the practice of the federal government, especially the military, to declare vast amounts of equipment and other supplies as surplus from time to time. Much of this equipment is declared surplus because it is obsolete or does not meet current military specifications, but much of it is frequently in working order and has many years of usable life left.

This equipment is available for purchase by cities, and the price generally is low, but it is available only for purchase by cities with approved civil defense programs. The sole requirement is that the city make the equipment available in its own civil defense operations during times of national or local crisis, but this obviously would be no burden, since any city will use its own equipment when necessary during an emergency, regardless of where this equipment comes from.