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Chief Officer Challenges and Opportunities

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Introduction

This course provided students a unique opportunity to meet various chief officers throughout south-west and central Ohio. The goal is to understand concerns and challenges facing chiefs as they manage their respective organizations. Students met with volunteer, combination part/full-time and larger metro department chiefs; all having issues of varying complexity. Ultimately, chiefs of large and small department share similar management hurdles.

Five Wicked Issues

The fire service is constantly challenged to provide greater services for less, adapt to changing philosophies and understand the dynamics that make up a community. These larger problems can be categorized as “wicked” because they’re nearly impossible to solve due to continual change. In 2013, the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) assembled industry leaders to identify the most daunting issues faced by today’s emergency responders and their departments. They established these five main or wicked issues fire and emergency services must address: cost efficiency, data, deployment/staffing, culture and political acumen.

Cost is always a concern to citizens and community administrators, most don’t question effectiveness, but are ever mindful of service cost. Agencies utilize data, but are the data points collected accurate or of value, moreover is it analyzed and used effectively. The level of staffing and justifying the need is difficult, requiring detailed analysis and knowledge of industry standards, such as those recommended by the NFPA. The culture of the fire service is ever changing; today’s environment may be starkly different tomorrow, necessitating constant re-evaluation and adaptation. Fire service leaders, now more than ever, are entrenched in a political environment for which they’re un-prepared.
These problems have existed, in some fashion or form, since I’ve been in the fire service. Though solving these issues may never occur, chief officers must be mindful of their existence and the challenges they present. Leaders are encouraged to engage in productive dialogue constantly debating these issues to determine the best response for their community.

**Volunteer Department Chief Meetings**

We met with two departments that utilize some form of volunteer staffing; Monroe Township and Cedarville Township. Chief Jetter of Monroe explained his transition from being chief of a combination suburban department to a smaller rural department. Monroe makes approximately 1,400 calls annually from two stations. When Chief Jetter started there were four career members, he included; shortly after two additional career FF/Paramedics were added. He explained the department lacked organizational management and formal departmental records.

He described concerns of poor township operations with no clear or collective vision for the future. The fire board “in-fights” and are unable to agree and lack productivity. The department has a $1 million budget that is also utilized to supplement non-fire related township expenses. He has worked to implement many changes and improvements including electronic EMS/fire reporting. The department received much needed grant awards for SCBAs and turn-out gear replacement. His major need is facilities, either total replacement or extensive renovation of existing stations.

The Cedarville Fire Department, led by Chief Miller, is a unique and impressive operation. Staffing consists of one career member (chief) and 43 volunteers. Members are notified of runs via Active911. They respond from one station, which houses an engine, tower, tanker, brush unit and two ambulances. Cedarville Fire Department operates on a meager $410K budget. They cover approximately 55 square miles and make 751 runs annually. The
department provides services to nearby Christian based Cedarville University, with an enrollment of approximately 3,400 students. Chief Miller qualifies the university, his primary staffing pool, as both a “blessing and a curse.”

The average age of Cedarville Fire Department members is 20 and they are mostly university students. Chief Miller’s primary challenge is retention and unusually high turnover which increases annually near spring graduation. The department maintains a robust recruitment program with nice retention incentives. Certain services are made available to staff, and are welcome comforts to college students, such as housing (for some), laundry, kitchen and internet not to mention a quiet place for study. This may have been the most impressive department I visited, and should be a must-stop for future classes. Any volunteer chief experiencing operational challenges would benefit by reaching-out to Chief Miller.

Two common concerns were noted after talking with Chief Jetter and Chief Miller, they are funding and staffing. Both have small budgets in relation to their operations and appear effective in managing with less. Staffing tends to be an issue with most volunteer departments; finding individuals willing to commit the time needed for initial training and continuing education is nearly impossible.

**Combination Department Chief Meetings**

We met with six combination departments; the townships of Goshen, Miami (Clermont County), Washington (near Dayton), Mifflin and the city departments of Trotwood and Worthington. Most chiefs expressed like concerns of staffing, funding and levy revenue distribution—this theme remained constant. Chief Pegram of Goshen offered other leadership incites he learned as a new chief. He recommends when taking over an organization, especially as an outsider, look for quick success “fix the easy stuff” to show progress. He advised not to
mess with what works or traditional departmental practices, though if needed do so slowly over time. Another point he discussed was conducting one-on-one interviews with the entire membership, he said it took time, but well worth the information gathered.

Chief Kelly of Miami Twp. was hired from the outside over internal candidates; this initially created organizational animosity, dividing some officers. One of his early goals, after being appointed in 2013, was to develop a five-year strategic plan; this has yet to occur. He explains his time is consumed managing HR issues and dealing with frequent turnover of personnel. Fortunately, the township passed a levy to fund additional staffing. Washington Twp. is an accredited department south of Dayton, with 37 full-time and 80 part-time personnel. Washington is the one agency without significant staffing concerns. When they experienced difficulty finding qualified part-time staff they added numerous career positions to compensate. Their part-time turnover is minimal; full-time personnel are hired from within the organization. This may be an answer to problems encountered by agencies with frequent part-time personnel shortages.

The Mifflin Township Fire Department, located east of Columbus, also provides services to the City of Gahanna. I must admit, I didn’t take many notes during this visit; Chief Kauser’s willingness to engage focused our interest. He discussed the need for education and its importance in the fire service; he is currently working toward his PhD. Most of the conversations were more philosophical in nature which encouraged constant dialogue. One discussion centered on community dynamics, ethnicity and demographics. He articulated that hiring and department make-up should mimic the diversity of the citizens served.

Trotwood, located to the west of Dayton formed in 1996 after merging Madison Twp. and the City of Trotwood. They operate three stations but at times “brown out” or close one during
periods of inadequate staffing. They have a unique staffing model, 48 hours on then off for 96 hours. BC Barnett states this form of scheduling decreases sick time use and allows members more time to complete departmental projects. Trotwood is an aging department, with an average personnel age of 40. Another huge obstacle is high turnover; they hired 12 part-time members in the last five months and have already lost 4.

Our final meeting was with Chief Highley of the Worthington Fire Department. This department absorbed Sharon Twp. in the early 1990s. Worthington makes nearly 6K responses annually from one centrally located station. Changes and elimination of promoted, administrative positions has been detrimental to departmental operations. Day-to-day functions are carried out by the chief, leaving no time for administrative planning. Chief Highley states he only has time to manage problems and employee issues; he appears exhausted. An assistant chief position was recently created to alleviate some his burdensome workload. He states his major problem is overtime and frequent personnel shortage.

**Metro Department Chief Meetings**

The class was fortunate to meet with three metro chiefs from Cincinnati, Dayton and Columbus. Chief Braun of Cincinnati stated one of his biggest concerns is fear of the unknown; he specifically referenced the recent line-of-duty death of Daryl Gordon. I couldn’t imagine the emotional toll of managing a LODD.

Managing a large department has its challenges, and he recommends putting the right people in key positions to assure success. He doesn’t like “yes men” and appreciates unbiased opinion which he believes promotes “buy in.” Chief Braun wished he’d received his degree earlier in his career and discussed the importance of formal education.
Chief Payne of the Dayton Fire Department discussed the welfare of his personnel as his top priority. He is supportive of, and monitoring the progress of the presumptive cancer bill and appears rather knowledgeable on the subject. Some cancer preventative measures he is currently working on include purchasing two sets of turnout gear for all firefighters, new gear washer/extractors for cleaning and promoting the use of SCBA during overhaul. He was the only chief, that I recall, who talked extensively of health/wellness and its applicability in the firehouse. Chief Payne too is a proponent of higher education; he recently received his Masters from the Naval Postgraduate School.

The Columbus Fire Division is the largest department in Ohio; they staff 34 stations with nearly 1,500 personnel. Chief O’Connor discussed his budget of 230 million and provided insight on how he manages monetary concerns. He is constantly challenged to be fiscally responsible and states cuts would impact staffing (93% of budget). He encourages asking for what you need, not want and be able to justify requests. He discussed data, its value and worth; a “wicked problem” earlier identified. He relies on utilization reporting to justify unit/personnel deployment, I found this approach interesting. If utilization numbers are low, staffing level is supported by department standard response time benchmarks—4 minutes. He finished the with a good point, “as fire chief I need to do the right thing,” I believe this is always the best approach.

**Recommendations**

I enjoyed the class and see the benefit of talking with chief officers of varying sized department—provides prospective. This class would be next to impossible, almost criminal to conduct on-line; the one-on-one meetings with chiefs were invaluable. One concern was travel, which I personally was not opposed to; I drove 520 miles during this class. What I would do though, is include the travel needs in the course description; making this point well known. One
discussion was to include chiefs from atypical style departments like airport and/or military installations—could be of benefit. I appreciated the first day, and the overview of the “Wicked” issues; directly applies to what students heard during chief visits.

Please feel free to call me with and questions… as I relayed to Larry, I thought the class was wonderful and a great opportunity for students. Thanks Mark and Tyler, If I don’t see or talk to you, have a wonderful Christmas.
References
