



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Are You Tall Enough to Ride?

I once attended a small carnival that had come to town with my son. He was about 6 or 7 years old at the time. It wasn't long after we arrived that he wanted to get on one of those stomach wrenching contraptions called a "carny ride". But, as we approached the ticket counter there was a bar stretched across the gate that said "you must be this tall to go on this ride". He wasn't that tall. No amount of arguing with the ride operator was going to get him on it either. He was disappointed and I was grateful of not having to go on it with him.

I was reminded of his disappointment recently as a result of a very serious debate among a group of fire officers as to what the definition is of a real fire department. What prompted the debate was to contention that there are groups of people engaged in private activities that look like a fire department, but do not conform to this group's perception of reality. How does an organization measure up to become a real fire department? What is the minimum criterion?

You might think that after 300 years of having fire services being provided in this country that there would be a legal definition somewhere. Well, maybe there is and maybe there isn't. My research indicates that the federal government has not done it yet. Going all the way back to the US Constitution, through the development of state constitutions, and all the way down to the creation of local fire departments, there is no real defined portrait of what a fire department has to be that has been accepted by everyone.

That doesn't mean there aren't laws about how to organize them, but there is not a standard they must meet to actually become one.

In my own state, there are a hundred ways that an organization can become a fire department. But, there are no minimum requirements for what a department must look like or provide in the way of service. At one level, fire protection is a discretionary decision that is best defined at the lowest possible level. And, as we all know there is a library of recommended practices on how to run a department once it is formed. The missing link is consistency as to what the criterion are.

One thing is for sure, there are a lot of ways to skin the cat and create a fire department. Where should we start with defining what one is in order to be recognized as such? My suggestion is we use the school of hard knocks approach. Let's set the bar at a certain level and see who matches up. The following are 10 elements on a yardstick that can be used. Every fire agency that exists should be able to determine if they meet that yardstick. These elements are as follows:

1. The organization needs to be legally established according to state law and have a defined area for response that can be mapped.
2. The organization has to have conducted a basic risk assessment of the area to be protected and documented it so that it knows what it protects.



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3. The department has to have established a specific table of organization that shows that there is a chain of command and some degree of accountability.
4. A budget has been established to account for all funds collected and dedicated to fire protection. These records are available through the public information act.
5. The department has established a minimum of one fire protection program that provides a service level to the population living under its jurisdiction. In general, this is likely to be suppression, but it could be fire prevention also.
6. All physical assets of the department are accounted for in the financial accounting system that is identified in item 4.
7. The department is in compliance with all state and national legislation regulation relating to human resources
8. The departmental personnel are training to meet the minimum state and federal training requirements for their state.
9. The department is a participant in the NFIR system and has a training records system to document compliance in Category 8
10. The department is in compliance with the state mutual aid system

If you are a follower of the accreditation process currently being carried on by the Center for Public Safety Excellence, you may have recognized some of the basic elements in that model. I have not called these yardstick statements “criterion” because they are very simplified in this article. I have not provided the reader with a subset of performance requirements because size is not the question here. In short, this is merely an initial assessment of whether or not you are tall enough to ride.

In this case, ride means to tell the public that you are going to respond to their requests for service in a formal fashion and do so legally and without creating another form of jeopardy; community liability.

Does meeting these 10 yardsticks make you a good fire department? No. I don't think that meeting the minimum of any measurement makes you good. But, I do think it goes a long way in terms of keeping you from hurting yourself or someone else by being incompetent to be in this arena. It's just a start. But, it is a start in the right direction.

From my perspective, an organization that establishes its planning process on these rails could go on to become a good, then a great fire department. But one that can't meet these basic guidelines should not be sending anyone into harm's way under the assumption that they are doing good. Those that stay on these rails could ultimately become an accredited fire agency, which one way of saying that no one can ever doubt why you exist; you can prove it. But being accredited is not the goal here. Becoming real is the goal here.

Eventually my son was tall enough to ride the ride. Today he is over 6 feet tall and probably doesn't even remember that rite of passage. Every fire department that starts out has some growing pains to get its structure right. But not all grow up right.



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Some departments out there are mature, well documented entities that don't need this advice at all. But, somewhere out there are organizations that are wanna be's and don't even know that they have failed to achieved even the basic considerations for being a viable fire protection agency. There are incipient agencies that haven't done this homework and are looking for guidance. Some places still have ad hoc fire protection that lacks the fundamentals.

If you don't believe me, then let us ask this question; why do "black holes" of fire protection still exist and more importantly, who is going to fill them some day?