



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Black, Brown or Shades of Grey

What is the symbol of modern fire protection? Another words, what one thing tells a member in our community that they have a fire protection? Is it the profile of an American firefighter's helmet? Or is it a sign on the outside of a fire station down the boulevard? Or, is it the fire truck parked in the apparatus room that can be seen as they drive down the street? The answer is that all three of those symbols have come to mean different things to society and simultaneously they may mean nothing to the average citizen. While it may seem to be contradictory, those symbols stand for the idea of fire protection but they in fact may or may not be present when a person demands of their availability.

What I am talking about is the fact that fire trucks, firefighters and fire station do not mean fire protection. They are the resources in which we are trying to utilize and provide fire protection. I would submit that when all three are in place, it is very likely that something positive will happen when they are called upon. But, I would also submit that a fire station that has no fire truck in it or a piece of apparatus that has no firefighters on it might be symbolically present but that is not fire protection.

The reason for this conversation has to do with the contemporary term that is emerging as a result of our economic problems. How many of you heard about a concept about "browning out a fire station"? The idea is that under certain economic conditions, a fire station can be turned off and on like a light switch. The use of the phrase brown out sort of sounds like we are treating this phenomenon the same we treat the phenomenon of a lower level of electricity being available to a community.

My theory is a little more straightforward than that. I believe fire protection is like an umbrella. You have it or you don't. It is raining outside. If you go out and you have an umbrella and you can open it up above your head there is a possibility that you will remain dry. But, if you walk out in a rain storm without that umbrella you are going to get wet.

The concept of closing a fire station for economic reasons is very serious. For, whenever you provide a community with a fire station there is an expectation that it will somehow or other be readily available for the majority of the population whenever there is a demand for that service. From a standpoint of policy, fire stations are not like a light switch in that when they are it is dark and when they are on it is light. Society, rightly or wrongly, looks at fire protection as a given.

Let's imagine that there is absolutely no fire protection and the area is blacked out. Let's further imagine that every time there is a fire truck readily available to respond to a demand, the area is colored white. Just like my umbrella metaphor the umbrella is both up and available or it is closed and unavailable.



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For purposes of this discussion there are really three definitions of that umbrella. That is there is no availability, there is constant availability – or there is intermittent availability.

Constant availability is defined as a fire station that has a crew and apparatus ready to deploy 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. An interim availability fire station is only open for specific hours and for specific reasons. The degree of being intermittent varies all the way from being out of business entirely (station closures) or availability based upon some criterion such as call demand or operational experience. For example, a fire station would be open only during the daylight hours (0800-1700) there might be an assumption that this is a period of time in which the station had previously received most of its fire calls. Or, having a station open only for three days out of a week (Friday, Saturday, Sunday) might be based on an assumption that a particular area is primarily occupied during the weekends because of tourism or other forms of transition.

Constant staffing means the umbrella is open. Intermittent staffing means that fire protection doesn't exist at all. I don't call that being brown. I call that being blacked out.

The consequence of other unavailability is a common sense problem. Longer response times are to be expected when one of many facilities are closed. But, is that the only consequence? Having a fire station available for intermittent staffing also has a consequence in the areas where the second due companies are responding from. In other words, you are not just reducing the level of service where the fire stations used to be but you are also reducing the level of service in the adjacent areas.

The challenge the modern fire service has to face up to is what to do about intermittent staffing. All too often this lapses into a problem into it is all or nothing. I know that there will be individuals who will make an argument that if there is inadequate staffing it is totally inappropriate to keep a fire station open. I have heard that argument extensively. On the other hand, if you look at it from a statistical point of view, the probability that a person is going to call the fire department for an emergency medical aid is probably five to seven times more likely to occur. Therefore, during these periods of intermittent staffing is it better to change the mission alignment and accept that limitation? Or, is it better to black out the station?

If you are looking for me to provide you with an answer to these questions, you can probably stop reading the article right now. I am not sure there is an answer to this. As long as the concept of staffing is based upon the idea that it is all or nothing, my contention that shades of grey will continue to exist still applies.

Other options and alternatives continue to provide for response need to be explored in depth. Perhaps it is time for us to recognize that keeping the umbrella open is going to protect a lot more people than closing it is going to save in the long run.



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No one wants these solutions. Moreover, the development of a deployment plan should not be based upon a simplistic solution that if you can't afford enough people you can't continue to act as if you are a full service entity when in fact you are not.

Everyone hopes that all of the economic conditions will eventually right themselves and will be back to the point where there is no question about a fire station being any shade of grey. It is when the system fails to sustain itself that this argument is going to come back onto the table. Could we or should we be thinking of the different ways of managing the fire departments availability? Could we or should we be thinking in terms of service levels being intermittent based upon risk assessment?

As I travel around the country I see everything from fire departments responding with a single person all the way out to fire departments with four or five people on board. Fantastic! I don't think anybody in our profession could ever argue the idea that having the maximum number of people available on a fire company provides it with its highest possible level of performance. Yet, when it comes time to making decisions on restricting staffing because of economic conditions it seems to go back to an all or nothing phenomenon.

Constant availability speaks for itself. But intermittent availability sends a mixed message to the community.

One of the arguments that I have heard posed in this case is that if you can afford to get by with closing a station on an interim period, why can't you just get rid of it in its entirety? I don't have enough time in article of this sort to get into the in depth review of the consequences of total closure. The point I am trying to make is that interim coverage needs to have a metric also. Whatever interim coverage is put into service there should be a renewed interest in the effectiveness and efficiency of that level of service in order to measure consequences.

As I was preparing this article I was reminded of a hardware store where I grew up back in Oklahoma. If you would go by the hardware store most of the time it was an area of intense activity in the community. However, if you drove by the store and it had a sign on the door that said "gone fishin" you didn't waste your time parking your car. You knew that it wasn't available.

The issue of closing fire stations I don't think is over with by a long shot. What this article proposes is that we spend a lot more time talking about intermittent levels of service than merely making a statement that we are going to "brown out" a facility. All this points to the importance of data collection and documentation. If you are going to provide interim fire protection, it is highly desirable that it be based upon some kind of data driven decision rather than an emotional one.