

Achieving National Recognition for the California Fire Service Training and Education System (CFSTES)



Why is it important?

Achieving National Recognition

For over 30 years California has had a professional certification system specifically for the Fire Service. Some of the early pioneers who created the professional standards that we are using nationally were involved in the creation of the National system from the very outset. This included Dr. Leonard Marks, Carlton Williams and Edward Bent. The Office of the State Fire Marshal has administered a system known as the California Fire Service Training and Education System (CFSTES). The state system was created as a result of the 1971 Master Plan of Training and Education. CFSTES was implemented to bring order to the ever growing number of training opportunities made available to fire service personnel, and provide a venue for them to achieve professional recognition for their training, education and experience through position level certifications. California was one of the first states to enact professional certification for fire service personnel, and the system has grown over the years to include over 20 levels of certification, with over 3,000 individual certifications earned annually. CFSTES is successful because of strong partnerships from stakeholders including individual fire service professionals, fire departments, fire labor organizations, fire service professional organizations, community colleges and numerous others.

CFSTES is a strong system; however it has not kept pace with the broader fire service trend of national recognition which embraces reciprocal professional certification based on pre-established compatibility between other state and national fire service certification entities. CFSTES has been missing an opportunity to offer its numerous stakeholders the option to participate, and reap the benefits of the expanded nationally based fire service professional qualification systems. Participation in national recognition would directly benefit all stakeholders and allow the CFSTES to demonstrate its effectiveness in the application process.

There are two organizations administering national recognition for fire service training entities, the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC) and the Pro Board Fire Service Professional Qualifications System (Pro Board). Both organizations have well defined processes to evaluate the professionalism and capabilities of applicant agencies. These processes are based on the demonstrated model of applicant self-assessment which is then evaluated through study of application materials and on-site independent review by an unbiased peer team outside the applicant's jurisdiction. The organizations' respective governance hierarchy review peer team conclusions.

The biggest question regarding participation in national recognition is how would CFSTES and stakeholders benefit from participating in this national recognition process?

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For CFSTES, successfully completing the national recognition process would result in the accreditation of the California certification system. National accreditation of municipal services is a method of demonstrating program excellence that continues to gain momentum both nationally and internationally. State and municipal agencies including fire departments, building departments, state fire marshal offices and, of course, fire training certification agencies have recognized accreditation as an important tool to evaluate their programs in an unbiased manner and demonstrate their high level of professional competency. Upon application, and most commonly on 5 year cycles thereafter, the agency conducts an extensive internal self-assessment of policies, procedures, resources, capabilities, staffing, curriculum, testing and finances to ensure they meet the standards of the accrediting agencies and are appropriate to fulfill the applicant agency's stated mission. Review standards are based on nationally recognized best practices. California's participation would result in CFSTES being recognized for its accomplishments among other accredited state training and certification programs, resulting in additional influence over national fire service training initiatives. Furthermore, accreditation would provide a standardized, demonstrated system for individual participant certification reciprocity between other accredited state certification programs and national organizations such as the Department of Defense (DOD).

Should CFSTES become accredited, participants would benefit by having the option to obtain national certification in conjunction with their California certification. This allows them to demonstrate performance excellence with peers at the national level and have their certifications recognized in recruitment opportunities in numerous other states. Conversely, nationally certified participants from outside California, including individuals certified via Department of Defense (DOD) fire training programs would have the ability to seek CFSTES certification via a structured process, allowing them better access to employment opportunities within California. Fire service entities within California could expand their search for talent outside California, and trust that candidates meet CFSTES standards.

Lastly, one of the major changes that has occurred in the last thirty years is that catastrophic events have resulted in the fire services not only crossing state lines to provide assistance but also responding to international incidents. This raises the issue of inter-operability of personnel that are being required to operate under the most stressful circumstances. Engaging in the accreditation process provides a basis for professional competency that is reflected in our ability to assist each other under emergency conditions.

There are no disadvantages to participating in national recognition programs. It is time for the California Fire Service Training and Education System, with the support of the California fire service, to take another step to maintain program excellence and support the needs of stakeholders by assuming its rightful and deserved place at the table with the other 46 state fire service certification providers that have demonstrated their excellence through national recognition.