

## Modernization of Volunteer Fire Services

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## Report Summary

This report provides information regarding the modernization of Volunteer Fire Services as requested by City Council on March 9, 2021. The report outlines work to support our volunteer component in the areas of technology, recruitment, mutual aid, and response from home solutions, while some of these initiatives are ongoing others are scheduled to be implemented in 2024.

## Relationship to the Strategic Plan, Health Impact Assessment and Climate Action Plans

This report refers to operational matters and has no direct connection to the Community Energy and Emissions Plan.

## Financial Implications

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

## Background

Greater Sudbury Fire Services (GSFS) maintains nineteen volunteer stations across the municipality, staffed through a paid on-call system of approximately 210 volunteer firefighters. Volunteer firefighters are expected to be available on an on-call basis to respond to emergency incidents and are notified to attend at their respective station when their services are required. They are also required to participate in other non-emergency duties such as training, equipment maintenance, and station duties. In Greater Sudbury, volunteer firefighters are financially compensated for all emergency responses, mandatory training, equipment maintenance, and station duties. The Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC) represent volunteer firefighters Local 920.

## Analysis

### Technology - Cellular Paging

A system to link the dispatch of firefighters to cellular phones was developed and tested in 2013. The cellular system was upgraded several times over a nine-year period and today remains in operation, dispatching audio files to assigned cellular phones of volunteer firefighters. However, the 'in-house' system is beyond its serviceable life and no further expansion or upgrades can be performed, requiring the system to be replaced. Currently, cellular dispatching is a back-up solution only and is not relied upon as the primary method of

dispatching firefighters.

Greater Sudbury Fire Services has a purchased services agreement with Greater Sudbury Police Services for the delivery of the 911 Fire Communications Centre. Their Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system is from the software vendor Hexagon, which maintains several options for leveraging cellular technology on phones and computer-based tablets.

The I Am Responding (IAR) application has been selected as the preferred technology to enhance the dispatch and communication capabilities for our firefighters. This decision follows Council's approval of the necessary budget and moves away from the previously considered Hexagon's Mobile Responder software application. The IAR application offers a comprehensive suite of features to improve response and communication among first responders.

Adopting the I Am Responding application aligns with our commitment to leverage technology to enhance the capabilities and safety of our firefighters. In 2023, a business case for \$313,500 for the purchase and implementation of this technology was approved by Council.

This application supports not only direct incident paging alerts to responders' smartphones but also allows them to report their availability to respond and receive GPS navigation directions to incident locations. It integrates real-time updates from responders into a responder's dashboard, providing critical information such as the number of responders enroute and their estimated arrival times. This integration is vital for adjusting resource deployment dynamically as the situation on the ground evolves.

## **Recruitment**

Following the 2023 volunteer recruitment, Fire Administration completed a full review of the existing volunteer recruitment practices and identified opportunities to enhance the recruitment process. The updating of the volunteer recruitment process focused on:

- Improving communication with applicants throughout the recruitment process.
- Enhanced website clearly describing expectations, exceptions, and required commitments.
- Simplifying the application process.
- Updating recruitment physical testing to be aligned with the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) certification testing.

Many of the updated changes have been implemented in the 2024 volunteer recruitment, while the remaining updates will be implemented in the 2025 volunteer recruitment. Additional details on the volunteer recruitment outcomes, including the updated recruitment process, will be provided in the up-coming report entitled Update on Mandatory Firefighter Certification and 2024 Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment, to be presented at the City Council Meeting on June 11, 2024.

## **Firefighter Certification Training**

On July 1, 2022, the Government of Ontario implemented regulation (O. Reg. 343/22) Firefighter Certification. This regulation will ensure that all GSFS volunteer firefighters receive consistent training to the most current NFPA standards. This will assist with modernization of the volunteer fire service through standardized training, knowledge of apparatus, tools and personal protective equipment.

Additional details on the firefighter certification, including GSFS status of compliance with O. Reg 343/22, will be provided in the previously noted, Update on Mandatory Firefighter Certification and 2024 Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment Report, to be presented to City Council in June.

The Training Division recently received portable fire suppression props that will be incorporated into volunteer certification and weekly training nights. This will allow volunteer firefighters to practice realistic fire operations utilizing the training props. These training props can be moved to the various fire districts in order to reduce the need to attend the Lionel E. Lalonde training grounds for live fire training. The live fire props

are fueled by propane, allowing for clean burning and minimizing the amount of smoke and toxins released into the environment when training. The fire suppression props include simulated barbeque, car, upright propane cylinder, gas meter and garbage bin.

In an effort to continue to improve and modernize training, Fire Services will bring a business case forward for future budget consideration for the purchase of a FireVent mobile training unit at an estimated cost of \$120,000. This mobile FireVent unit is more than just a ventilation prop, it is a multi-discipline training unit that will be utilized to enhance training through multiple realistic scenarios that are encountered during fire suppression incidents.

## **Mutual Aid**

GSFS is a member of the Sudbury and District Mutual Aid Plan. This working group is designed to provide additional resources or assistance for fire emergencies to other departments/municipalities who are a member of the plan. A member of the GSFS Fire Administration has recently become the coordinator of the Sudbury and District Mutual Aid Plan. The coordinator works with the member departments and municipalities to develop their response plans and shared resources while ensuring proper reporting to the Office of the Fire Marshal.

For a municipal fire department to participate in a mutual aid plan, there are two key requirements that must be in place. The local Establishing and Regulating Bylaw must grant the Fire Chief or designate the ability to allocate resources outside of the municipal boundary and there must be adequate resources in the fire department to meet their day-to-day fire protection obligations. The Fire Chief of the municipality in which the emergency occurs has the ultimate responsibility for managing such emergency.

Mutual Aid is designed to be a mutual sharing of resources, work force or apparatus, between both parties. It is not to be used as a one-way allocation of other municipalities' fire department resources to provide primary fire protection services. Mutual aid is not a fee-based service and is to have no cost associated with the sharing of resources as per the Provincial Mutual Aid framework.

Greater Sudbury currently maintains an aid agreement with the municipality of Markstay-Warren. A new aid agreement with Nairn-Hyman and GSFS has been drafted, and is currently being reviewed by Nairn-Hyman.

## **Response from Home/Work Practices**

The development of a response from home/work practice could improve the overall response times of volunteer firefighters in certain circumstances. When considering the value of implementing a response from home/work practice, the fire service must also consider the risks and potential liability in determining if a respond from home can be done with minimal risk. Such considerations would include:

- Securing the bunker gear in a sealed container to mitigate exposures to contaminants to both firefighter and family.
- Proper decontamination of PPE after responding to an incident.
- Civil liability and insurance concerns.
- Congestion of emergency scenes with personal vehicles.
- Arriving on scene prior to the apparatus and unable to assist.

## **Responding in Personal Vehicle - Use of Green Lights**

The purpose of flashing green lights is to help other drivers recognize a firefighter enroute to an emergency and be courteous and yield the right-of-way. Personal vehicles are not defined as emergency vehicles under the Highway Traffic Act. As such, volunteer firefighters responding to the station in their vehicle equipped with a flashing green light cannot violate any traffic laws.

The existing Green Light Operational Procedure will require expansion to include response by a personal

vehicle to an emergency scene. In most current situations the firefighter is responding to the fire station, changing into the required firefighter Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and then responding to the emergency on a fire apparatus. In rare cases, firefighters have been authorized by Fire Administration to respond directly to scene in personal vehicles. Each firefighter's situation is assessed, taking in factors such as firefighter health and safety, availability to respond from work during daytime hours, distance from home/work to the station, response record, and provision of a secure container for transporting PPE in personal vehicle.

## **Federal Incentives**

On April 16th, the 2024 Federal Budget included an increase to tax credits for volunteer firefighters and search and rescue volunteers. The tax credit doubled, from \$3,000 to \$6,000 for the 2024 tax year and subsequent tax years, saving volunteer firefighters up to \$900 per year.

The implementation of O.Reg 343/22 Firefighter Certification in 2022 requires volunteer firefighters to achieve NFPA 1001 & 1002 firefighter certification. This certification provides volunteer opportunities to pursue a fulltime career in firefighting as NFPA firefighter certification is recognized across North America.

As the collective agreement for the volunteer firefighters expires at the end of 2024, there may be additional incentives council may wish to consider to assist with recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters. Such incentives will be discussed with Council when a control position is being considered.

## **Conclusion**

Since this report was requested by City Council in 2021, GSFS has proceeded with the modernization of the Volunteer Fire Service through technology enhancements (specifically the "I Am Responding" mobile app), updating the volunteer recruitment process, developing an aid agreement for the western portion of the City, certification training including new portable fire suppression props, and consideration of expanding the respond from home practices. The implemented initiatives noted above increases communication and participation of volunteer firefighters, which assist with the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters. GSFS will continue to identify and implement additional opportunities to modernize the fire service.