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January 16, 2023

Mr. Chris Brown, ESQ
Miyares and Harrington LLP
40 Grove Street • Suite 190
Wellesley, MA 02482

RE: Blackstone Fire Service Management Letter

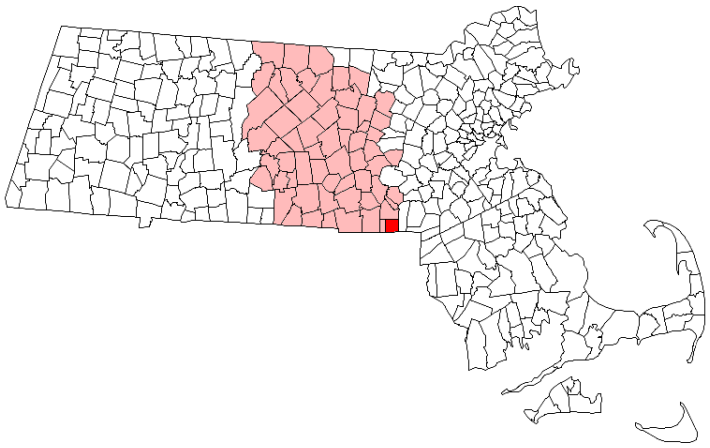
Dear Attorney Brown:

I am providing this management letter to you as a confidential working draft for the purpose of informing negotiations and under attorney client privilege. Please share this information with the Town as appropriate.

The Town of Blackstone has contracted with Municipal Resources, Inc. (MRI) to develop a management letter that provides the community with an overview and perspective on current issues that are impacting the Blackstone Fire Department. Specifically, the Board of Selectmen requests an assessment to determine a baseline of operations, identification of issues related to leadership transition, and overall evaluation of resources that impact delivery of public safety services to the community. It is the goal of the town to have a reliable response capability, for both fire and medical emergencies, utilizing the current small career staff to supplement a predominantly on-call organizational configuration.

The goal of our review was to perform an analysis of the department to identify current issues and challenges, as well as potential threats that could frustrate the department's success in the years to come. To accomplish that goal, this management letter is divided into eleven sections as detailed below:

I. OVERVIEW



The Town on Blackstone, located in south central Massachusetts covers 11.2 square miles within Worcester County in Central Massachusetts. According to the 2020 census, the town has a resident population of 9,249. With a population density of 820 persons per square mile, the town is classified as a rural community, which is an accurate classification. The implication of this classification from a fire and emergency services perspective, is an acknowledgement that emergency responses may take longer due to longer travel distances to reach the scene and transporting patients to the hospital. These longer travel distances also translate into longer response times.

The Blackstone Fire Department is nominally a full-service fire/rescue organization which provides fire, rescue - such as vehicle extrication, and emergency medical services at the advanced life support level (ALS) to the community. It currently has an Insurance Services Office (ISO) rating of 4/4X, which is the mid-point of the scale and commendable for a small community with a water supply. From 2017 through 2021, the department has averaged 418.6 incidents per year of which an average of 172 (41%) were EMS related. The fire department's annual operating budget is $1,133,492.16, of which about $396,001 is offset by revenue generated by EMS third party billing for ambulance transports.

The department is authorized a total of twelve full-time personnel. There is also a total of fourteen personnel listed as part-time on-call firefighters. However, as is often the case with on-call and volunteer fire departments, only about three or four of these personnel are truly active and respond to calls on a regular basis.

The current command staff of the fire department is comprised of the fire chief who is serves as a shared resource with the Town of Mendon. This situation has created a leadership and management challenge within the Department as there is not day to day oversight and insufficient time to manage the requirements of a combination department.

The Blackstone Fire Department (BFD) operates from three fire stations located in various sections of the community. Station 1 is located at 15 St. Paul Street and houses two engines,

one ladder truck, one brush truck, and one ambulance. Within this station is the chief's office, two lieutenant's offices (each with two work spaces), a day room / kitchen, a storage room, sleeping quarters, and a locker room.

II. SCOPE OF WORK AND METHODOLOGY

MRI conducted a comprehensive service study of the Blackstone Fire Department. In an effort to obtain the necessary information our team conducted a site visit of the Town (inclusive of public safety facilities) and a tour of the community, reviewed target hazards and interviewed members of the fire department. The topics included in this report include:

A. Identification and inventory of issues currently facing the Blackstone Fire Department;

B. Identification of issues related to leadership transition;

C. Development of a recommended organizational chart for the Blackstone Fire Department, including recommendations relative to the number of personnel in each rank;

D. An evaluation of fire service data and operational information as provided by the Town;

E. Evaluation of the current deployment and response patterns;

F. Evaluation of response times, incident volume, (trend analysis) and the number of personnel that respond to each call for service;

G. Evaluation of the average number of responders to emergency incidents;

H. Assess and evaluate the department's current staffing, organization and delivery of services, with the primary focus being emergency medical response;

I. Review the location and effectiveness and configuration of fire facilities;

J. Evaluation of mutual and automatic aid practices in Blackstone;

K. Conduct a SWOT analysis for the Blackstone Fire Department;

L. Review and comment on apparatus, and facilities;

M. Review the qualification, training and selection of officers;

N. Review current recruitment and retention efforts;

O. Recruitment and retention of on-call personnel;

P. Outline a process to implement change;

Q. Develop a report that will address staffing, organizational structure, service demand trends, apparatus set configuration, training and facility needs over the next decade.

To accomplish these tasks, we employed the following ten methodologies:

1. Reviewed pertinent service demand data
2. Conducted a review of response times
3. Toured the community and reviewed target hazards
4. Evaluated fire service facilities and equipment
5. Interviewed the town administrator
6. Interviewed the fire chief
7. Interviewed the fire department command staff
8. Interviewed several other members of the fire department
9. Reviewed various fire department documents
10. Developed a management letter

III. SIGNIFICANT ISSUES CURRENTLY FACING THE BLACKSTONE FIRE DEPARTMENT

The emergency service expectations of the Blackstone Fire Department by the citizens of the Town of Blackstone include the provision of basic fire protection, fire suppression, and emergency medical services provided at the advanced life support level, including patient

transport. They also expect delivery of basic rescue services, including vehicle extrication and water rescue, and hazardous materials response to the basic operational level.

MRI's assessment clearly indicates deficiencies in the department's ability to meet the public's expectations as described above. **The following summarizes what we believe are the major (and in several cases immediate) issues that are impacting the Blackstone Fire Department's ability to meet those expectations.**

1. **One of the significant issues that is facing the BFD is that a policy and procedure document does not exist. This creates a significant liability for the organization and the Town of Blackstone.**

2. **The BFD currently does not have a full-time chief officer. The chief position is being shared between the Towns of Mendon and Blackstone and there is no Deputy / Assistant Chief. We believe that this situation has deprived the fire department of the unique leadership, direction, and vision necessary for a fire and rescue organization to make positive progress. The result of this effects future items in this document, many relative to NFPA 1500. Within the department there was also a question of chief officer availability as it relates to operational issues or responses.**

3. **The BFD is operating Self Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA) that requires annual testing of the actual apparatus and hydrostatic testing of the cylinder. MRI was only able to obtain flow testing (required by NFPA 1852) for two years' worth of data (2020 and 2021). Among the SCBA present it was noted that 17 of the air cylinders present will be expired and require disposal in April of 2023. One was noted to be out of hydrostatic compliance.**

4. **The BFD has six brand new MSA G-1 sets of SCBA which have not been placed in service as they are a different type than the other units currently operated by the Department. We discourage having multiple types of SCBA in service which could cause operational confusion and increase training requirements.**

5. **The BFD does not conduct FIT Testing of firefighters that are certified to operate in an environment that is Immediately Dangerous to Life and Health (IDLH). This testing provides guidance on the size of mask best suited to each firefighter and minimizes inhalation of the products of combustion or other toxic/carcinogenic gases. Per NFPA 1500 and 29 CFR 1910 this shall be done annually. Failure to complete this requirement represents a clear liability on the Town. In addition to this provision, it is recommended that each firefighter**

be assigned their own SCBA mask to assure a proper operational fit and prevent biological contamination.

6. **The BFD permits firefighters to wear structural firefighting ensembles beyond life expectancy. The National Fire Protection Agency provides standards (NFPA 1851) relative to personal protective equipment and the use beyond retirement recommendations negatively affects the health and safety of firefighters. This practice also creates both a risk for personnel and a growing liability on the Town.**

7. **Most BFD career personnel have completed formal recruit training and are certified at the Firefighter I/II level, the most basic of firefighter certifications. One career member is not certified and is expected to attend the Massachusetts Firefighting Academy in May of 2023. Although other members of the on-call department may have participated in some regionally based basic training, many did not complete the training or did not obtain their certification. The lack of certification by personnel serving as firefighters raises serious questions about what actions they are trained and qualified to perform. It also presents serious potential liability to the Town. Personnel not certified to the level of Firefighter I should not be allowed to participate in interior structural firefighting operations.**

8. **The Department has no designated training officer internally, no real formal in-service training program, and utilizes a private contractor to conduct some departmental training.**

9. **There is almost no one currently within the Department that possesses the requisite training, certification, and experience to be considered qualified to be an officer, other than the part-time chief.**

10. **MRI was unable to locate aerial testing records for the department's Ladder truck. We were advised that a test had been completed around 2016 but that the truck failed the inspection. It is unknown why or if a repair was made. This annual test is outlined in NFPA 1911. Failure to complete this requirement represents a clear liability on the Town.**

11. **MRI was unable to locate any testing records for ground ladders. Ground ladders shall be tested annually to assure that they are safe for firefighters to use to prevent injuries. This can be referenced in NFPA 1932. Failure to complete this requirement represents a clear liability on the Town.**

12. **MRI was unable to locate any records relative to annual hose testing since 2013. It was also confirmed that there has been no testing completed for at least the previous three years. This testing is required per NFPA 1962. This creates a safety concern as hose lines are operating a high pressure and if they fail can result in significant injury. Failure to complete this requirement represents a clear liability on the Town.**

13. **MRI was advised of pump testing records for two of the Department's pumpers from 2021 following the rebuilding of the pumps on this apparatus. Testing was not completed on the other two engines in 202. Other than the two tests listed above, pump testing of all apparatus has not been completed in several years. NFPA 1911 requires that each apparatus that has a pump should be tested annually. Failure to complete this requirement represents a clear liability on the Town.**

14. **Facility security is lacking as our personnel were allowed uninhibited and unannounced access to dispatch from both the fire and town hall side of the building. This represents a significant risk to personnel and operations and is contrary to industry best practice.**

Each of the thirteen critical items listed above should be considered to be an immediate priority and our team recommends that these high priority items be addressed immediately.

IV. LEADERSHIP TRANSITION ISSUES

The leadership issues facing the BFD start with the fact that the department does not have a full-time chief officer / administrative officer to run a combination department. This has created a situation where the Department is falling behind with expected compliance with standards, succession planning, and direct operational oversite. Currently, there is no clear sense of common vision for the future of the BFD.

As stated previously, the Blackstone Fire Department does not have a succession plan in place. This fact has contributed to the current situation within the department that has allowed little professional growth and development to occur. Because of this we see an organization that needs a strong infusion of technical knowledge, management experience, and leadership skills. The town leadership needs to be aware of the fact that the lack of full-time professional oversite can create a heightened level of anxiety and stress among members of the organization.

It is our belief that the BFD requires the installation of strong "full-time" leadership whether at the chief officer level or the deputy chief level. Each day that passes without it makes the climb that the Department will need to make more challenging. The lack of direct, in station supervision (Deputy Chief or Fire Chief) of the current staff has created a low productivity work environment and corresponding organizational culture that needs to be reversed. The lack of direct supervision is evidenced in the cleanliness of the station and apparatus, the lack of training, and the general lack of productivity that the team observed among the on-duty career staff.

The Town of Blackstone will need to very carefully examine their options for making this transition successful, and selecting the next administrative officer / fire officer will be very important. It is our opinion that in addition to the requisite education and experience, the successful candidate will need to have excellent and proven, leadership and communications skills to be able to articulate his/her vision for the department moving forward; ensure that all personnel are working in unison toward common goals to achieve that vision; and in general, to navigate through the next several years while the department is strategically moved forward. Previous experience managing a combination full-time/call fire department that provides EMS services will be a definite plus.

V. ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The organizational structure of any organization or entity, whether public or private, establishes and illustrates the important heirarcial relationships between various personnel and supervisors/subordinates within the organization that allow it to function properly, operate effectively, and efficiently in its daily operations or the pursuit of its mission. It also helps to clearly define the organizational chain of command from top to bottom, an especially important consideration in a quasi-military public safety organization, such as the fire department where everyone from the highest rank to the lowest is subject to receiving orders and, with the exception of the lowest rank, also issues them. Effective communications in any organization, but especially public safety agencies, are essential, and a cohesive chain of command allows everyone to know excactly who they report to and/or who reports to them.

The current BFD organizational structure nominally consists of a fire chief, one career captain, three career lieutenants and firefighters, both career and on-call. During interviews there was conversation relative to an MOU that was being discussed to add a Deputy Chief to the Department.

The position of Fire Chief was held for many years by a career member, who also served concurrently as the emergency management director. Recently secondary to retirement, the

position of fire chief is currently being shared with the Town of Mendon. The captain of the department is assigned a rotating work group and also assists with some administration and training. However, none of these duties and responsibilities have been formally established or placed into writing as there are no job descriptions present at the fire department. At the time of this assessment, one shift lieutenant was on long-term injury leave.

In our opinion, the current organizational structure is not suitable for a combination department of this size, and is not conducive to effective, or efficient, operations. For a small organization, Blackstone lacks full-time oversite by a chief level officer that can manage both the career and call staff.

Traditionally, and in most fire service organizations, company level officers (captains and lieutenants) are working supervisors. They form an integral part of their company, apparatus, or unit, and it is often necessary for them to assume hands-on involvement in operations while simultaneously providing oversight and direction to their personnel. During structure fires and other dangerous technical operations, it is imperative that these officers accompany, and operate with, their crew to monitor conditions, provide situation reports, and assess progress toward incident mitigation. During structure fires, they must be capable of operating inside of the fire building with their crews, the most dangerous place on the incident scene.

It is imperative that these officers are highly qualified and experienced and can command the confidence of their personnel. It is also important that personnel who are serving as chief level officers fully understand and are experienced at these skills and tasks before assuming greater responsibility. While we are cognizant that any type of organizational hierarchy is not always going to line up perfectly on emergency incidents, we believe that the organizational structure we recommend will provide increased operational effectiveness, safety, and improved accountability.

Recommendation V-1 - The Town of Blackstone should create a significantly revised organizational table for the Blackstone Fire Department to clearly delineate the chain of command and make it more effective and efficient (Figure 1). Bargaining will be necessary to implement many of these changes should the Town opt to hire a Deputy Chief.

Recommendation V-2 - To stress the fact that the Blackstone Fire Department remains primarily a combination department, a Deputy Fire Chief, should be designated as a career position and work to develop the on-call staff by promoting certification and training.

Recommendation V-3 - The Town should promote professional growth and development, particularly amongst the officer core, to begin succession planning and allow for internal advancement in the future.

Recommendation V-4 - In addition to their normal emergency scene operational duties and station management responsibilities, all officers should have one or more administrative duties/responsibilities to assist the Fire Chief with the Department's overall management.

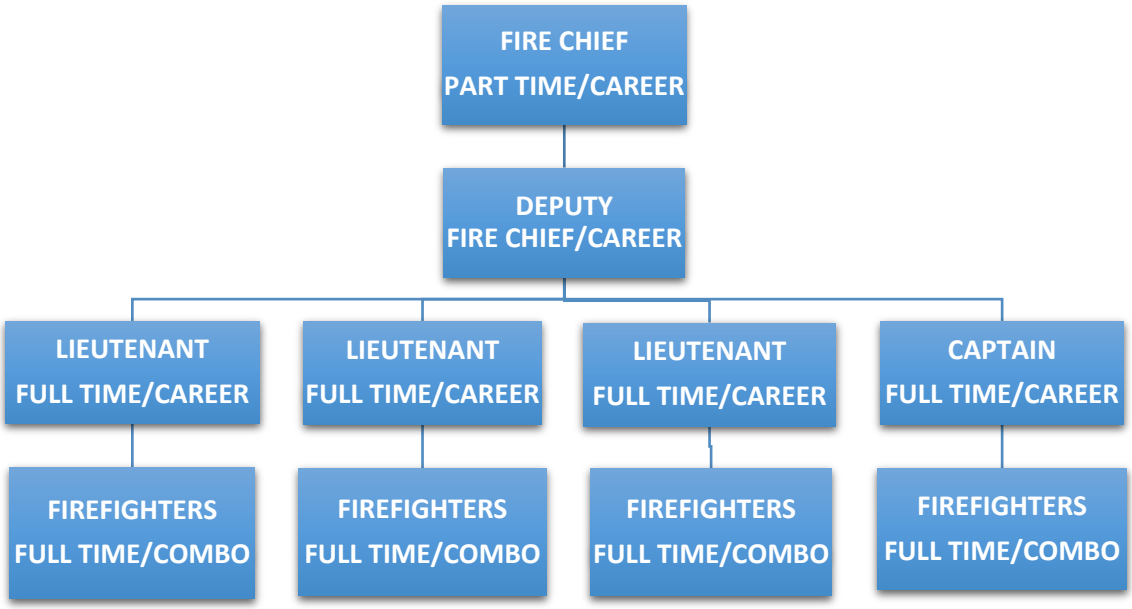


Figure 1 - Proposed Blackstone Fire Department Organizational Chart

Organizational Structure Notes:

- Fire Chief (Career- Part-Time) – 1
- Deputy Fire Chief (Career) – 1
- Fire Lieutenant (Career) – 3
- Fire Captain (Career) – 1
  - ✓ A call lieutenant should be added once the call membership exceeds 16 certified personnel.
- Firefighter (Career) – 8
- Firefighter (Call) – 25 – 30
  - ✓ Development of a call force of 20 to 25 fully trained, certified, and active members should be the goal over a 3-year period.

VI. INCIDENT RESPONSE TIMES AND PERSONNEL TURNOUT

By definition, the BFD is a combination fire department. The Department does utilize a small career staff whose primary responsibility is to provide timely and guaranteed response of the ambulance during their assigned duty hours. However, these personnel are also cross-utilized for fire duty and are designated as firefighters.

At the time that this assessment was completed, the BFD's on-call firefighter roster listed fourteen personnel. Several members on this active roster appear to have received zero compensation or had low participation for years leading us to believe that the number of truly active members is low. Even in a small town such as Blackstone, the size of the Department from an on- call personnel perspective, is not going to be adequate to handle the expected emergency workload. In addition, in almost any call/volunteer emergency services organization there is going to be a percentage of members whose names still appear on the "active" roster, yet they no longer truly are, or are minimally so, for a variety of reasons. Factor in that most members of the department have a primary job, other than the fire department, that probably limits their availability to respond mostly during normal business hours, and the current staffing picture becomes much more of a concern.

Of the fourteen personnel listed on the roster, the highest responder provided 198 hours of call back to general recalls. To provide a comparison, two other members provided zero hours of response during fiscal year 2022 and the average was approximately 50 hours per year by the remaining personnel. These statistics tend to support the idea that the Department currently has between four and six truly active on-call members.

In 2021, the Blackstone Fire Department dispatched 921 calls where members of the Department were toned out for an incident response. These incidents can include various fire related incidents, motor vehicle crashes, and serious emergency medical situations. The average response time for calls during this calendar year was 6 minutes and 45 seconds. It is unknown how many general recalls there were as the Department was unable to provide this data. The number of personnel who responded ranged from a low of just one member to a high that we estimate to be 10 personnel. Record keeping was found to be extremely difficult to obtain for certain items as it was noted that the retired Chief of Department kept "log books" that were hand written every year for decades and stored on a closet shelf. MRI did request information from the Department of Fire Services Data Unit and learned that the Town reported 420 responses in calendar year 2021 for fire and EMS. During this same time the Town's EMS billing company billed for over 700 patients. It is our belief that a significant amount of mutual aid may have been provided out of state and this information was not provided via Massachusetts Fire Incident Reporting System.

From the perspective of effective emergency response, there are three main factors that are used to help determine the deployment of resources: **response time, travel distance, and call volume.** For most evaluations, response time is the most critical factor; an important measuring

instrument to determine how well a fire department or EMS provider is currently performing, to help identify response trends, and to predict future operational needs. Getting emergency assistance to the scene of a 9-1-1 caller in the quickest time possible may be critical to the survival of the patient and/or successful mitigation of the incident. Achieving the quickest and safest response times possible should be a fundamental goal of every fire department and EMS provider. It is not just a cliché that during critical life threatening situations, minutes and even seconds truly do count.

Structural firefighting has become far more challenging and dangerous in the last thirty years. A fire can easily double in size and intensity every 30 seconds. If firefighters cannot arrive in a timely manner and attack the fire quickly, a strong possibility exists that a dangerous flashover (simultaneous ignition of the all combustible materials in a room) will occur. Flashover can occur within five to seven minutes of fire ignition, and is one of the most dangerous events that a firefighter, or trapped civilians, can face. When a flashover occurs, initial firefighting forces are generally overwhelmed and will require significantly more resources to effect fire control and extinguishment.

Heart attack and stroke victims require rapid intervention and care, and transport to a medical facility. The longer the time duration without care, the less likely the patient is to fully recover. Numerous studies have shown that irreversible brain damage can occur if the brain is deprived of oxygen for more than four minutes. In addition, the potential for successful resuscitation during cardiac arrest decreases exponentially with each passing minute that cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) or cardiac defibrillation is delayed.

The BFD does not have a formal or established Standard of Cover[1] (SOC) for their district. This is not unusual for a smaller department. An analysis of the Blackstone Fire Department's incident response times (based upon data provided to us by the department) for fire related incidents from 2017 through 2021, indicated that during that five-year period, the department responded to a total of 75 true fire related incidents, an average of 15 per year. During this period, it was reported that there were three civilian injuries, one civilian death, and zero injuries to firefighters. During that time, this data indicates that the first unit arrived on location within 7.5 minutes of dispatch 46.62% of the time. **We question the accuracy of times and suggest that moving forward a policy/directive should be issued to fire staff and dispatch staff to better monitor response times over the next year.** Looked at from the opposite direction, from 2017 through 2021, response to structure related incident took six minutes for the first unit to arrive on location (Figure 2).

[1] *The Commission on Fire Accreditation, International defines "Standards of Response Coverage" (SOC) as being those adopted, written policies and procedures that determine the distribution, concentration and reliability of fixed and mobile response forces for fire, emergency medical services, hazardous materials and other forces of technical response including defining baseline emergency response performance standards.*

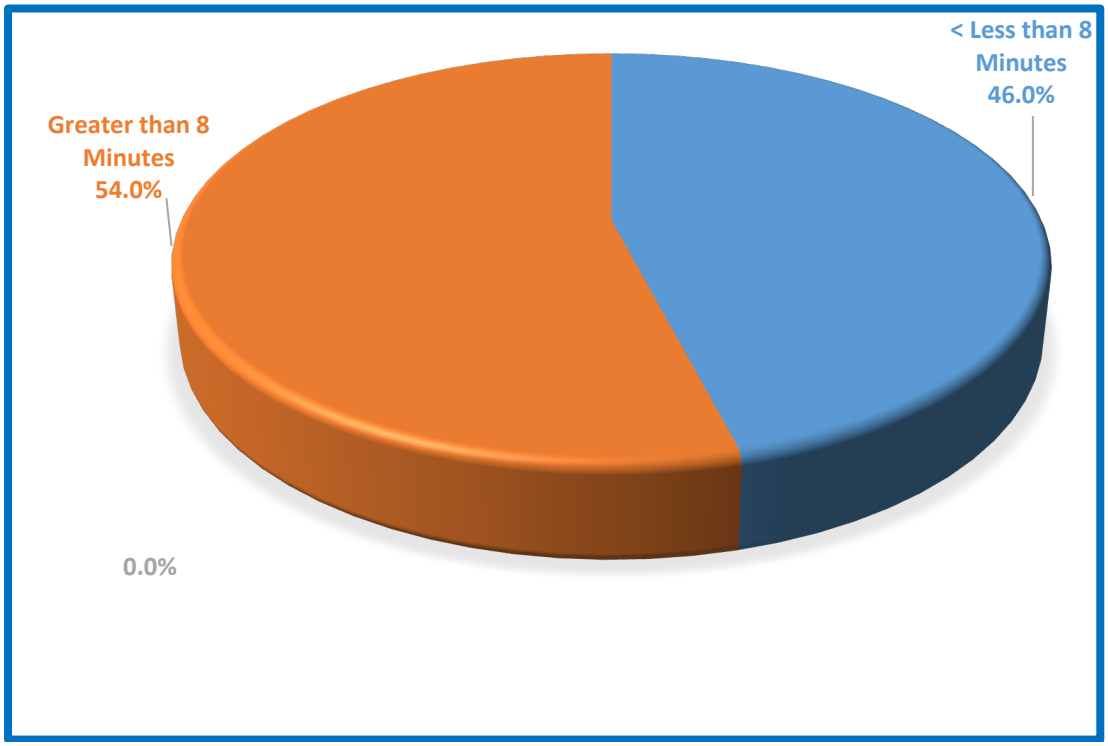


Figure 2 – Incident Response Times – Fire Related 2014-2016
Average Fire based response time 6 Minutes overall

Note: Figure 2 represents our best attempt at generating an accurate response time chart. However, this was based on an incomplete and arguably an inaccurate data set.

For EMS incidents, nationally the standard of care based on stroke and cardiac arrest protocols is to have a unit on scene at a medical emergency within six minutes from receipt of the 9-1-1 call. Paragraph 4.1.2.1(4) of NFPA 1710[2], which would be applicable to Blackstone Fire Department EMS operations since they are primarily provided by in station, career personnel, recommends that for EMS incidents, a unit with first responder or higher level trained personnel and equipped with an AED, should arrive within four minutes of response (five minutes of dispatch of the call), and an Advanced Life Support (ALS) unit should arrive on scene within eight minutes (ten minutes of call receipt. Paragraph 4.1.2.2 recommends the establishment of a 90% performance objective for these response times. CAAS[3] recommends

[2] NFPA 1710, *Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations and Special Operations to the Public by Career Fire Departments,* 2014 edition (National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA), outlines organization and deployment of operations by career and primarily career fire departments.

[3] *The Commission on Accreditation of Ambulance Services (CAAS) is an independent commission that established a comprehensive series of standards for the ambulance service industry.*

that an ambulance arrive on scene within seven minutes, fifty-nine seconds (00:07:59) of dispatch.

An analysis of the BFD incident response times (based upon data provided to us by the department) for EMS related incidents from 2017 through 2021, indicated that during that five-year period, the department responded to a total of 2,093 incidents, an average of 418 per year. Again, we question the accuracy as there appears to be a significant amount of mutual aid data missing. During that time, this data indicates that the first unit arrived on location within six minutes of dispatch 46.62% of the time. Looked at from the opposite direction, from 2017 through 2021, the average response time of EMS related incidents took 6 minutes 45 seconds for the first unit to arrive on location (Figure 3).

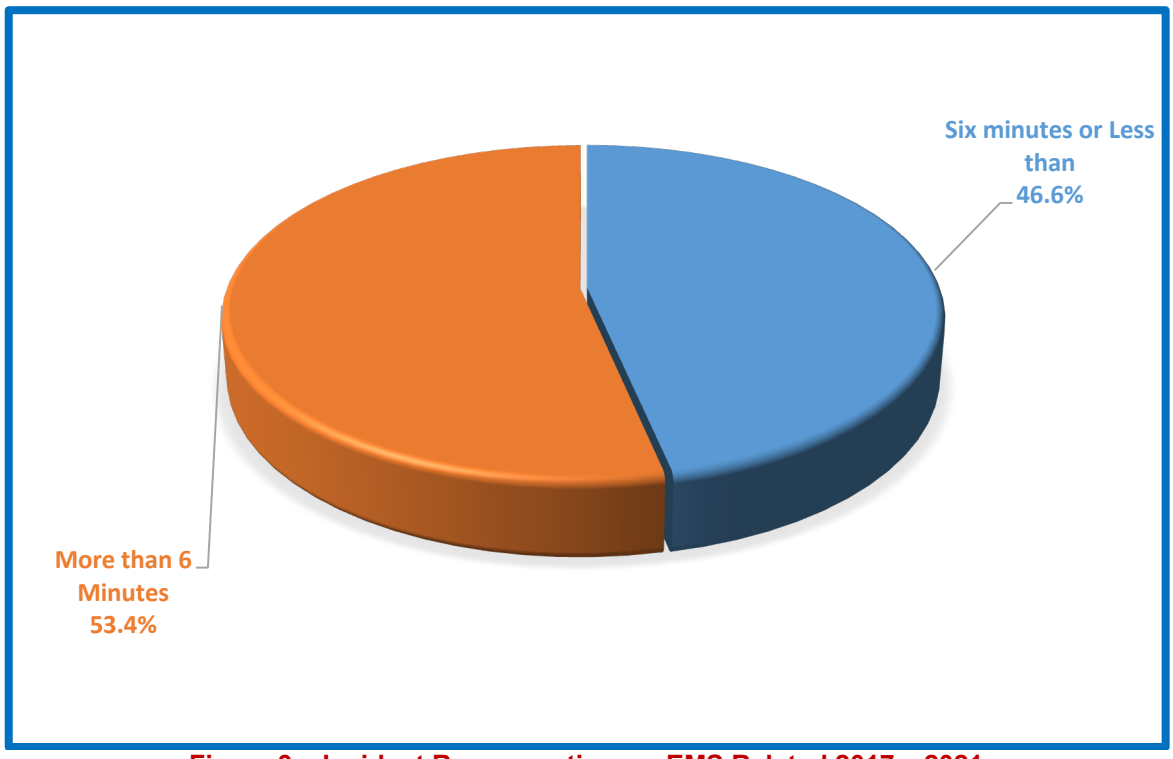


Figure 3 – Incident Response times – EMS Related 2017 – 2021
Average EMS response Time 6:45

Note: Figure 3 represents our best attempt at generating an accurate response time chart. However, this was based on an incomplete and arguably an inaccurate data set.
Although the number of incidents during this time is relatively low, data provided to us by the department shows that response times are much higher than would be desired (Figure 5).

Throughout this evaluation of response times it was noted that the average response appeared to take longer than necessary for a small community. One concerning issue should be the clinical outcome of out of hospital cardiac arrests in the community. Another should be the delayed response / interventions to critically ill or injured persons.

The incident reporting system/data base (IMC) currently utilized by the Blackstone Fire and Police Departments apparently does not have the capability to extract certain response data, particularly on the fire and EMS side. This is partially because of the system being very police centric. The Town should consider evaluating a Record Management System that is applicable to Fire/EMS to better facilitate data collection and enhance departmental capabilities as well.

Recommendation VI -1 - The BFD should make it a priority to improve its first unit on scene response times, including the adoption of a SOC, for the town. The SOC should be based upon a hybrid of the NFPA 1710/1720 and CAAS recommendations.

Recommendation VI-2 - With Blackstone covering only 11.2 square miles, the Blackstone Fire Department should adopt standard of cover benchmarks to have the first unit responding to emergency incidents within one minute of dispatch (career/staffed station), and have the first unit on scene within eight minutes after responding to all types of calls, 90% of the time.

Recommendation VI-3 - The BFD needs to examine and consider all options for improving its Records Management System. This asset should have a bridge that allows data to be dumped from IMC to permit better accuracy with time recording and enhance operational capabilities.

Recommendation VI-4 - The Town of Blackstone should evaluate the amount of mutual aid that it provides versus receives. Is this number equitable or is the Blackstone taxpayer subsidizing neighboring community's EMS services?

VII. AUTOMATIC AND MUTUAL AID PRACTICES

Paragraph 4.1, *Fire Suppression Organization* in NFPA 1720[4] states, fire suppression operations shall be organized to ensure that the fire department's fire suppression capability includes sufficient personnel, equipment, and other resources to deploy fire suppression resources effectively, efficiently, and safely. Paragraph 4.2.2, *Community Risk Management,* states the

[4] NFPA 1720, *Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations and Special Operations to the Public by Volunteer Fire Departments,* 2014 edition (National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA) outlines organization and deployment of operations by volunteer/call, and primarily volunteer/call fire departments.

number and types of units assigned to respond to a reported incident shall be determined by risk analysis and/or pre-fire planning.

At the time of this study, when a call was received reporting any type of a fire/emergency incident in a structure (smoke/fire in the building, interior gas leak, etc.), regardless of size, the Blackstone Fire Department is for the most part dispatched alone for the incident. The decision on whether to request additional resources to respond is made on a case by case basis by the highest-ranking officer responding, based upon information they may be receiving while en route and/or upon conditions encountered upon their arrival on the scene. This procedure is a concern in that it results in delays in the dispatch and response of additional needed mutual aid resources who may be faced with limited staffing, travel distance, and response time issues of their own. With a roster of just fourteen call personnel, about 50% of whom are active, the result is that from a practical operational stand point it can significantly impact the ability of the department to quickly mitigate the incident, resulting in potentially increased fire damage and loss.

While Blackstone reports to utilize a box alarm/run card system, they report that the actual run card is managed by "Rhode Island Intercity." MRI personnel have searched on-line for this information without success. It should be noted that Blackstone, MA is geographically assigned to Massachusetts Fire District 7 which has a communications center in Southbridge, MA. And a back-up communications center in Northbridge, MA. Blackstone has resources available to the community through this fire district such as a Fire Investigation Unit, Technical Rescue Unit, Dive Rescue Team, Communications Team, District Assistance Team, and a Public Information Officer. Annual dues are inexpensive ($1100) and 25 communities assigned have an exemplary working relationship. Within District 7 there is also a training facility with a burn building that is available to participating community's in Auburn, MA. The chief officers in each of the District 7 towns meeting monthly and continue to advance the fire service in a professional capacity together.

The operations necessary to successfully extinguish a structure fire, and do so effectively, efficiently, and safely, requires a carefully coordinated, and controlled, plan of action, where certain operations, such as venting ahead of the advancing interior hose line(s), must be carried out with a high degree of precision and timing. Multiple operations, frequently where seconds count, such as search and rescue operations and trying to cut off a rapidly advancing fire, must also be conducted simultaneously. If there are not enough personnel on the incident initially to perform all of the critical tasks, some will, out of necessity, be delayed. This can result in an increased risk of serious injury, or death, to building occupants and firefighters, and increased property damage.

At the time of this assessment Blackstone does not have any minimum staffing requirements for their apparatus so vehicles can respond with just one or two personnel rather than a much

more desirable minimum of three or the recommended four. It is our opinion that Blackstone, with their current personnel resources, will rarely be able to get either sufficient apparatus or firefighters to the scene of a significant incident without turning to their neighboring departments for assistance. Paragraph 4.7.3 of NFPA 1720 states, the fire department shall be allowed to use established automatic aid or mutual aid agreements to comply with the requirements of Section 4.7, *Sustained Firefighting Operations*. Paragraph 4.3.5, *Staffing and Deployment* states, standard response assignments and procedures, including mutual aid response and mutual aid agreements predetermined by the location and nature of the reported incident, shall regulate the dispatch of companies, response groups, and command officers to fires and other emergency incidents.

It is important to point out that command and control of emergency incidents is very important. With limited fire officers on-duty in the Town of Blackstone the department should not overlook the District 7 "District Assistance Team" and consider it a valuable resource.

Recommendation VII – 1 - In consultation and cooperation with its neighboring departments, the BFD should enter into formal automatic aid agreements that specifies the number and types of resources that should be dispatched immediately to various types of reported emergencies, such as structure fires. These recommendations should be based upon a community-wide risk management process and/or pre-fire/incident plans.

RecommendationVI-2 - Although more stringent than the requirements found in Table 4.3.2 of NFPA 1720 for rural communities, through the utilization of automatic aid agreements with neighboring communities, the BFD should consider the adoption of an SOC with the goal of attempting to have at least 16 personnel on the scene of any reported structure fire within 14 minutes.

Recommendation VII – 3 - The BFD should formalize short-term automatic/mutual aid agreements that allow for qualified command staff to assist at emergency incidents in Blackstone while reporting to the fire chief. These roles would be inclusive of Safety Officer, Accountability Officer, Rapid Intervention Officer, etc.

VIII. FIRE SERVICE FACILITIES AND APPARATUS

FIRE STATION FACILITY

Fire and EMS stations are a critical community asset. The station facilities of a modern fire and EMS department are designed to do much more than simply provide a garage for apparatus and a place for firefighters and EMS personnel to wait for a call. Well-designed fire and EMS facilities enable staff to perform their duties effectively, efficiently, and safely.

The BFD currently operates out of 3 fire stations to serve a population of 8,804 within 11.23 square miles. Headquarters, located at 15 Saint Paul St, houses fire department administration, fire prevention and operations. Blackstone Station 2, located at 666 Rathbun Street, houses operations. Blackstone Station 3, located at 132 Elm Street also houses operations.

Figure 4 – Blackstone Fire Station One – 15 St. Paul Street
Photo courtesy of massfiretrucks.com

Station One, located at 15 Saint Paul Street is the headquarters station. The station houses the full-time duty crew, fire chief, combined police/fire dispatch (PSAP), fire prevention activities and operations. The building houses 2 Class 'A' structural pumpers, one aerial ladder truck, one brush truck and an ambulance. The building was constructed in the 1970's and is connected to the police station and town offices. Dispatch center security is an issue as anyone can walk unimpeded from the police station through the dispatch center and into the fire department. Overall building condition is average to fair. The station does not have adequate storage. The building has no automatic suppression system (sprinklers). There is no smoke detection system and carbon monoxide detectors are only located in the sleeping areas. There is heat detectors present in the facility. There is a radio fire alarm box to transmit any alarm activation to the central station.

There is an apparatus exhaust ventilation system which covers most of the vehicles. One more system drop is needed for full coverage. Members turnout gear is stored in the apparatus bays on racks which is not consistent with NFPA standards. There is no dedicated facility to decontaminate members who return with contaminates from EMS, fire or other hazardous responses. There is adequate protective turnout gear washing equipment onsite however it is located in the sleeping dormitory which permits contaminated turnout gear to enter this area. Also in the sleeping dormitory there is a large hole in the wall which was made to facilitate plumbing. The area around this permits visual access into the unisex locker room creating a liability for the Town.

There is a station self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) air filling station, however there is no filling cage provided. The entire complex is protected by an emergency diesel power generator.

Station 1 Recommendations:

1) Security measures should be taken to prevent unimpeded access to the public safety dispatch area. This area, as well as the fire station should be secure, controlled access areas.
2) Long term vision of this building should include a full coverage automatic fire suppression (sprinkler) system to protect the community's public safety investment.
3) The building needs a comprehensive smoke and fire detection system including carbon monoxide protection to code. This is a life safety issue and should not be delayed.
4) One more drop should be added to the apparatus exhaust system, creating full coverage and maximum protection from diesel exhaust.
5) Appropriate decontamination area should be constructed to decontaminate members who return with contaminates from EMS, fire, or other hazardous responses.
6) A protective cage should be provided on the self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) air filling station to minimize risk of injury while filling air bottles.
7) The wall between the sleeping quarters and the gender-neutral locker room should be repaired to provide privacy and reduce liability.

Figure 5 – Blackstone Station Two – Located at 666 Rathbun Street
Photo courtesy of massfiretrucks.com

Station Two, located at 666 Rathbun Street, is staffed by the call members and thus is not open 24/7. The building houses one Class 'A' structural pumper, one dive team truck, a small rescue boat and an ambulance. The building was constructed in the 1980's. Overall building condition is fair. The station does not have adequate storage. The building has no automatic suppression system (sprinklers). There is no smoke detection system and no carbon monoxide detectors system. There is heat detection. There is a radio fire alarm box to transmit any alarm activation to the central station. There is no apparatus exhaust ventilation system to remove noxious diesel exhaust. Members turnout gear is stored in the apparatus bays on racks. There is no dedicated facility to decontaminate members who return with contaminates from EMS, fire, or other hazardous responses. Turnout gear washing facilities are located at station 1. There is a station self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) air filling station available at station 1. Emergency power is delivered through a natural gas fueled generator.

Station Two Recommendations:

- Long term vision of this building should include a full coverage automatic fire suppression (sprinkler) system to protect the community's public safety investment.

- The building needs a comprehensive smoke and fire detection system including carbon monoxide protection to code. This is a life safety issue and should not be delayed.
- An apparatus exhaust ventilation system should be provided to protect employees from noxious diesel exhaust.

Figure 6 – Blackstone Station Three – Located at 132 Elm Street
Photo courtesy of massfiretrucks.com

Station Three, located at 132 Elm Street, is staffed by the call members and thus is not open 24/7. The building houses one Class 'A' structural pumper and two tanker trucks. Both Tanker trucks are out of service. The building was constructed in the 1970's. Overall building condition is fair. The station does not have adequate storage. The building has no automatic suppression system (sprinklers). There is no smoke detection system and no carbon monoxide detectors system. There is heat detection. There is a radio fire alarm box to transmit any alarm activation to the central station. There is no apparatus exhaust ventilation system to remove noxious diesel exhaust. Members turnout gear is stored in the apparatus bays on racks. There is no dedicated facility to decontaminate members who return with contaminates from EMS, fire, or other hazardous responses. Turnout gear washing facilities are located at station 1. There is a

station self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) air filling station available at station 1. Emergency power is delivered through a natural gas fueled generator.

Station Three Recommendations:

- Long term vision of this building should include a full coverage automatic fire suppression (sprinkler) system to protect the community's public safety investment.
- The building needs a comprehensive smoke and fire detection system including carbon monoxide protection to code. This is a life safety issue and should not be delayed.
- An apparatus exhaust ventilation system should be provided to protect employees from noxious diesel exhaust.

With three stations located within an 11 sq. mile area, the Town should consider whether two stations are adequate to protect the community. This would be a separate study and is not part of this management letter.

Future fire station design should include a detailed review of the following components :

- Health and Safety
  - Fire protection systems (automatic fire sprinkler, fire and carbon monoxide detection)
  - Remote shut offs for kitchen stove controlled by the dispatcher.
  - Equipment decontamination
  - Extractors (washers) and dryers for personal protective equipment (PPE)
  - Building security and access
  - Fire code compliance (means of egress, separation of crew quarters from apparatus and other hazardous areas, fire extinguishers etc.)

- Facility operations
  - Heating and air conditioning system
  - Electrical system and lighting
  - Alarm notification system
  - Gender accommodations
  - Administrative space
  - Apparatus and equipment maintenance capabilities
  - Crew quarters
  - The functionality of apparatus bays
  - Traffic control systems
  - Emergency power

- Natural disaster resilience of the facility (flooding, winter storm, earthquake, etc.)
- IT system support including data back-up and retrieval
- Future fire station space needs and capital improvement planning

Training Building: Located on the grounds of Station One is a three-story wood frame training building. Such buildings are used to facilitate departmental training such as hose evolutions, search, and rescue. Before utilizing this building for training, any required maintenance and upkeep should be performed to ensure the building is structurally safe for training. The facility, types of training and procedures should comply with NFPA 1402 as applicable.

Figure 7 – Blackstone Fire Training Structure

APPARATUS

The geography, infrastructure, hazards, and construction features within the community all play a major role in determining the composition of each department's unique and individualized apparatus fleet and equipment inventory. Blackstone is primarily a rural community with the

expected limited fire potential such communities usually present. However, new single family dwellings are nearly all built utilizing lightweight construction which presents many safety hazards to firefighters. These factors, as well as projected future needs, must be taken into consideration when specifying and purchasing apparatus and equipment. Every effort should be made to make new apparatus as versatile and multi-functional/capable as is possible and practical.

A review of the Town of Blackstone's apparatus fleet in terms of age, condition, and capabilities finds that the BFD maintains a modern fleet of Fire apparatus, and ambulances sufficient to support its mission. The fleet includes:

1) 4 Class A Structural pumpers.
2) 1 109' aerial ladder
3) 2 Tankers (both out of service)
4) 1 Brush/Forestry truck
5) 1 Dive team vehicle
6) 2 Ambulances
7) 1 Marine unit (boat)
8) 1 administration vehicles assigned to the fire chief

There is a 20-year capital plan in place to provide for planned vehicle/major equipment replacement:

1) Each ambulance is scheduled for replacement every 5 years.
2) Each Class 'A' Structural pumpers is scheduled for replacement every 25 years.
3) Tower Aerial Ladder is scheduled for replacement every 30 years.

Annual Apparatus and equipment testing is critical to firefighter safety and minimizes the possibility of an equipment malfunction during emergency operations. The following is BFD annual apparatus testing status:

1) Annual pump test was last completed in 2019
2) Annual ground ladder test was last completed in 2012
3) Annual aerial ladder test was last completed in 2016
4) Annual hose testing was last completed in 2013

As noted previously in this management letter a lack of compliance and annual testing represents a risk to both firefighters, the public and generates an ever-increasing liability on the Town.

Typically, larger fire apparatus is funded by town meeting approval via borrowing.

Fire apparatus should be repaired by certified Emergency Vehicle Technicians (EVTs).
The following are apparatus recommendations:

1) Ensure annual pump test, aerial test, ground ladder tests and hose test are completed to maximize firefighter safety and minimize the possibility of an equipment malfunction during emergency operations.
2) For its staffing and normal expected operational needs, the Blackstone Fire Department should consider hiring a third party vendor to evaluate the current condition of the community's fleet. The information gathered should enable the Town and fire department to right size the department and maintain a fleet that is safe, appropriate for the community, and conforming to the recommendations of the ISO report.

The MRI study team has concerns over the fact that Blackstone has only one ambulance that is easily accessible to the career staff. In any community, there are going to be occasions where there are simultaneous, or at least overlapping incidents, or situations, even relatively minor motor vehicle accidents, where more than one ambulance may be required. In each of these cases, mutual aid would need to be summoned to Blackstone to handle the second incident. The odds of simultaneous or overlapping incidents increases in a community such as Blackstone, where every transport to the hospital will take time by virtue of the fact that all the local hospitals are located in neighboring communities, some with extended travel distances that lengthen turn-around time. This is especially true where transfer times of patients in emergency departments occurs often or when road conditions may be hazardous, particularly during the winter. In addition, anytime the ambulance must be taken out of service for routine maintenance or minor repairs, the department must retrieve the reserve ambulance from an outlying station. Having the second ambulance with the career staff will also allow employees to better care for the EMS resource.

Figure 8
Engine 51 1997 International (Station 1 reserve)

Figure 9
Engine 53 - 2012 Emergency One (Station 1)

Figure 10
Engine 54 2008 International (Station 2)

Figure 11
Engine 55 2018 F450 (Station 1 Brush)

Figure 12
1994 Emergency One (Station 3)

Figure 13
2000 HME 109' (Station 1)

Figure 14
Ambulance 2 2014 F550 (Station 1)

Figure 15
Ambulance 1 2009 GMC (Station 2)

Figure 16
Tanker 1 (Station 3 out of service)

Figure 17
Tanker 3 (Station 3 out of service)

Figure 18
Dive Team 1997 F350 (Station 2)

Recommendation VIII -1 - When the time comes for replacement, Engine 51, 1997 International, the community should consider investing in a custom rescue/pumper that is set up for primary response for the majority of incidents in Blackstone.

Recommendation VIII-2 - Consideration should be given to hiring a third-party consultant to evaluate the safety of the existing fleet.

Recommendation VIII-3 – Once the third-party consultant evaluates the two brush breakers which are out of service, a cost benefit/risk analysis should be conducted to determine if these units are needed or should be repaired.

Recommendation VIII-4 - For the BFD to continue to be able to provide superior service to the community, particularly if there are simultaneous or overlapping incidents, multiple patients from a single incident, or when the ambulance is out of service for maintenance or repair, a second ambulance should be moved to fire headquarters. We also recommend that the community continue to invest in a new ambulance every 5 years. This may require amendment should chain supply issues continue and delivery dates may be prolonged.

Recommendation VIII-5 – The need for, use of and qualification of personnel should be considered when evaluating the ongoing benefit of a Blackstone dive team. Consideration should also be given to participating in the District 7 Dive Team Program.

IX. QUALIFICATIONS, TRAINING, AND SELECTION OF OFFICERS

Training is, without question, one of the three most important functions that a fire department should be performing on a regular basis; the others being response to emergency incidents and fire prevention activities. One could even make a credible argument that training is, in some ways, more important than emergency responses, because a department that is not well trained, prepared, and operationally ready, will be unable to effectively, efficiently, correctly, and safely, fulfill its emergency response obligations and mission. A comprehensive, diverse, and ongoing training program is absolutely critical to the fire department's level of success. The need for well-trained officers, who may be faced with serious life and death decisions that must be made quickly and correctly are absolutely mission critical to any emergency services provider's ability to perform their designated mission(s).

Professional development for fire department personnel, especially officers, is also an important part of overall training. There are numerous excellent opportunities for officers to attend training on a wide range of topics outside of Blackstone, including the Massachusetts Firefighting Academy in Stow, and the Volunteer Incentive Program (VIP) at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland. All state sponsored fire academy courses are offered without charge to local municipalities. Annual events, such as the Fire Department Instructor's Conference (FDIC) in Indianapolis and the Firehouse Expo, provide a wide range classroom training, as well as extensive hands on evolutions. Beyond the practical benefits to be gained from personnel participating in outside training, encouraging personnel to earn and/or maintain various specialized certifications, such as Fire Instructor or Fire Officer, increases the positive professional perception of the organization and can help to demonstrate a commitment to continued excellence. The BD has recently supported outside training by an outside vendor. This should be continued until the Department can support the appointment of a qualified training officer. Once this is accomplished the Department should build training curriculum that supports the following:

1) 16 hours' company training per month (on-duty)
2) 18 hours annually at an approved training facility (available in District 7)
3) 12 hours of officer training per year for command staff
4) 12 hours per year of driver/operator training per year per person
5) 6 hours of hazmat training per year per person

As has been noted previously, one of the major issues facing the BFD is the fact that very few of the current call members of the Department are even trained or qualified at the basic skills and competency levels commensurate with their positions. Only a handful of the call members of the department are apparently certified at the Firefighter I/II level. If personnel have not earned even these basic certifications, it is impossible to imagine that they could function appropriately on fire scenes. **Members not certified to the level of Firefighter I should not be allowed to participate in interior structural firefighting operations.** This is a major problem for the Town and the BFD, one that must be resolved.

All officer positions, both career and call, should be filled based upon the person's firefighting/emergency services training, certifications, and experience commensurate with the position being sought, along with successful completion of a rank appropriate assessment process, and a basic practical skills evaluation. We would highly recommend that these standards include some provision requiring completion of Fire Instructor Level I and Fire Officer Level I as a minimum. All officers should also be required to have completed rank appropriate National Incident Management System (NIMS) training. Finally, they should be required to have completed incident safety officer training.

In conjunction with the officers who will be selected in the future to fill the department's key leadership positions, the next fire chief should work to implement a career development program and succession planning process to ensure that all officers can perform their superior's duties, as well as identify the core future leaders of the department. This should include both career and call officers.

Recommendation IX -1 - The BFD, with the support of the Town of Blackstone, should make it a priority to develop and implement a policy for providing and requiring that all personnel, both career and call, attend, and successfully complete, state sponsored training programs that will result in their achieving basic Firefighter I/II certification.

Recommendation IX-2 - All officer positions, from lieutenant to fire chief, should be filled based upon the person's firefighting/emergency services training, certifications, and experience, commensurate with the position being sought, along with successful completion of a formal, rank appropriate assessment process, and a basic practical skills evaluation.

Recommendation IX-3 - The Blackstone Fire Department should insure that all department members are trained/ certified to the minimal NIMS level required for their duties/responsibilities and ranks. In addition to the basic I-100/I-700 training mandated, it is our recommendation that all officers should be trained to the ICS-300 level. All chief level officers should be trained to the ICS-400 level.

Recommendation IX-4 - The BFD should require its career officers, and strongly encourage its call officers, to obtain a certain level of fire officer certification as a job requirement, such as Fire Officer I for lieutenant, Fire Officer II for captain, and Fire Officer Level IV for fire chief.

Recommendation IX-5 -The BFD should require that all officers be certified as Incident Safety Officers. Additional personnel who may be interested should be encouraged to take this training and obtain this important firefighter safety certification.

Recommendation IX-6 -As part of the succession planning process, the next fire chief should work to implement a career development program to ensure that all officers can perform their superior's duties, as well as identify the core future leaders of the department.

X. ON-CALL PERSONNEL RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION PROGRAM

As previously noted, the BFD is a combination fire service organization that is a combination of call and career staff. In reality, the current composition of the department is close to a 50/50 split of career and on-call. The Department needs to formally evaluate the certifications and training of all members and assure that at a minimum all firefighters have achieved a firefighter I/II level. Should this not be the case, those without certification should not be permitted to operate in an environment that is Immediately dangerous to Life and Health. Should this be permitted there is a significant amount of liability that is placed on the Town and there is a greater risk of injury to the member.

The Town of Blackstone has expressed a desire to retain a strong call firefighting force. We concur and believe that goal is realistic and achievable for the foreseeable future. However, it will require the implementation of program(s) to recruit and then retain personnel; a strong commitment from the town; and strong leadership in the fire department.

In March 2004, the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) issued a report by the Volunteer and Combination Officers Section, entitled *A Call for Action: Preserving and Improving the Future of the Volunteer Fire Service.* Among other things, the report highlighted the fact that the ranks of volunteer/call firefighters nationwide are declining due, at least in part, to an increasing demand for services. There are also various other factors that are prevalent to the reduction in the number of volunteer and on-call firefighters in communities such as Blackstone. Among them is that the demographics of many communities today do not support a sufficient number of the types of person who is attracted to the fire service in the 21st century - someone with time to dedicate to public service, or a young person who wants to make a career of it. We have found that on average, for every five on-call firefighters recruited, two will remain active after a period of 48 months has elapsed. The task of recruitment and

retention is further complicated when the department lacks leadership and a true commitment (whether real or perceived) to the on-call force.

Presently, the BFD has approximately fourteen on-call members on its roster. When payroll was evaluated it was obvious that membership was not always active as there was an annual hourly commitment range of 0 hours to 198 hours. This data, after evaluation, showed that 6-8 members were actually active on the department. On its own, this number is insufficient to provide an adequate level of emergency service to the town. However, in almost any call/volunteer emergency services organization there is going to be a percentage of members whose names still appear on the "active" roster, yet they no longer truly are, or are minimally so, for a variety of reasons. Factor in that most members of the department have a primary job, other than the fire department, that probably limits their availability to respond, mostly during normal business hours, and the current personnel picture becomes much more of a concern.

In an effort to attract call personnel over the next three to five years, a significant effort will need to be put forth towards recruitment and retention of on-call members. Although Blackstone is far from alone in dealing with this reduction in on-call staff, it is essential that addressing this situation is clearly identified as a top priority of the new fire chief and be adopted as a shared mission of the entire department.

The BFD also does not have a formal recruitment and retention program for call personnel and has only very infrequently actively recruited for new members. The MRI study team was informed that newest members of the department are recruited by word of mouth or are "walk ins". There is no mention of the need for additional members on the town or fire department's websites, or even a person to contact if someone is interested in joining the department. This is something that is frequently displayed very prominently on the websites of many call/volunteer departments.

Even if the recruitment obstacles can be overcome, hurdles remain before a new member is a productive member of the department. Once an individual becomes interested in becoming an on-call firefighter, they must achieve a level of ever increasing specialized skill that is time consuming. Often exit interviews reveal that the training commitment alone is daunting and one of the primary reasons that on-call personnel resign. It is also costly to the department. To become a certified firefighter takes several hundred hours. Once certified, there are the dozens of hours training annually spent maintaining firefighter and EMT or paramedic (if required) skills and certifications. Unfortunately, in 2017, the average citizen does not want to spend a great deal of personal time dedicated to the fire and emergency services, especially when family commitments take priority. In addition, many on-call firefighters in departments that have a career force handling the day-to-day emergencies, find it hard to stay motivated if they are not being utilized frequently. Other reasons are for difficulty recruiting and retaining members include:

- An overall reduction in leisure time
- Employment obligations and the common need to maintain more than one job
- The virtual elimination of employers understanding and flexibility relating to this form of community service
- Increased family demands
- Generational differences and increased family demands
- Increasing training requirements
- The cost of housing in many affluent communities
- Organizational culture
- Internal respect
- Recognition of personnel
- Internal communication
- Department leadership styles and commitments

It is easy to believe that increasing the number of on-call firefighters can be a cure all to eliminate all staffing, and thus response problems. Unfortunately, in 2021, this is an increasingly difficult problem to overcome. However, there still appears to be a small town feel to Blackstone, and perhaps more importantly, still a sense of community. These are key attributes that may increase the likelihood of success for any call firefighter recruitment and retention program. Some studies and reports prepared by various entities have noted that many call and volunteer fire departments serving small to medium sized communities anticipate that about one percent of its year-round population will be members of the fire department. This would equate to about 92 members. While we believe this figure is overly optimistic, particularly in 2021, if we cut it in half and said one-half of one percent, the department could still anticipate a membership of 46 residents of the town, nearly triple the current on-call contingent.

As most rural and suburban communities across the United States are dealing with the reduction in volunteer and on-call staff, trying to reverse this trend has become a common issue in many places. When compared to the ever-increasing costs of employing additional full-time career personnel, many communities have come to the conclusion that investing in on-call personnel is the best, and more cost effective, practice, and to that end they have pursued some of the following strategies:

A. Creating a marketing program to recruit new personnel into the department.

B. Placing a prominent banner or link on the home page of the Town of Blackstone and Blackstone Fire Department websites.

C. Conducting a recruitment mailing to all residential properties in the town with information about the fire department and recruiting new members.

D. Placing signs at the entrances to town recruiting call members to the department.

E. Placement of a temporary sign board at various locations in the community.

F. Working with local businesses in an attempt to form partnerships that would allow employees to leave work to respond to emergency incidents when needed.

G. Hire a volunteer firefighter "Recruitment and Retention Coordinator" to develop, implement, and coordinate these activities. This could possibly be undertaken by a number of communities as a regional endeavor.

H. Nurture the call fire department.

I. Provide a tax abatement incentive for volunteer firefighters modeled after a program in place in the State of Connecticut.

J. Increasing compensation rates or the minimum hours paid for a response.

K. Provide a reduction in property tax for on-call service.

L. Provide on-call firefighters with community-based benefits

M. Provide community based awards and recognition.

In the smaller government, anti-taxes, and benefits climate of today, many of these benefits can be controversial. However, after considering these strategies, we have focused on developing innovative strategies for the Town of Blackstone. One example of an unconventional and innovative best practice that we feel would work in Blackstone is to provide a health insurance package for self-employed, year-round residents, provided they complete training, certification, and provide the town with a high level of immediate response. Typically, this type of program attracts electricians, plumbers, painters, and other trades, as well as self-employed professionals that would be beneficial to the organizations.

The federal government has a version of the Staffing for Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program that pertains strictly to volunteer and on-call firefighters. It provides competitively awarded funds to municipalities to recruit and retain on-call and volunteer firefighters. The grant funds expenses, such as recruitment campaigns, providing money for

such as expenses as tuition for college curriculums in fire science, for EMT and paramedic training, for health insurance for call members, for physical fitness programs, uniforms, and various tax incentives offered to attract new candidates to join the fire department, and then stay for an extended period of time.

We believe that the town/department should attempt to secure a SAFER grant to recruit and retain on-call members for the first time. This grant should note the staffing issue that currently exists and indicate that the grant would be an attempt to meet the NFPA 1720 fire response standard. The goal of developing a viable call force of twenty-five total on-call firefighters would also be a goal to articulate in the grant application. It is quite possible that a portion of the health care program cost described above may be eligible for incorporating in a SAFER grant.

There are no easy or guaranteed solutions to the staffing quandary facing Blackstone and many other communities throughout the country. It is also important to stress that what may work in one community with regards to staffing and call/volunteer recruitment and retention may not work in another nearby community. Each community must individually determine what programs, incentives, and motivations will work, and be most effective in their community.

Recommendation X-1 - The Town of Blackstone and the BFD should apply for a federal SAFER grant for on-call recruitment and retention. This grant should be utilized to develop a comprehensive marketing program to attract new members, and provide incentives for the retention of those personnel, such as tuition reimbursement, health care benefits, tax abatements, etc.

RecommendationX-2 - The Town of Blackstone should recognize that the only way to develop a more active and properly staffed fire department in the absence of hiring a larger force of career firefighters is to determine what would motivate potential responders and craft a program of investment that meets these extrinsic and intrinsic needs.

Recommendation X-3 - The Town of Blackstone should convene a focus group to determine what concepts and recruitment and retention strategies are feasible and most attractive to potential candidates.

Recommendation X-4 - The BFD should set a realistic goal of recruiting at least 15 to 20 new members over the next three years, and simultaneously set a goal of increasing the overall call member force to around 25 to 30 active personnel. These personnel should be required to be properly trained and certified to the Firefighter I/II level, and preferably to the EMT-basic level.

<u>Recommendation X-5 -</u> The BFD should make it a priority to develop an active on-call recruitment program led by the fire chief and supported by the command staff. At a minimum, this program should consist of:

1. ***Developing a recruitment brochure and mailing it to all residents***
2. ***Holding periodic open houses at the fire station***
3. ***Performing public outreach through the local media***
4. ***Contacting community and service groups***
5. ***Developing an eye-catching banner on the town's and fire department's web sites***
6. ***Placing signs recruiting call/volunteer personnel at the main entrances to town***
7. ***Placing a temporary sign board at various locations within the community***
8. ***Placing signs for call/recruiting volunteers in local businesses, particularly high volume locations***
9. ***Implementing a fire explorer program***
10. ***Radio and media advertisements***

Although time consuming, consideration should also be given to conducting a door-to-door recruitment campaign of every residence in the town.

The proposed SAFER Grant could be utilized to cover many of the above expenses.

<u>Recommendation X-6 -</u> The Fire Chief should develop a social media presence and involve other members of the department in this endeavor.

<u>Recommendation X-7 -</u> The Town of Blackstone should consider the development of a program that would provide active responders with the opportunity to obtain health insurance. The town should pay a graduated percentage of this program based upon participation levels.

<u>Recommendation X-8 -</u> The BFD should develop a series of team-based activities that build involvement in the organization.

Recommendation X-9 - The BFD should seek assistance from the Massachusetts Call and Volunteer Firefighters Association (MCVFA) relative to enhancing recruitment and retention efforts in Blackstone.

XI. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

Based upon our analysis of the current day operations of the BFD, we have found an organization that is currently in crisis. The Department has many operational necessities inclusive of immediately correcting several safety issues involving personal protective equipment, apparatus, equipment, and the lack of policies and procedures.

Staffing remains a problem for the Department. The number of call firefighters is limited and there has been no active recruitment or retention program in place. Although it has been beneficial to the department to help it support operational needs, the ability to support a recruitment and retention program is necessary for the long-term success of the Department. The SAFER Grant may provide unique opportunities to the community.

Having a sense of common vision is important in any organization to ensure that the organization and its personnel are moving in unison toward a common goal(s). Having a common vision is not only about making sure that all parties are aware that they are in the same boat and rowing, but even more importantly, that they are rowing in the same direction. The impact of not sharing a common vision will be very noticeable in the quality and quantity of work performed, but also with the spirit and passion that the work of the organization is accomplished.

The Department lacks any type of long-range or strategic plan that charts its projected path to the future. To the best of our knowledge, the department does not have a mission statement. A mission statement, if carefully developed and truly accurate, should provide the very foundation for the BFD and why it exists. The mission statement should be providing that broad direction that everything else that the fire department does is going to be built upon. The fire department also does not currently have any formal vision statement, nor has it developed any core values that will help to drive the organization forward.

The Department does not have a policies and procedures manual. This promotes an environment without accountability and places a high level of liability upon the organization and the community.

Looking ahead, the BFD does possess some definitive positive attributes, most notably the dedication of its core membership group. The ISO evaluation conducted prior to this

assessment earned a rating of 4/4y which is commendable for a combination fire department in a small town. This shows there is a strong foundation upon which to build.

However, the Department is also facing serious challenges both today, and looking toward the future. With volunteerism declining and the ranks of call emergency services personnel dwindling nationwide, the Town of Blackstone faces the dual challenges of attempting to balance a credible emergency response system, staffed a balance of with call and career members while simultaneously facing a slowly increasing number of requests for service, both emergency and non-emergency.

To that end, we propose the following strategic initiatives should be considered as a roadmap for producing the significant cultural and organizational change and the major rebuilding that needs to be completed within the organization.

1. **The Town of Blackstone should hire a qualified Deputy Fire Chief as soon as possible to provide full-time day to day supervision and oversight to the fire department. Although the town will eventually need a permanent, long-term fire chief, the mentoring and coaching by the part-time fire chief should work toward the development of a successor chief.**

2. **The BFD should develop a mission statement, vision statement, and a list of core values that guide the department's overall mission and operations.**

3. **The BFD's mission statement should be prominently displayed in the station, along with the vision statement and core values.**

4. **The Town of Blackstone should complete driving record and background checks on all current members of the fire department to ensure that they are eligible to be firefighters.**

5. **Conduct a comprehensive review of existing training records. The Fire Chief should meet individually with each member to review the training file and develop a prescriptive training plan.**

6. **A concerted effort should be made to certify as many existing career and on-call members as possible to the level of Firefighter I/II through the Massachusetts Fire Training Council. This action should include a training effort that is designed to train and refresh all candidates on the 85 specific "non-fire" hands-on skills and 20 "live fire" skills essential for certification and basic level.**

7. **The Fire Chief should begin to identify members of the department who could possibly possess the skills to be developed into officers and begin to mentor them and provide appropriate additional training. Part of this development process could include the delegation of certain assignments to these personnel.**

8. **The Fire Chief should form a committee for the purpose of putting together an aggressive and wide ranging program for recruitment and retention of call personnel. While a long-term strategy to address this issue needs to be developed, there are also short-term actions that can be taken to try to immediately recruit additional personnel.**

9. **The Fire Chief should work with the Town of Blackstone to address the deficiencies, particularly those associated with life safety noted in this management letter.**

10. **The Fire Chief, assisted by a committee comprised of a cross-section of department stakeholders, should begin the creation of the department's standard operations procedures or guidelines (SOP/SOG) manual, starting with mission critical procedures such as, but not limited to, b*asic engine company and truck company operations, dwelling fires, commercial structures, rapid intervention team operations, personnel accountability, gas leaks, hazardous materials incidents, ice rescue, vehicle extrication operations, thermal imaging camera use, and automatic external defibrillator use.* The committee should be given whatever support is necessary to complete at least a basic manual update within one year.**

11. **Based upon the foundation that currently exists and building upon the results of the recommendations contained in this letter, the Town of Blackstone and the BFD should develop a formal process for implementing a long-term vision for the department and developing a strategic plan.**

12. **Blackstone should enter into discussions with the municipal administrations, and fire department leaderships of its adjacent communities, for the purposes of identifying possible opportunities for shared services, and long-term explore the feasibility of a more regional approach to fire protection and EMS delivery systems.**

13. **To stress the fact that the BFD remains primarily a combination department, a Deputy Fire Chief, should be designated as a career position and work to develop the on-call staff by promoting certification and training.**

14. **The Town should promote professional growth and development, particularly amongst the officer core, to begin succession planning and allow for internal advancement in the future.**

15. **In addition to their normal emergency scene operational duties and station management responsibilities, all officers should have one or more administrative duties/responsibilities to assist the fire chief with the department's overall management.**

16. **The BFD should make it a priority to improve its first unit on scene response times, including the adoption of a SOC, for the town. The SOC should be based upon a hybrid of the NFPA 1710/1720 and CAAS recommendations.**

17. **With Blackstone covering only 11.2 square miles, the BFD should adopt standard of cover benchmarks to have the first unit responding to emergency incidents within one minute of dispatch (career/staffed station), and have the first unit on scene within eight minutes after responding to all types of calls, 90% of the time.**

18. **The Blackstone Fire Department needs to examine and consider all options for improving its Records Management System. This asset should have a bridge that allows data to be dumped from IMC to permit better accuracy with time recording and enhance operational capabilities.**

19. **The Town of Blackstone should evaluate the amount of mutual aid that it provides versus receives. Is this number equitable or is the Blackstone taxpayer subsidizing neighboring community's EMS services?**

20. **In consultation and cooperation with its neighboring departments, the BFDshould enter into formal automatic aid agreements that specifies the number and types of resources that should be dispatched immediately to various types of reported emergencies, such as structure fires. These recommendations should be based upon a community-wide risk management process and/or pre-fire/incident plans.**

21. **Although more stringent than the requirements found in Table 4.3.2 of NFPA 1720 for rural communities, through the utilization of automatic aid agreements with neighboring communities, the Blackstone Fire Department should consider the adoption of an SOC with the goal of attempting to have at least 16 personnel on the scene of any reported structure fire within 14 minutes.**

22. **The BFD should formalize short-term automatic/mutual aid agreements that allow for qualified command staff to assist at emergency incidents in Blackstone while reporting to the fire chief. These roles would be inclusive of Safety Officer, Accountability Officer, Rapid Intervention Officer, etc.**

23. **The Town of Blackstone should review the above recommendations for existing fire stations and evaluate long term needs of the community and the need for three stations in a relatively small area. Consideration should be given to construction of a new central station, closure of a station, or at a minimum renovation of existing structures.**

24. **When the time comes for replacement, Engine 51, 1997 International, the community should consider investing in a custom rescue/pumper that is set up for primary response for the majority of incidents in Blackstone.**

25. **Consideration should be given to hiring a third party consultant to evaluate the safety of the existing fleet.**

26. **For the BFD to continue to be able to provide superior service to the community, particularly if there are simultaneous or overlapping incidents, multiple patients from a single incident, or when the ambulance is out of service for maintenance or repair, a second ambulance should be moved to fire headquarters. We also recommend that the community continue to invest in a new ambulance every 5 years. This may require amendment should chain supply issues continue and delivery dates may be prolonged.**

27. **All officer positions, from Lieutenant to Fire Chief, should be filled based upon the person's firefighting/emergency services training, certifications, and experience, commensurate with the position being sought, along with successful completion of a formal, rank appropriate assessment process, and a basic practical skills evaluation.**

28. **The BFD should insure that all department members are trained/ certified to the minimal NIMS level required for their duties/responsibilities and ranks. In addition to the basic I-100/I-700 training mandated, it is our recommendation that all officers should be trained to the ICS-300 level. All chief level officers should be trained to the ICS-400 level.**

29. **The BFD should require its career officers, and strongly encourage its call officers, to obtain a certain level of fire officer certification as a job requirement, such as Fire Officer I for lieutenant, Fire Officer II for captain, and Fire Officer Level IV for fire chief.**

30. **The BFD should require that all officers be certified as Incident Safety Officers. Additional personnel who may be interested should be encouraged to take this training and obtain this important firefighter safety certification.**

31. **As part of the succession planning process, the next fire chief should work to implement a career development program to ensure that all officers can perform their superior's duties, as well as identify the core future leaders of the department.**

32. **The Town of Blackstone and the BFD should apply for a federal SAFER grant for on-call recruitment and retention. This grant should be utilized to develop a comprehensive marketing program to attract new members, and provide incentives for the retention of those personnel, such as tuition reimbursement, health care benefits, tax abatements, etc.**

33. **The Town of Blackstone should recognize that the only way to develop a more active and properly staffed fire department in the absence of hiring a larger force of career firefighters is to determine what would motivate potential responders and craft a program of investment that meets these extrinsic and intrinsic needs.**

34. **The Town of Blackstone should convene a focus group to determine what concepts and recruitment and retention strategies are feasible and most attractive to potential candidates.**

35. **The BFD should set a realistic goal of recruiting at least 15 to 20 new members over the next three years, and simultaneously set a goal of increasing the overall call member force to around 25 to 30 active personnel. These personnel should be required to be properly trained and certified to the Firefighter I/II level, and preferably to the EMT-basic level.**

36. **The Fire Chief should develop a social media presence and involve other members of the department in this endeavor.**

37. **The BFD should develop a series of team-based activities that build involvement in the organization.**

38. **The BFD should seek assistance from the Massachusetts Call and Volunteer Firefighters Association (MCVFA) relative to enhancing recruitment and retention efforts in Blackstone.**

In conclusion, the missions performed by the fire department are some of the most basic and fundamental functions of government; to ensure the safety and protection of its residents and visitors. The real issue facing the BFD, and the Town of Blackstone then, as it is for every community, is to determine an acceptable level of risk and then define an appropriate level of service for the community. There is no "right" amount of fire protection or EMS delivery. It is a constantly changing level based upon the expressed needs of the community. Determining the

appropriate level of service also involves deciding upon the municipalities' fiscal ability, and willingness, to pay for the desired level of service. These are decisions that the citizens of the town and the board of selectmen will ultimately need to make.

Respectfully submitted,

Patrick J Purcell
Senior Consultant, Fire/EMS, and Emergency Management Services

Appendix A

Project Team Profiles

Patrick J Purcell serves as the Fire Chief and Emergency Management Director for the Town of Westborough, Massachusetts. The Town of Westborough Fire Department, which provides full fire, rescue, emergency medical services, and public safety dispatch, is staffed by 45 career firefighters and 9 career public safety dispatchers who serve a residential population of 19,100 and a large transient population, primarily during the daytime hours. During his career Pat has administered an annual fire department budget of nearly $5 million. Pat had also served as a paramedic for Worcester EMS and Life Flight Helicopter at Umass Memorial Health Care for 24 years. He has an associate degree in Paramedic Science from Quinsigamond Community College, a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice and Graduate Degree in Fire Service Administration from Anna Maria College. He is a graduate of the Chief Fire Officer Program administered by the Edward J. Collins Center for Public Management at Umass Boston and the Massachusetts Department of Fire Services. He is a member of the International Association of Fire Chiefs and the New England Association of Fire Chiefs. Pat has a diverse background and expertise in Firefighting, EMS, Dispatch, Emergency Planning and Operations, Grant Writing, and Municipal Finance and Government and Labor/Management relations. In addition he has been instrumental in developing a joint public safety dispatch center for the Town of Westborough and has participated in a number of municipal assessment centers.

Mark Cotreau is currently the Fire Chief in Rye NH. Working with Department staff and town leaders, Mark has significantly improved the departments capital plan, upgraded key equipment and purchased several critical pieces of fire apparatus. Mark instituted Rye's coastal ocean rescue program. He is also leading the department through a multi-year staffing improvement plan. Formerly, Mark was a long-time member of the Concord, MA Fire Department serving 34 years; 16 as Shift Commander and 9 as Fire Chief/Emergency Management Director. He is a 19-year member of the Massachusetts Regional Hazmat Response Team, serving in several key roles. During his tenure as fire chief, Mark steered the department through the organizational recovery due to a major fire loss in a fire station. This included a relocation of services, major renovation of the fire station and replacement of several pieces of fire apparatus and an ambulance. Mark also led the expansion of the EMS service to add a second staffed ambulance to bridge a critical service gap. Mark has extensive experience as an emergency manager and LEPC Coordinator.

Mark has a bachelor's degree in Fire Science Administration from Salem State College. He is a graduate of the National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer (EFO) program. He is also a credentialed Chief Fire Officer by the Commission on Professional Credentialing. Mark has

taught at the National Fire Academy in the managing Officer program and New Fire Chief series. He is also a guest lecturer in the Chief Fire Officer program at the Massachusetts Fire Academy. Mark served on the Executive board of the CMERA Regional ALS service for 8 years, the last 5 as Board Chairman. Mark currently serves on the Seacoast START Hazmat team executive board and is the NH Coordinator for the Transcaer hazmat training group.