

## **BUILDING A CASE FOR AN INCLUSIVE AND DIVERSE VOLUNTEER AND COMBINATION FIRE SERVICE**

Emergency service leaders must justify and convince others of a variety of mission needs on a daily basis. Building an inclusive and diverse organization is one mission need that is beginning to receive more recognition. But rarely do the benefits of an inclusive and diverse workforce receive as much attention as the challenges, resistance, or even legal actions garner.

Leaders must be able to convey the mission need for inclusion and diversity, whether to educate Company Officers of the benefits of an inclusive company and inspire their role in creating it, or to persuade local government to support diversity-inspired leadership training for officers, or to convince recruiters to reach out to “non-traditional” communities. In each instance, leaders must first educate themselves of the realities and complexities of the issues involved, and then guide their organization forward.

When a Chief Officer needs to build a case to the county commission for purchasing a new apparatus, she must prepare a solid rationale for the expenditure. The Chief cannot simply state that the department needs the apparatus, but most offer persuasive information, statistics and evidence to support her argument. She’ll have to pose a business case, showing long-term cost-savings. Her argument regarding personnel safety will identify the additional safety features available on the new apparatus. The Chief will articulate the customer service, recruiting, community risk reduction, and other benefits to convince local government of the value of this purchase.

In a similar way, leaders must be able to present the case, the persuasive argument, the benefits of an inclusive and diverse workforce to our mission. Simply stated our mission is to deliver the highest quality customer service while providing for the health and safety of our personnel, every day, every call.

We believe if our organization is both inclusive and diverse, while firmly rooted in our mission -

- We are better able to serve all – regardless of language or culture
- We are trusted – to enter, to intervene, to serve
- Our personnel are safer and healthier
- Our organization becomes a “recruiting magnet”
- Less time, energy and money are wasted

The following pages express a mission case, a customer service case, a case for health and safety, for recruiting and retention, for community risk reduction and prevention, for disaster preparedness, for reputation management, operations, a business case, plus an ethical and moral case, for building an inclusive and diverse emergency service organization.

### **THE MISSION CASE**

As stated above, the mission of every department is the provision of consistently, high quality service to every customer, while protecting the health and safety of personnel. Today’s mission

of fire and emergency services has expanded beyond fire suppression and will likely continue to expand in the foreseeable future. The community's expectation for a broader range of service demands ever-expanding skill sets from personnel.

Let's say you're the coach of a football team and you have eleven highly skilled quarterbacks. How many games would you win if you fielded only those quarterbacks? None. You'd have the same result with eleven running backs. If you need surgery, you probably don't want the entire surgical team to be surgeons. You'd want the best anesthesiologist, the most skilled med techs and the sharpest OR nurses. Today – a monolithic team is an ineffective one.

A successful team employs the different skills of diverse individuals for the benefit of the team – to meet the mission. A lack of diversity will limit innovation and adaptability. An effective team is agile, flexible, resilient, open to innovative ideas and perspectives and able to put them to work on behalf of the mission.

## THE CUSTOMER SERVICE CASE

The communities we serve are becoming increasingly diverse. Competent and compassionate performance of our mission demands trust and a genuine relationship with those communities.

Our job, whether volunteer or paid, is to serve and protect our communities. When Mrs. Smith or Señora Sanchez call 911, on perhaps the worst day of their lives, they both expect and deserve not just our honed skills and our highest quality customer service, but also to be treated with the utmost respect and dignity.

Common sense tells us our customers will be better served by personnel who speak the language, are familiar with the cultural norms, spiritual rituals, celebrations, history, interpersonal and familial communication norms, needs and expectations when faced with illness, death and dying, and the myriad of other aspects of life that are not the same culture to culture.

## THE HEALTH and SAFETY CASE

### FIREFIGHTER HEALTH

In today's fire service there is a sharper focus on firefighter physical health than ever before. There is also increased attention paid to the behavioral health of personnel. Of the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives (LSI) from the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation and Tampa & Tampa 2, Initiative #1 focuses on the need for "cultural change within the fire service relating to safety." Initiative #13 offers guidance specific to behavioral health.

Most of us are familiar with the individual "lifestyle choices" that can lead to better health (don't smoke, drink alcohol in moderation, eat a balanced diet, use sun protection, etc.) In the public health domain "social determinants of health" (eg. racism and other forms of oppression, poverty, working conditions, social exclusion, violence, etc.) are joining those individual risk factors as significant contributors to ill health. <sup>1</sup>

Research shows a correlation between repetitive stressors like racism, sexism, poverty, homophobia, et al, and the resulting allostatic load <sup>2</sup> and Complex (or Chronic) Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (C-PTSD). <sup>3</sup>

We talk about “repetitive stress injuries” to our muscular-skeletal system. What about the female firefighter who experiences “repetitive stress” in the form of daily sexist insults, shunning, humiliation or harassing behaviors on the job? This treatment can have emotional and/or physical effects, like, depression, isolation, substance abuse, hyper-vigilance, low self-esteem, unwarranted risk-taking.

What about the “repetitive stress” caused by the daily flow of racist insults, shunning, humiliation, harassment toward personnel of color? And the physical or emotional impact of continual homophobic / transphobic remarks and behaviors toward LGBT personnel must also be acknowledged.

Exclusion and injustice have a direct and negative impact on a person’s physical, emotional and psychological health. A genuinely inclusive and affirming work environment will contribute to the physical and emotional health of responders, and that will benefit the mission.

## FIREFIGHTER SAFETY

Operational and training safety has been enhanced in departments that have adopted rigorous and job relevant fitness and skill testing requirements. Job relevant fitness and skills will result in fewer job related injuries and lost work time for ALL volunteer responders.

Other safety benefits have been the result of diversifying the service. For example, as women entered the fire service in greater numbers, vendors began to develop more ergonomic tools, apparatus, and better fitting PPE. These improvements lead to fewer injuries and safer performance by ALL firefighters.

Responders who belong to or have positive relationships with diverse communities will be trusted more during an incident that occurs in those communities. Instructions from the responders will be better understood and more likely obeyed. When crucial instructions are followed and when community members place their trust in responders, the safety of all personnel who respond to that incident is enhanced.

Personnel safety will be improved by rigorous and relevant job standards, by tools and PPE that fit their working bodies, by being physically and emotionally healthier, and when more trusted in all the communities they serve.

## THE COMMUNITY RISK REDUCTION (CRR) and FIRE PREVENTION CASE

“The definition developed for the Vision 20/20 Project years ago is as follows: CRR is the identification and prioritization of risks followed by the coordinated application of resources to minimize the probability or occurrence and/or the impact of unfortunate events. In a fire service context, it means that the fire department exists not only to respond to emergencies after the fact but to prevent or reduce the effects of their occurrence in the first place. It means the fire service will (and should) act proactively as a risk reduction entity for the community. It also

assumes that the fire service can't do it alone and must ultimately partner with other community organizations to accomplish risk-reducing objectives.”<sup>6</sup>

How effective will a fire department's candle safety campaign be if ethnic or spiritual communities can't read the brochures, or don't know how to access the department's education programs, or because of past history of violence in their homeland they don't trust anyone in a uniform? How effective will that candle safety campaign be if department members can't speak the language of the community, or are uneducated regarding the use of candles in their rituals, or have no non-emergency, trust-building relationship with members of the community?

The following is taken from Fire 20/20's *Multicultural Health and Safety Research Project (MHSRP)* (funded through a grant from the Department of Homeland Security)

“Findings from the MHSRP study identified the following risks and challenges between first responders and multicultural communities:

- Bi-directional language barriers
- Lack of trust
- Knowledge gaps
- Lack of proactive, non-emergency relationships

All contribute to the perplexity of providing effective fire prevention, risk-reduction and emergency medical services to multicultural and high-risk communities.”

In the survey 1023 Volunteer\* Departments responded to the question: “Which of the following are issues for your department in providing services to your multicultural and high-risk communities?” Respondents could select as many as were relevant from the eight issues offered, or respond “other.” Below are the eight issues and the percentage of departments who selected that issue.

Community's lack of knowledge about fire department services	48.8%
Community's lack of knowledge about basic life safety and prevention	43.2%
Language barriers	40.1%
Community's misuse of 9-1-1	17.2%
Fire department's lack of proactive relationships with the communities	13.9%
Fire department not understanding cultural practices and how this impacts service delivery	11.4%
Community's fear of people on uniform	6.2%
Community's distrust of the fire department	6.2%
Other	14.5%

Fire prevention remains the only SURE way to eliminate civilian and firefighter deaths from residential fires. Fire suppression efforts, no matter how well funded, resourced or staffed, can never save as many lives or property as preventing fires from starting. Fire service models from other nations (eg, UK) that prioritize fire prevention education, home visits, and on-going, community relationships have significantly reduced residential fire deaths, firefighter injuries and deaths, and property damage.

An inclusive and diverse fire department that develops trusted, on-going, non-emergency relationships with multicultural communities, and shifts more focus onto prevention efforts, will better serve and protect their customers and personnel. **Does your roster foster community relationships?**

\*Fire 20/20's 2012 *National Multicultural Community Fire Prevention Study – understanding leads to safety*, included many more survey results, including those from career departments. <sup>7</sup>

## THE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS CASE

All our communities must be ready to respond to disasters (natural or human-caused) and be resilient following these emergencies. Community preparedness and resilience demand on-going, NON-emergency relationships between community members and their emergency service / management agencies.

As in the case of community risk reduction and fire prevention, similar barriers can impede community readiness and the volunteer / combination fire department's capacity for providing effective preparedness education.

From *Emergency Preparedness: Knowledge and Perceptions of Latin American Immigrants*: "Effective risk communication, ...requires both knowledge of people from other cultures and respect for their diversity. <sup>8</sup> Cultural groups respond to risk and crisis communication on the basis of their perceptions and ways of thinking, and these differ from group to group. <sup>9</sup>

"... the planning process must be firmly grounded not only on the physical or biological science literature on the effects of the hazard agent on human safety, health and property, but also on the behavioural literature describing the response patterns of affected populations and emergency organisations." <sup>10</sup>

Once again, as in the case of community risk reduction, ongoing, proactive, positive relationships between the department and all the communities served will lead to more thorough and relevant disaster preparedness, response, as well as post-disaster resilience. More such relationships will be possible when the department includes members of those communities.

## THE RECRUITMENT CASE

The fire service should not have to work so hard to recruit and retain qualified, passionate, skilled, safety minded people for the best job in the world. There has to be something very wrong when recruiting and retaining a diversity of quality responders is so challenging, and when so few men and women of color, white women and Lesbians, gay men, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) personnel move into positions of leadership.

Regrettably, it is the "traditional" (volunteer and career) fire service culture, with its obvious lack of inclusion of women and men of color, white women, LGBT people that continues to discourage potential, competent, compassionate and socially adept candidates. It will remain difficult to recruit from those groups as long as the historical and current public image of a

firefighter persists: a six foot plus, bulging biceps, military hair cut, grim-faced, emotionless, white man.

It is critical to acknowledge two facts at this point in the discussion. First, all fire service organizations (volunteer or career) are merely microcosms of the larger society, since the fire service culture does not exist in a vacuum, isolated from the rest of society. The many forms of oppression and discrimination (racism, sexism, et al) that have existed historically and persist today are reflected in every arena of U. S. society, including emergency services. Second, the U. S. fire service is steeped in tradition. Many are honorable traditions that should be valued and preserved. But discriminatory policies, harassing behaviors, or other barriers to full inclusion that impede our mission, need to be abandoned by the side of our future roads.

A truly inclusive, affirming organization becomes a “recruiting magnet” that attracts people from beyond the “traditional” recruit pool. When these new recruits become active and recognized by their home communities, others will consider joining. Visible role models have a powerful recruiting effect.

The U. S. military and recruiting of women soldiers was a clear example. As the military re-wrote policies to enhance women’s experiences, unlocked previously closed duties, and diversified recruiting messages to include women, more women signed up. As more women joined the service and related their opportunities, more women became aware of the potential opportunities for themselves. More women volunteered. The increase was slow but steady.

While role models were an effective recruiting tool, bad experiences by those “non-traditional” members can have a predictable, negative impact on recruiting, as the U. S. military has also learned. The increase and magnitude of military sexual assault of women soldiers and sailors became common knowledge. Female survivors returned to the U. S. and told their stories to family and friends, who told their friends. It is no wonder that the U. S. military may have a more difficult time recruiting new women or retaining current female personnel.

Similarly, as cases of sexual harassment, sexual assault, racist and homophobic incidents within the volunteer service become public knowledge (whether from social media or other means), recruiting women and men of color, white women, or LGBT people will be difficult.

Good news travels slowly and quietly; bad news travels fast and with a louder voice. A truly inclusive, affirming department will become a “recruiting magnet” by making the good news visible.

## THE RETENTION CASE

An inclusive and diverse, emergency service organization that builds an empowering and rich work environment, avoids the “revolving door” syndrome, and will retain more personnel.

Some departments, in an attempt to diversify without first building an affirming, inclusive climate, have created that “revolving door.” Members from diverse populations (i.e., men and women of color, white women, LGBT people, et al) are recruited, become members and begin serving their community. If the department culture is exclusionary and the new people are not fully included in the life and work of the department, why would they remain? If they face racist,

sexist or homophobic “jokes,” remarks and/or behaviors, whether overtly hostile or more subtle, the member may soon look for the exit door.

A note here about volunteer versus paid departments: In the current economic downturn, there can be a significant difference regarding the “revolving door” for volunteer departments, compared to paid ones. A career job in the fire service is well-paid, has good benefits, and offers work schedules that many workers seek. A recruit who has fought their way through the testing process, the interviews and made it through the academy, may choose to stay on the job longer because of the income and benefits, even in the face of oppressive treatment.

Because they love serving their community, many volunteers stay on the job, even if they have been ignored, shunned, insulted or threatened. But can volunteer or paid personnel perform their very best under those conditions?

Better retention is influenced by many factors, but a key one is the ability of the department’s leadership to remove barriers to inclusion, and to affirm, support and develop every member’s capacity for success.

As an organization becomes truly inclusive and diverse, momentum will build. More personnel will experience the benefits and recognize the value of diversity. There will be less resistance to change and some previously resistant members may even become advocates for more diversity.

## THE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT CASE

When an individual firefighter displays poor judgment by posting racist, sexist, homophobic comments, cartoons or photos on social media, the reputation of his / her department is tarnished. Similarly, acts of theft, public intoxication or criminal behavior erode the positive image of the fire service held by most members of the public.

As the Fire Service Reputation Management White Paper reminds us, “The nation’s fire service has long been held in justifiably high esteem. [but] that hard earned respect is easily lost.”<sup>11</sup>

Unprofessional and inappropriate behaviors committed in the past might never have reached the eyes of the public, but today’s (and future) social media can broadcast a damaging story in moments. The damage may not be isolated to a single department, but have a national impact. Offensive comments about women, People of Color or any other group will erode public trust, as well as the trust among personnel.

An abusive tweet may take 5 seconds to read, but it may take years for the department to recover the respect and cooperation of it’s community. In addition to the loss of trust from the public and personnel, there can be a negative impact on the department’s recruiting and retention efforts, increased government oversight, loss of funding, even legal action.

Standard Operating Procedures regulating departmental computer and internet use, verbal or written public statements, whether on personal or department time or accounts, that do not address the content of comments or graphics that are posted will do little to prevent reputation damage. Only education on social justice issues (racism, sexism, et al), combined with a clear code of ethics, plus knowledgeable, firm and consistent leadership will protect a department’s reputation.

## THE OPERATIONS CASE

The operations case for an inclusive and diverse department could be summed up in two words: trust and perspectives.

Trust - The fire service is founded on trust. Daily operations in emergency services put responders in hazardous situations on a regular basis. Whether a working fire or an MCI, responders must constantly protect themselves and each other from harm. We trust one another to have our back. It is naïve to believe the common statement, “once we’re in our turnouts, everyone is my trusted brother.” Realistically, if there is a lack of trust at the station, because of someone’s gender, racial identity or sexual orientation, then there will be a lack of trust on scene. Personnel who truly value and trust each other will undoubtedly perform at a higher and safer level.

Perspective - Every incident is a problem to be solved, often demanding quick situational information gathering and rapid-fire decision-making. Commercial airlines, surgical teams and other high stress vocations have instituted Crew Resource Management (CRM), formalizing the adage “two heads are better than one.” CRM is a set of training procedures for use in environments where human error can have devastating effects, and can be defined as a management system which makes optimum use of all available crew perspectives and other resources to promote safety and enhance the efficiency of the crew.

A crew composed of all 40-50 year old, white, heterosexual men will bring some degree of variation of skills, perspectives and problem-solving. But common sense persuades us of the value-added to decision-making when a broader range of experience, skills, world views, cultural and generational perspectives, and problem-solving techniques are available to the decision makers.

When trust exists and more perspectives and skill sets work for the mission, efficiency and effectiveness will be improved and personnel safer.

## THE BUSINESS CASE

While fire service organizations are not profit driven they cannot afford to waste money, especially in these current economic times. An organization that has not done the work to build an inclusive, diversity-affirming environment will waste money, time and energy.

Both career and volunteer departments invest huge amounts of money and time recruiting, testing, training, outfitting, and equipping each member. If the new recruit discovers a hostile organizational culture, she/he may leave the department to seek a more affirming workplace. The “revolving door” is financially costly to the exclusionary department.

Legal grievances, lawsuits resulting from discrimination and/or harassment are expensive. A cursory review of recent monetary settlements against fire departments reveals awards in the millions of dollars. (Two recent examples: Ohio sexual harassment settlement: 3-2013 - <http://firelawblog.com/2013/03/ohio-fd-tagged-for-1-7-million-in-sex-discrimination-suit/> and



San Francisco, racially motivated abuse settlement:

<http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Tentative-settlement-in-black-SF-firefighter-s-4795725.php>)

Social media is playing an expanded role in making regrettable, even criminal behavior by responders widely known. Bad publicity is costly, both in potential monetary damages and the loss of donations.

The budget is critical, of course, but our mission is our “bottom line.” Emergency responders have to be able to perform at 110% every day, every shift, every call. Anything that interferes with highest performance is costly to the department, and more importantly, costly to our customers.

Our mission is ever-expanding and so requires ever-expanding skill sets, creative problem-solving and new ideas to do more with less. Innovation is essential for emergency services today and in the future. An affirmed, diverse workforce can offer innovation, creativity, high performance and will save money.

#### The ETHICAL and MORAL CASE

Building a service that fiercely promotes and protects genuine inclusion of people from all segments of the U. S. population (i.e., people of all racial and ethnic groups, spiritualities, gender and gender identities, sexual orientations, economic and educational backgrounds, generations, veterans, and others) is ethical, moral, rooted in U. S. American values, and simply the right thing to do.

#### CONCLUSION

An emergency service organization that is both inclusive and diverse will be more agile, resilient, healthier, safer, cost-effective, creative, open to innovative ideas and perspectives and able to put them to work on behalf of the mission.

We have courageous people, honorable traditions, and a future with limitless potential for good. Perhaps never before has the fire service had such a moment – such an opportunity. This sister/brotherhood COULD be a model for our communities and the nation. To prove that our diversity is the high octane fuel that powers our highest performance.

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