

The Ford Foundation 2000 Finalist
for
Innovations in Government
The Town of Bristol's Public Works Answering Fire/Rescue calls

A.P.W.A Exceptional Performance Award

The Town of Bristol has been innovative by training our public works employees to respond to emergencies for the fire and rescue department. Bristol is a small community of 4,600 residents in approximately 34 square miles. In addition to households, the Town has a small industrial park and a fairly large interstate commercial area. Like many small municipalities it is very difficult to get day time help for its paid on call or volunteer departments. Bristol responds to approximately 500-550 fire/rescue responses yearly. The problem is, Bristol doesn't have enough incidents to warrant or afford a full time fire and rescue department.

The solution started in 1988 when the first public works employee became a firefighter and emergency medical technician (EMT). Currently there are 6 public works employees: Firefighter/EMT's Mike Hole and Joe Panek, Firefighter/EMT Intermediates Mark Neiderer and Randy Kerkman, and Firefighter/Paramedics Steve Kempf and Joe Kozak.

The public works employees are specifically scheduled and understand which public works projects have priority. When the fire or rescue incident comes in, the employees not working on the priority project answer the incident. If there is a major incident, all employees answer after they safely stop the project they are working on.

The current employee incentives are \$.75 per hour for each fire and rescue certification. The new union contract went up to \$1.50 per hour for each fire and rescue certification. The fire department budget only picks up the cost of the employees wages from the time the employee leaves the public works job until the employee comes back from the fire or rescue incident. This saves the fire departments budget the cost of a full time fire department.

All six public works employee's are on shifts of two, that are on call for the fire department 24 hours on and 48 hours off. This schedule enables our volunteer department to ensure volunteer response at all times. In essence our employees are working public works during the daytime and are also full time fireman.

All of the public works department employees are cross trained in all aspects of public works as well as fire and rescue response. This includes wastewater, water, streets, parks, recycling and janitorial operations. This keeps boredom at bay and keeps their need for learning at its peak. The government workers of the millennium will need to be able to handle wider ranges of tasks in order to be able to justify higher wages. The private sector has been trying to get more with less for many years. After all, our definition of a civil servant is to serve the public in what ever means necessary. It is much more cost effective to cross train highly motivated and self empowered employees as to keep everything status quo.

This program addresses how small town government can provide professional fire and rescue services for less cost than full time fire and rescue departments. Small municipalities do not have enough incidents to justify a full time department. Volunteer departments are having

greater difficulty handling day time incidents because of the lack of fire volunteers available during the day. This is in part because businesses can not afford to let employees go on a call during work hours and there are few second or third shift workers available for day time incidents. In the past, volunteer departments were able to rely on the family farmer or small local business owners to run incidents during the day. But the loss of small family owned farms and businesses and the increase of corporate America is not conducive to the volunteer system. There is a crisis in rural America in having adequately trained fire and rescue personnel during day time hours. We believe this is the most cost effective way to provide emergency services to small communities.

The best verifiable evidence of the most significant achievements of the program are that the Bristol fire and rescue department has not had a single daytime fire or rescue incident go unanswered since 1988 when the program was instituted. In fact, the Towns response times during this period has rivaled full time departments. Also, the Bristol Fire and Rescue Department has responded and helped and received mutual aid to surrounding communities during the day because of a lack of day time manpower in other communities.

The most helpful advocates of our program have been the Town Administrator Rick Czopp and Town Supervisor and Public Works Supervisor Wayne Eide. They have and continue to help out with the political end of the program. The program has been accepted by both the Public works employees and the volunteer department members, which is probably the most pivotal achievement.

The current beneficiaries of our program are the citizens. They are able to receive the benefits of a full time fire and rescue department without having to pay for the tremendous cost and overhead of a full time department. Bristol rescue has certified emergency medical technicians at an intermediate level. Bristol rescue is working closely with our county medical services director to take on more advanced care such as endotracheal intubation and administration of nitroglycerin for patient care.

The indirect beneficiaries are the citizens from the surrounding communities that can access our department through mutual aid agreements for help during daytime hours. During day time hours, most rural departments have difficulties supplying enough personnel for incidents.

The potential beneficiaries are the citizens of most small government bodies in the United States and other countries. This program can be replicated by other municipalities with some hard work and education of government officials and their employees. It will take time and a lot of understanding by the government officials. However with incentives and education to create the mind set of employees, fire and rescue service around the world could improve upon response times and level of care to each citizens.

This program is very replicable in any small local government that truly wants to make their government more efficient and effective.

There is a five step plan for implementation:

1. The governing body has to be fully behind this program and have patience to work it through.
2. The existing volunteer fire department members must understand and buy into the concept of having full time paid personnel to respond to day time calls. The existing public works employees need to know what is best for the community and its citizens to get the care and

response they need.

3. There must be a pay incentive program to give the public works employees an incentive to become firefighters and EMT's.
4. Hiring criteria for public works needs to include the ability to become or already be a certified firefighter and EMT.
5. Constant attention to this program is needed to alleviate any friction.

The obstacles to this program could include:

1. Governing body not being totally behind the program and not patient enough to work through the smaller issues (ex. pay incentives, conflict between departments, recognition).
2. Fire department members pushing for full time department.
3. Public works employees that are not motivated and they don't want to change.
4. Public complaints that projects set still for an hour or two while public works employees are on a fire incident.
5. Complaints from surrounding local government employees that don't want to change.

All funding sources are from the Town of Bristol budget. Fire department wages and benefits for 1999 - \$104,000 of which the public works salaries are 7% or \$7,835. Compare this with full time personnel would cost \$216,165. **There for the savings to the tax payer of Bristol is approximately \$208,330.**

Employees have an incentive of \$.75 for fire certification of Firefighter I and \$.75 for licensed EMT Intermediate. This is between .037% and .05% of the employees salary depending on how many other certifications the employee holds.

The employees also have incentives through the union contract to become educated and self evolved in all departments.

There are probably some municipalities that already use public works employees for fire and rescue responses. This award is to help us open up the communications with these other municipalities and together continue to improve upon the program. We will be doing this by opening up a WEB page for municipalities to communicate and ask and answer questions with each other.

Article written by: Public Works Director Randy Kerkman and Fire Chief Peter Parker