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Fire Department Accreditation: A New Way of Evaluating Efficiency and Effectiveness of Fire Departments (2012)

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FIRE DEPARTMENT ACCREDITATION:

A new way of evaluating efficiency and effectiveness of fire departments

Updated by Dennis Wolf, Fire Management Consultant

April 2012

THE UNIVERSITY of TENNESSEE 
MUNICIPAL TECHNICAL ADVISORY SERVICE

In cooperation with the Tennessee Municipal League



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By sharing information, responding to client requests, and anticipating the ever-changing municipal government environment, MTAS promotes better local government and helps cities develop and sustain effective management and leadership.

MTAS offers assistance in areas such as accounting and finance, administration and personnel, fire, public works,

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Fire Accreditation	1
The Accreditation Process	3
Fire Accreditation and the Community ISO Rating.....	4
Fire Department Accreditation in Tennessee.....	5
Summary	6



FIRE DEPARTMENT ACCREDITATION:

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FIRE ACCREDITATION

Fire department accreditation is a growing trend across the nation with 140 fire departments as of April 2012 having already received accreditation, including three in Tennessee: Kingsport, Nashville and Maryville. In addition, another four Tennessee fire departments have registered and are in some phase of the accreditation process: Alcoa, Cookeville, Brentwood and Memphis.

Accreditation is a way to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of a fire department by determining community risks and fire safety needs, accurately evaluating the organization's performance and providing a method for continuous improvement. Measuring professionalism and service delivery of fire and emergency services is a new concept for most cities.

Every day, fire chiefs, city managers and local elected officials make critical decisions about fire protection and emergency medical services for their communities. Now more than ever, there is constant pressure to do more with less. Most city managers are hard-pressed to justify increasing expenditures unless they can be attributed directly to improved or expanded service delivery. There are a number of methods and a variety of techniques to measure fire service performance. Everyone agrees that the process should allow citizens, elected and appointed officials and fire service personnel to see the success.

The Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI) provides an assessment tool to determine when a fire department has achieved an appropriate level of professional performance and efficiency. The CFAI has been providing this service since

1988 when it was created by the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) and the International City/County Managers Association (ICMA). In 1996, the CFAI became a trust organization in cooperation with the IAFC and ICMA, and in 2001, the CFAI incorporated to create a unique standalone organization. The cooperation among all three organizations remains excellent. Members of the IAFC and ICMA serve on the board of directors of the Center for Public Safety Excellence, Inc., the CFAI and the Commission on Professional Credentialing Excellence (CPC). The CFAI is the result of a decade of hard work by many fire service leaders and local government officials. The success of this program depends upon the support of the two founding organizations as well as a strong board of directors.

The center's board of directors is composed of the following representatives:

- Two IAFC representatives;
- Two ICMA representatives; and
- One member-at-large representative.

The commission is composed of the following representatives:

- Agency head representing a fire department serving a population of greater than 250,000;
- Agency head representing a fire department serving a population of 100,000 to 249,999;
- Agency head representing a fire department serving a population of 25,000 to 99,999;
- Agency head representing a fire department serving a population of up to 24,999;
- International Fire Service representative;
- Consensus standards representative;
- City manager representative;



- Labor representative;
- Insurance industry representative;
- Federal fire service representative; and
- County manager representative.

These board members provide a broad spectrum of representation that allows for continuous improvement and increased professionalism within the CFAI itself. The most recent change for the CFAI came in March 2006 with the unveiling of a new corporate name and logo. The new name, Center for Public Safety Excellence, Inc., was intended to better describe what the organization does in relation to fire department accreditation and fire chief credentialing as well as new programs in virtual reality training. As for the fire department accreditation section of the corporation, the name remained Commission on Fire Accreditation International.

The mission of the CFAI is to “assist the fire and emergency service agencies throughout the world in achieving excellence through self-assessment and accreditation in order to provide continuous quality improvement and the enhancement of service delivery to their communities.”¹ The accreditation program provides an in-depth process of self-assessment for fire departments, granting accreditation to organizations that successfully complete the assessment process and an on-site evaluation by their peers.

So why would a fire department want to conduct an evaluation of its fire service program? According to the CFAI, there are four major reasons:

1. To help a fire department that is trying to cope with change;
2. To provide for periodic organizational evaluation to ensure effectiveness;
3. To provide information when there is a change in leadership whether it is the fire chief, city or county manager or key elected officials; and

4. To raise the level of professionalism within the organization, and ultimately, within the profession.

These are all proactive reasons with a purpose to improve, but the primary goal of a self-assessment process is to answer three basic questions:

1. Is the organization effective?
2. Are the goals, objectives, and mission of the organization being achieved?
3. What are the reasons for the success of the organization?

CFAI further describes the benefits of an accreditation program as:

- The promotion of excellence within the fire and emergency services;
- Encouraging quality improvement through a continuous self-assessment process;
- Providing assurance to peers and the public that the organization has defined missions and objectives that are appropriate for the jurisdictions it serves;
- Providing a detailed evaluation of a department and the services it provides to the community;
- Identifying areas of strength and weakness within a department;
- Developing a method or system to address deficiencies and build on organizational successes;
- Professional growth for a department as well as its personnel involved in the self-assessment process;
- Creating a forum for communicating organizational priorities;
- Achieving international recognition for a department by peers and the public;
- Creating a mechanism for developing concurrent documents, including strategic and program action plans; and
- Fostering pride in the organization from department members, community leaders and citizens.

¹Commission on Fire Accreditation International, “An Improvement Model Through Self-Assessment” 2006



These benefits range from abstract concepts to practical, day-to-day improvements. However, improvement will not occur unless the organization applies the findings from the self-assessment to local planning and implementation activities. The willingness to allow for improvement and accept change is another challenge the department must accept.

Self-assessment focuses on whether the organization is meeting goals that are commensurate with its responsibility. In today's world of government where the focus is on reinventing, re-engineering, rethinking and quality management, a department must continue to ask itself if there is value added by the actions it is taking within the organization. This process assists the fire service by asking questions to determine if the fire department is effective in meeting the needs of its community. A task force consisting of a group of highly qualified and dedicated professionals developed the accreditation model. These chief fire officers, trainers, city and county administrators, and academic professionals worked together to develop the self-assessment model, the basis for accreditation. The model provides a proven methodology to continually evaluate and improve services. The process helps organizations stay in touch with the communities they serve and meet the needs of their citizens.

Included in the accreditation model are the following 10 categories that fire departments use to evaluate their performance:

- Governance and administration;
- Assessment and planning;
- Goals and objectives;
- Financial resources;
- Programs;
- Physical resources;
- Human resources;
- Training and competency;
- Essential resources; and
- External systems relationships.

Within each category are criteria that measure or index a service or practice so that a judgment can be made. Within each criterion are performance indicators that define the desired level of ability to demonstrate a particular task as specified in the accreditation model. A total of 244 performance indicators are evaluated in preparation for the accreditation with 77 of these being core competencies that cannot be failed.

The accreditation model also includes a comprehensive research and information guide to assist the department in the self-assessment process. This manual is subject to continuous improvement and revision. The manual includes checklists, exhibits, benchmarks, references and activities to assist the fire department through the process. In addition, several appendices necessary for the accreditation process have been developed to address topics including defining the elements of response time, creating standards of response coverage and developing master or strategic plans.

THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS

The accreditation process includes four major levels: registered agency, applicant agency, accreditation candidate and accredited department. These levels allow a department to move through the CFAI process and achieve accreditation. The CFAI encourages departments to join the CFAI network as registered agencies even if they do not intend to pursue accreditation in the short term.

The process begins by applying for registered agency status and paying an application fee. Registered agency status is valid for three years and includes manuals, information and access to the CFAI accreditation program. During this stage, the fire department must also assign an accreditation manager who is the fire department's point of contact and who must attend the complete CFAI workshop series for the department to progress to the next step.



Once the accreditation manager and others are trained and oriented to the process, the department may proceed to applicant agency status. This requires another fee that is based on the population served by the department. This one-time fee, unless there is a lapse in status, can range from \$2,500 to \$10,000. Applicant agency status is valid for 18 months for career departments and 24 months for fire departments that are 90 percent or more volunteer.

The entire self-assessment process can take from one to three years of dedicated work. After a long self-assessment and planning process, the department will enter candidate agency status, and the commission will send a peer assessment team of three to five people from outside the state to conduct an on-site assessment. This on-site assessment includes a week long review of water supply systems, fire safety inspections, firefighter training records, dispatching procedures, financial planning, apparatus maintenance and many other operational topics. There are no fees associated with this part of the process although the requesting fire department is responsible for the expenses of the peer assessment team.

After almost a week of peer review, the peer assessment team will compile a report to CFAI either recommending accreditation or recommending that additional work be conducted before accreditation. If accredited, the fire department will be presented with the certification by the commission at a semi-annual CFAI meeting and will join the elite group of accredited fire departments.

Fire department accreditation is valid for five years. Within 30 days of the anniversary date of accreditation, the department must submit an annual compliance report with its yearly maintenance fee. On the fifth anniversary of the award of accreditation, the department submits the application for re-accreditation. The department

will submit a revised copy of the self-assessment to the CFAI and go through another on-site peer assessment process. The agency is then brought to the commission for reaffirmation of accreditation.

This might seem like a lot of work and a significant financial obligation; although, after completing the accreditation process, securing a comprehensive self-assessment management document, and making improvements within the department, most will agree the time and money are well spent.

FIRE ACCREDITATION AND THE COMMUNITY ISO RATING

Inevitably, the question will arise about whether accreditation will help lower the community ISO rating. Data collected by Dennis Gage of ISO seems to indicate that it will. CFAI provides the following information:

The Insurance Services Office, Inc. (ISO) is the agency that collects data and analyzes the capability of community fire suppression services. This evaluation is based on criteria such as fire alarms (how well the department receives alarms and dispatches its resources), the number of engine companies (their distribution, etc.), and water supply (whether the community has a sufficient water supply, etc.). Essentially, ISO is classifying a community's ability to fight fire.

The CFAI, on the other hand, provides a comprehensive system of fire and emergency service evaluation that can help local governments determine their risks and fire safety needs, evaluate the performance of the organizations involved, and provide a method for continuous improvement.

This presents a correlation between the ISO community assessment and the CFAI self-assessment. In fact, ISO conducted research to



determine if the self-assessment helped improve the ISO rating. According to a report released by Dennis Gage of ISO in May 2006, there are presently 1,114 accredited agencies although ISO has established a classification on only 92 of these agencies. The remaining are military installations or are found in a state where there is an independent rating bureau. Of the 92 accredited agencies with an ISO classification, the following is a breakdown by classification:

Classification	Percent
Class 1	0.10
Class 2	0.91
Class 3	3.45
Class 4	8.61
Class 5	15.65
Class 6	18.56
Class 7	13.87
Class 8	5.90
Class 9	29.50
Class 10	2.75

Note that if you want to improve your ISO classification to a class five or better, accreditation is a good opportunity to do so.

FIRE DEPARTMENT ACCREDITATION IN TENNESSEE

As previously stated, the Kingsport, Nashville and Maryville Fire Departments are already accredited. Brentwood, Cookeville and Memphis are in the registered agency status, and Alcoa is in applicant status. These efforts are setting the path for many more to follow.

In May 2006, the Maryville Fire Department hosted the first CFAI training for fire accreditation class conducted in Tennessee. In the past, anyone from Tennessee who wanted to take the courses had to travel outside the state. Each of the three courses are one day each and were offered for three consecutive days. Martel Thompson, a retired fire chief from Henderson, Nev., led the Maryville course. Students in the class came from as far away as Alaska, Illinois, Ohio and Georgia.

The first course is a one-day session about the self-assessment process and serves as an introduction to the accreditation program and its benefits. The focus is on determining how good your fire department is, how you measure it for credibility,

Classification	Number in Class	Percent of Total
1	8	9
2	24	26
3	40	43
5	14	15
5	6	7
Split	27	29

Since becoming accredited, ISO re-rated 27 of these departments resulting in the improved classification as follows:

- No regressions
- 19 improvements (70 percent)
- Eight retained their classification (30 percent)

It should be noted that most of the eight departments that retained their classifications were already class one fire departments (the best possible classification). The following chart shows the relationship of this data to the national ISO grading statistics of more than 44,000 classifications that could be compared with the chart above.



and how you prove it. This class and process focus on measuring success rather than failure. One example is about how a fire service measured itself by determining the amount of fire loss in a given community. A better measurement in this case would be the amount of property saved rather than the amount lost.

Day two of the series is on the standards of coverage and covers the primary functions of eight strategic planning components: deployment, risk identification, service levels, distribution, concentration, reliability, performance, and overall evaluation. The assessment process requires the fire department to develop a standard of coverage document that analyzes response factors and to set a standard for the local community. This process alone provides a tremendous amount of valuable information to be used in the future growth of the city and fire department.

Day three of the series includes training on becoming a peer assessor. Peer assessors are a key element of accreditation and are the foundation for improvement. Anyone with experience can become a peer assessor after training. Peer assessors are not paid and actually perform an incredible amount of work during the peer assessment process. Peer assessors are not allowed to review fire departments within their own state, but they do assess fire departments of similar size and makeup to their own.

The Maryville classes had 35 attendees with most of them representing Tennessee fire departments. This was a great opportunity, and we hope to see future courses sponsored in Tennessee.

SUMMARY

In summary, successful completion of the evaluation process will enhance training, quality of service, and information available to fire and emergency service agencies and personnel.

Self-assessment has many benefits. It allows agencies to accurately evaluate their departments and identify strengths and weaknesses. It provides them with a method to address deficiencies and encourages quality improvement through continuous self-assessment. There are many examples in which agencies were able to justify the need for additional equipment, work force, or services using the self-assessment process. Ultimately, self-assessment ensures that agencies are meeting the needs of their communities.

Many city managers have already heard about this process through ICMA, and with additional information and courses being held in Tennessee, it is expected that there will be more Tennessee fire departments achieving registered agency status. The cost of the registration and courses may seem expensive, but the return on the investment will be incredible. Contact your MTAS fire management consultant if you need additional information.

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