

FIRE CHIEFS' ASSOCIATION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA and BRITISH COLUMBIA FIRE TRAINING OFFICERS ASSOCIATION



Briefing Paper:

The Challenge and Responsibility of Training Firefighters in British Columbia



June 2013

OVERVIEW

PROBLEM

Rapid, safe and effective control and resolution of fire and other emergency incidents requires dedicated training in safe, modern practices. Academic and industry research has repeatedly demonstrated that current structural firefighting practice in British Columbia lacks both appropriate standards and effective oversight for skills at the fundamental level. Province-wide oversight of the determination, deployment and enforcement of training, with adequate provincial funding, is required to ensure the safety of all BC residents and firefighters.

DISCUSSION

In BC, local governments are responsible for determining the need for and providing structural firefighting services – including training – in their jurisdiction. While structural firefighting services are necessary to protect the safety of all British Columbians, there are no specific mandatory requirements for such services anywhere in BC under the *Fire Services Act* (the “Act”), unlike the requirements for fire inspections and investigations. Historically, the Office of the Fire Commissioner (OFC) played a large role in the provision and oversight of training through such programs as the Volunteer Firefighter Certification Program and the British Columbia Fire Service Training Standards. However, in the past 15 years there has been a sharp decline in OFC involvement with training which has coincided with significant funding cuts. This has gradually increased the pressure on local governments, which have limited access to resources.

The recent *BCIT Report – BC Fire Training Needs Assessment* identified that over 30% of BC fire services have not established a minimum level of training. In addition, over 30% list Basic Firefighter as their minimum training level to provide interior firefighting and rescue, despite the fact that this program does not train or certify students to perform those actions and is not a recognized NFPA standard. Only 49% of Chiefs report that they feel the standard for interior fire attack should be NFPA 1001. Of particular alarm is that 7% of fully career departments indicated that they use, and accept, the Basic Firefighter program as their minimum standard for interior firefighting. Further, 40% of career departments identified that partial completion of the NFPA 1001 standard is acceptable, indicating that they too have significant barriers to achieving the full standard.

The made-in-BC Basic Firefighter training program is not NFPA endorsed at this time. Developed to meet specific needs and challenges in BC, it was fully endorsed by then-Fire Commissioner David Hodgins in May 2007 and, as illustrated in the BCIT report, is now extensively used in the province. The OFC has done nothing to preclude its use in favour of an NFPA standard. If the OFC accepts the Basic program as a baseline training model, that should be formalized.

Under Ministerial Order #368 (Dec 2002), the OFC identified that published NFPA standards, including NFPA 1001 for firefighters, would be the minimum standards for training in BC. An OFC Information Bulletin released November 30, 2012 related to the Ministerial Order states that “the intent of the standard was that local governments and local authorities could adopt, not adopt, or adopt in part...” While that Order apparently remains in effect, there was no identified mechanism for obtaining, maintaining or enforcing it as the Order was never introduced as a mandatory standard. As noted above, in May 2007 the Fire Commissioner endorsed the creation and use of a new Basic Firefighter training program within the province, stating “...that it can be used to bridge into NFPA (1001) levels **should** (*emphasis added*) the local fire chief or individual firefighter wish to advance to certification...” Since the mandate for the OFC does not include responsibility for determining and enforcing training standards, local governments and individual fire services are left with the sole responsibility of interpreting and managing expectations related to training standards and operations.

The research demonstrates this approach to the use of NFPA as the standard has failed. Indeed, the OFC's own internally researched report, entitled *Fire Service Training Access Review (FSTAR 2009)*, repeatedly states that "one size does not fit all" when discussing the subject of NFPA 1001 as a training standard provincially. It is most concerning to provincial fire service agencies that the FSTAR report has never been made fully public, especially considering the high number of recommendations and findings that are similar to the recently published BCIT Report.

The multitude of research data from BC demonstrates that the NFPA 1001 standard for firefighter training is not attainable or realistic as the baseline requirement for all structural firefighters in the province. Over 85% of BC departments are primarily composed of volunteer or paid call firefighters, and of them 80% identify they cannot meet the NFPA 1001 standard because it is too costly, takes too much time, or requires courses/instructors that are not readily available. A full review of minimum training is required to identify and adopt more realistic and affordable baseline firefighter standards for both simple external firefighting activities outside a structure, and fire attack inside burning structures, which is far more dangerous and requires higher levels of training and experience.

Recommendation #2 from the FSLG report identifies a need to "broaden the mandate of the OFC" and recommendation #3 identifies a need to "standardize competencies and training standards." The BCIT report identified both of these areas as significantly lacking and requiring improvement in their recommendations #1, 2, 3 and 4, and the FSTAR report also identified them in findings #1, 2, 3 and 4. The lack of OFC oversight on standards and compliance, combined with an inability of local jurisdictions to either fund or train to the recommended NFPA 1001 standards, leaves large areas of BC being served by undertrained, and in some cases unsafe, fire services. These facts are well supported and documented and were specifically identified in the 2009 *Transforming the Fire/Rescue Service Report* from the Fire Services Liaison Group (FSLG).

The OFC is well placed to provide the expertise and oversight necessary to facilitate change and enhancement, though resources (both personnel and funding) would be required to undertake this. Similar responsibilities are performed by Fire Commissioner (FC)/Fire Marshal (FM) offices across Canada and necessary funding is often directly allocated from the Insurance Premium Tax (IPT), a tax on all insurance premiums. In BC, the IPT began as a fire insurance premium tax in 1921 to support the then-Office of the Fire Marshal, but today it is used as general revenue.

The BCIT report identified that both Manitoba and Ontario have FC/FM offices that have direct responsibility for delivery and/or oversight of all firefighter training. Each has a college that delivers training and is directly accountable to the FC/FM office. Each FC/FM office is allocated budget, with Manitoba utilizing 1.25% of the Insurance Premium Tax (total \$15 million) and Ontario receiving approximately \$25 million from provincial general revenue. In contrast, the annual operating budget for the OFC in BC is approximately \$900,000. This equates to \$0.20 per capita in BC while the Canadian FC/FM average is \$2.99. The average Canadian province or territory is therefore allocating, on average, over 15 times more budget than BC to fire service governance and oversight.

In BC, allocating 1% of IPT funds would result in an OFC budget of \$1.17 per capita – still well below the Canadian average, but a significant start that will have a marked impact on fire service oversight province-wide. This fact has been brought forward numerous times by the Fire Chiefs' Association of BC (FCABC) and was also identified within the OFC's FSTAR 2009 report in finding #4.

British Columbia has a number of highly regarded fire service training institutions that produce and deliver quality programs. However, there is little overall coordination or oversight, and significant gaps often go unaddressed related to both geographic delivery and specific training programs. Both the BCIT report and FSTAR identify the challenges caused by training institutions determining course scheduling and content on a province-wide scale, especially when they have a mandate to be economically viable as a priority.

An alternative strategy, utilized by Emergency Management BC (EMBC), provides strong oversight of the Emergency Management Division at the Justice Institute of BC. EMBC annually sets goals and targets for training, works with EMD to develop strategies, identifies and administers funding related to the strategies, and performs audits to confirm compliance and delivery standards.

If the Province is not prepared to move forward with resourcing the OFC, or in general assume greater responsibility for fire service training, then it should alternatively look to the FCABC – as the provincial representative of the overwhelming majority of fire services – to undertake that leadership role. However, if the Province chooses to have the FCABC or another agency act on its behalf, it must provide the necessary funds – equivalent to other provinces – to perform that responsibility.

Recommendations

1. That the Province direct the Office of the Fire Commissioner of BC to create a Working Group of stakeholders to research, identify, and recommend for adoption appropriate and attainable minimum training standard(s) for all structural firefighters in BC.
2. That the Province empower and resource the Office of the Fire Commissioner of BC to re-engage its operation, at levels comparable to other provinces and territories, so that it will provide strong leadership, oversight and enforcement of fire service standards.
3. That the Province direct the Office of the Fire Commissioner of BC and Advanced Education BC to review and recommend changes to the delivery of fire service training to ensure standards are attainable across the province through available, affordable and appropriate programming.
4. That if the Province of BC is not prepared to resource the Office of the Fire Commissioner of BC to meet these mandates, it identifies and allocates equivalent funding to the Fire Chiefs' Association of BC to facilitate provincial oversight on its behalf.

Conclusion

The fire service in British Columbia has been tragically altered by the recent deaths of firefighters. In firefighter deaths in recent years operational and training shortfalls were identified as mitigating circumstances. We cannot continue to provide fire and rescue services at substandard levels and/or at levels where adequate training has not been provided, as a result of inadequate oversight, training and funding. Local government does not have access to the adequate resources to undertake this mission alone. The Province must re-establish oversight capabilities and capacities to ensure that structural firefighters are operating to safe and practical standards through recognized, enforced and supported training. Funding and resourcing to levels seen across the rest of Canada are a minimum requirement to attain these goals. The citizens we serve, and the firefighters who serve, deserve such an assurance from the Province.

Supporting Documents

“British Columbia Fire Training Needs Assessment” – BC Institute of Technology SITE Centre for Applied Research, March 2013

“Public Safety in British Columbia - Transforming the Fire/Rescue Service” - A Report by the Fire Services Liaison Group, September 2009

“Improving Fire Services” – The Office of the Fire Commissioners Response to the FSLG Report, November 2012

“Fair Funding for Fire Services in British Columbia” – Fire Chiefs Association of BC Briefing Paper, March 2013
Information Bulletin – Minimum Training Standards for Firefighters in BC – Emergency Management BC, Office of the Fire and Emergency Management Commissioner, November 30, 2012

“Fire Service Training Access Review – FSTAR 2009” – Confidential Report to the Fire Commissioner of BC, 2009 Letter of Support for the Basic Firefighter Program, from Fire Commissioner David Hodgins, May 2007

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