
Introduction

This report examines fire services in Minnesota. Over time, fire services have come to extend beyond “fire protection” to include other emergency services. In addition to fighting fires, many fire department members are also responsible for extricating victims from vehicle crashes, inspecting buildings for compliance with fire codes, providing medical services at emergency scenes, and responding to spills of hazardous materials, among other duties.

In this review we researched the operations, apparatus and equipment, and personnel of Minnesota’s 790 local fire departments. Fire departments are typically run at the city or township level of government, although many fire departments serve areas that extend beyond a single municipal boundary line.¹ The great majority of departments operate with on-call or volunteer members, the latter of whom receive no hourly or per call compensation.

Our study looked at the overall structure and management of fire services but did not evaluate the individual actions of fire fighters at emergency incidents. For instance, although we identified the need for fire departments to develop incident management systems to determine in advance who has what responsibilities during an emergency, we did not

This review identifies best practices in delivering fire services.

examine how individual departments implemented their incident command once at the scene.

At the project’s start, we held a roundtable discussion to learn what local fire fighters, chiefs, fire marshals, state fire officials, legislators, local officials, fire prevention specialists, and others interested in fire services viewed as important issues. To define what actions are needed for successful fire services, we relied on guidelines developed and recommended by nationally recognized public safety organizations. We studied literature published by national groups, such as the National Fire Protection Association, as well as information from local organizations, such as the Minnesota State Fire Chiefs’ Association. We also organized focus groups of fire fighters in four different regions of the state to gather feedback on the concepts we had identified as necessary for effective and efficient fire departments.

We toured several fire departments in different regions of the state, rode along on some emergency runs, observed different apparatus in action, and interviewed chiefs and fire fighters to better understand the nature of their work. To learn more details about specific fire departments, we surveyed an extensive sample of volunteer and on-call departments in

¹ In addition, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has responsibility for preventing and extinguishing grass and forest fires in many areas around the state. See *Minn. Stat.* §88.10, subd. 1. The U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and National Park Service have fire management responsibilities for land under their authority.

smaller communities and all of the departments in larger communities around Minnesota. After identifying effective and efficient departments—based on whether they met performance standards developed by fire organizations—we visited a small number to gather additional information on their particular practices.

Throughout the review we relied on the advice and expertise of a technical advisory panel established at the outset of the project. This 18-member panel, consisting of fire chiefs, fire fighters, fire marshals, a city manager, and representatives from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, offered its professional input at various stages of our work. We also hired a retired fire officer to provide technical assistance. Appendix A lists the technical panel members and provides additional details on the methodology of this review.

This report has two chapters. In the first, we provide background information on how fire services are structured and financed in Minnesota as well as on the scope of fire department services. The chapter also explains the state's role in fire protection. Chapter 2 describes goals and actions for effective and efficient fire services and presents examples of Minnesota fire departments that use best practices in delivering their services.