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# Successful Fire-Service Practices Identified

## SUMMARY

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Many Minnesota fire departments with volunteer and part-time on-call fire fighters do a good job, even when compared to fire departments with full-time personnel in similarly sized cities, according to a best practices review of fire services released by the Legislative Auditor's Office. About 92 percent of Minnesota's fire departments have fire fighters who are volunteers or paid on an on-call basis. Only about 3 percent have full-time fire fighters, and about 5 percent have a combination of at least 6 full-time fire fighters and others who are volunteer or paid on-call members.

Local fire departments typically do much more than fight fires. A survey of fire departments conducted during the study indicated that about 80 percent were prepared to make basic responses to spills of hazardous materials, about 70 percent conducted rescues, such as extricating victims from vehicle crashes, and 60 percent offered some level of emergency medical services. Fire departments also conducted fire code inspections and educated groups on fire safety, although the extent of their fire prevention activities varied considerably.

According to the report, to be effective, fire departments should assess risks for fires and other emergencies in their response areas and plan their

services based on those risks, work on preventing fires, and recruit and train their members properly. The report uses standards and guidelines from national and local fire service agencies and state laws to define necessary practices for effective and efficient fire services. The study was prepared with input from urban and rural fire chiefs, fire marshals, and others involved with fire-related services.

One best practice recommended is to help prevent fires by providing fire-safety education to citizens. The public education program should be based on the most important fire risks identified in each community and tailored to people of different ages. Most Minnesota fire departments reported that in 1997 they provided at least a minimal level of public fire-safety information, but the extent of the programs varied greatly. Few fire departments had extensive and comprehensive public education programs that targeted information at preventing identified local fire risks, included a smoke detector program,

collaborated with teachers and others, designated a fire safety education officer, offered voluntary fire-safety surveys in homes, and provided ongoing monitoring of the program's effectiveness.

The report recommends that fire departments evaluate their responses to emergencies and use

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**Fire Services**  
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**Examples of Best Practices:**

- St. Louis Park's Fire Department regularly inspects multiple-occupant housing to enforce the fire code. Combined with a targeted education campaign, its efforts led to a reduction in apartment kitchen fires.
- To support safe and effective responses to fires, the Winnebago Fire Service requires its members to tour local businesses and high-hazard facilities. The tours make members aware of building layouts and potential risks they may encounter in emergencies.
- Maple Plain's Fire Department trains its members to recognize signs of arson. It follows standard guidelines to minimize property damage and to aid investigators by preserving fire scenes.

*The report is available at our web site:  
<http://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/pe9907.htm>.  
For copies of the full report or summary, call  
651/296-4708.*

resources effectively. This includes optimizing mutual aid arrangements, whereby fire departments assist each other during large-scale emergencies. For instance, in addition to relying on mutual aid for responses to fires, about 30 percent of fire departments reported using mutual aid for collaborative efforts in public fire-safety education and about 13 percent for making cooperative purchases. To the extent that fire departments extend mutual aid activities beyond traditional fire responses they enhance efficiency, according to the report.

Because effective responses to emergencies require tremendous advance planning, the report recommends that fire departments develop and follow “preincident plans.” Such plans prepare fire fighters with information, such as building construction and layout, utility shut-offs, storage of combustibles, and fuel loads in wildland areas, that they need to know before deciding on appropriate attack strategies. About 93 percent of fire departments in larger communities had preincident plans for at least some of their fire risks and structures; about 53 percent of fire departments in smaller communities reported having written emergency response plans to prepare for fire responses.

Other practices recommended for effective and efficient fire services include: developing active programs to recruit and retain fire fighters, particularly for departments using volunteer or paid on-call members; exploring alternative delivery methods to correct inefficiencies or inadequate service levels; ensuring fire code enforcement; developing effective communications both within the department and outside it; providing adequate protective equipment for each fire fighter; training fire fighters for the jobs they are expected to perform; adopting guidelines and protocols to support safe work practices; developing a process for fire investigations; and properly maintaining apparatus and equipment and planning ahead for their replacement.

The report lists examples of fire departments around the state that have adopted these practices. The purpose of the report is to highlight successful delivery of fire services.

Copies of the report, entitled *Fire Services*, are available from the Legislative Auditor’s Office at 651/296-4708 or the Internet at <http://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/pe9907.htm>. For further information, contact Jody Hauer or Roger Brooks at 651/296-4708.