



PRESIDENT'S message

Looming Public Safety Crisis in NYS?

By David Jacobowitz
FASNY Second Vice President



T here is a public safety crisis looming in this state, and I ask: Are we ready to provide solutions to these problems?

Do any New Yorkers actually know how many volunteer firefighters provide fire protection and EMS service to the citizens of our great state? When I ask the question, most people say 130,000, give or take a few thousand. I've heard estimates of 90,000 firefighters, with maybe 25,000 EMS personnel. These numbers don't take into account that some firefighters are also EMTs or paramedics. But the bottom line is this – the numbers are not as high as they could be.

If the number of firefighters and EMS personnel continues to decline, who will answer the alarm the next time? Who will help your elderly neighbor or relative who falls in the middle of the night? Who will check on the smoke detector going off in the house next door? Who will put out the car fire on the highway you're driving on and who will rescue the passengers and get them to a hospital?

As I said at the beginning of this article, there is a public safety crisis looming in this state, and I ask: Are we ready to provide solutions to these problems?

When I first joined the fire service 36 years ago, I was willing to take on the world, wanting to serve the citizens of my village. Our fire department had 75 members, responding to every emergency, from pumping cellars to fighting structure fires. There was nothing we would say no to.

Along the way, our department picked up EMS, adding to the bag of goodies we provided. But as the emergency calls increased, the number of volunteers started to decrease. The spread of automatic alarms didn't help either. It meant more calls for us to answer at all times of the day and night.

EMS calls also increased, forcing my department to assign the members to a nightly response squad to ensure that those calls were answered. (As we know, no one drives themselves to the hospital anymore.) More than ever, and possibly to our detriment, our status as the most trusted service providers in the neighborhood had become cemented. If they called, we would respond.

We can attribute the decline in volunteer levels to many factors. One of which is the investment of time needed for training. The

volunteer firefighter in New York has become as well-trained as their career brothers and sisters in the paid departments. The number of hours needed for a recruit changes by the month: firefighter 1, Haz-Mat, first responders, pump operator, RIT teams... the list goes on and on. Nowadays, volunteers aren't just giving up their free time to battle blazes. They need to attend classes and take courses in their off-hours. The time commitment has, for many, proven to be an obstacle to volunteering.

The workplace is another factor. Not only are people traveling further to go to work, taking them well outside their home communities, where they could volunteer. But you'd be hard-pressed to find bosses willing to let their workers answer alarms during normal business hours. As a result, daytime response has almost become non-existent. More and more departments are relying on Mutual Aid to bolster their manpower. Add to this the increase in emergency calls, and we have a major crisis looming.

Our attempts to recruit new members have little to show for it.

The new attitude of most potential recruits seems to be "What's in it for me?" And when you open the paper or read news online, it's not uncommon to find stories involving departmental or district corruption. It's truly a shame.

To help generate ideas to stem the tide, I traveled to St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia earlier this month for a symposium on "Fire Service Reputation Risk." It was

a joint presentation by the Cumberland Valley Volunteer Firemen's Association, VFIS, and the Public Safety and Environmental Protection Institute at St. Joseph's.

During the six hour program, we examined issues that pose further threats to the fire service. Discussions were held regarding the antisocial behavior by some members that threaten to undermine the high moral ground held by the fire service – things like fighting with neighbors after a parade; the same neighbors we took an oath to serve. We talked about the inappropriate use of fire department computers and how to prevent it.

We discussed subjects like substance abuse. Granted, we all enjoy a beer once in a while, but too often we've heard about firefighters killed in the line of duty with high levels of alcohol and even illicit drugs in their blood stream. Are drug and alcohol tests for



© 2007 Paul Combs - All Rights Reserved

www.ArtStudioSeven.com

President's Message continued from page 5

firefighters the wave of the future?

Another subject: sexual harassment. This behavior is the latest problem to rear its ugly head in the fire service. Couple these charges with discrimination and denial of advancement, and a few departments have gotten in hot water recently. If the media doesn't get wind of these shenanigans, then the internet will.

It was decided that the emphasis needs to be placed on creating a "zero tolerance" climate where this behavior will be immediately identified and prevented. It will take courage from the leadership, from the chief on down, to proactively encourage these changes in attitude.

In short, the fire service faces many challenges. Some problems,

like that of recruitment and retention, need to be studied and dealt with creatively. Other problems, like substance abuse, sexual harassment and the "glass ceiling," can be addressed more immediately by those who have the courage and wherewithal to do so. I invite all of you to contribute to these solutions and again make the fire service a force that everyone would like to join.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Jacobowitz". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.