



National News

## Nation's Fire Departments Face Challenges in Staffing, Water Access

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Most U.S. fire departments call on neighboring communities to help them fight fires and the most significant reason for that is the need for more firefighters.

Also, nearly one in six departments either has no water service for firefighting or must rely on sources other than hydrants, possibly leading to critical delays.

Those are some of the major findings of a recent independent survey of fire chiefs conducted by Opinion Research Corp. (ORC) of Princeton, N.J.

More than half (54 percent) of the chiefs in the survey said their departments "always or almost always" call on neighboring departments to respond to the initial alarm for a structure fire. Another 28 percent reported that they sometimes call on neighboring departments.

Among the chiefs who call on neighboring departments on the first alarm, 74 percent said a very significant reason for doing so is the need for more responders; 29 percent said a need for specialized apparatus or equipment is very significant; and 25 percent cited as very significant the fact that a neighboring fire station is closer to the response area than any station in their own district.

Fully one-third of the chiefs in the survey (33 percent) reported that their response areas have populated sections that are closer to a fire station in a neighboring fire district than to any fire station in their own district. But of those chiefs, 39 percent said the closer neighboring fire department does not respond on automatic aid to fires in their districts.

The survey, commissioned by ISO and conducted by ORC, includes responses from a random sample of 500 chiefs and other ranking fire department officials representing jurisdictions of all sizes across the United States. The margin of error is plus or minus 4 percentage points.

"The survey helps ISO — along with property/casualty insurance companies and the firefighting community — gain further insights into key issues in fire departments across the country," said Mike Waters, ISO's vice president, Risk Decision Services. "We hope the results of the study will highlight the critical challenges facing fire chiefs as they manage their limited resources."

Nearly all of the chiefs (98 percent) indicated that their departments have the capacity to communicate by radio directly with fire departments of neighboring communities. Most said they can also communicate directly with local emergency medical services (95 percent) and local police (84 percent).

"This positive finding shows that local interoperability — the ability to connect emergency responders — is on the rise," said Robert W. Cobb, ISO's director of community hazard mitigation. "We'll continue to track

emergency communications as one of the key elements of an effective fire-suppression program."

The study also reveals that communities with volunteer fire departments — or combination volunteer and paid/career departments — are having difficulty attracting and training a sufficient number of firefighters. Among the chiefs of volunteer and combination departments, 93 percent said that the biggest challenge surrounding recruitment is the time commitment. The chiefs also cited a small volunteer pool (84 percent) and education and training requirements (83 percent) as obstacles.

More than one-third of the chiefs (36 percent) said their departments spend less than 10 hours per firefighter per month on training; 42 percent spend between 10 and 20 hours; and 22 percent spend more than 20 hours. The average percentage of training hours spent on structure fires (42 percent) is double that spent on rescue incidents (21 percent) and also double that spent on EMS or other medical services (21 percent).

The study raises questions about the adequacy of the water supply in communities across the country. About 4 percent of the chiefs said that there is no water service for firefighting in their communities, and another 11 percent said they rely on sources of water other than hydrants — including lakes, ponds, rivers, creeks, wells, tankers, and others.

In communities that have water service for firefighting, only about half the chiefs (52 percent) said that hydrants protect "all or almost all" of their primary response areas. In communities with water service, 23 percent of the chiefs said that the responsible agency or organization inspects and flow-tests the hydrants less than once a year.

"This survey points out the need to understand the actual situation on the ground when evaluating fire protection at a particular location," said Waters. "It's not enough to know there's a fire station nearby. You also have to know if the station will respond to a possible fire and if there will be enough trained personnel, adequate equipment, and sufficient water for firefighting, among other things."

ISO's Public Protection Classification (PPC) program gives insurance companies and fire departments a standard measurement of the effectiveness of fire protection in more than 46,000 fire districts throughout the country. Under the program, expert ISO staff visit the communities to collect information about their fire departments, emergency communication systems, and water supplies. ISO then analyzes the information and assigns a Public Protection Classification — a number from 1 to 10. Class 1 generally represents the best fire protection, and Class 10 indicates that the community's fire-suppression program does not meet ISO's minimum criteria. The program incorporates recognized standards developed by the National Fire Protection Association and the American Water Works Association.

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