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4 Ways to Rethink the Firefighting Game

Former president of the International Association of Fire Chiefs Jeff Johnson shares his thoughts on the firefighting game.

BY: JONATHAN WALTERS | JANUARY 2011

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There are new ways for fire and rescue services to think about the job. One leading proponent of that re-thinking is Jeff Johnson, former president of the International Association of Fire Chiefs and recently retired chief of Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue in Oregon -- the second largest fire district in the state, encompassing Nike World Headquarters. Here are some of his thoughts:

1. Think regionally. There are places where you could easily combine two, three or four departments. The cost of a "fixed station" is significant, so potential savings from consolidation of stations are

equally significant. "In places where you have stations a couple of miles apart and each does about two runs a day, you should start asking about the cost of each community 'having their own,'" Johnson says.

2. Beef up the use of technology. For example, traffic cameras can scope out accidents prior to dispatch. That way, if you have a call for an accident on the freeway and you see that everyone is out of their cars and unhurt, you roll accordingly. "It allows you to stop carpet bombing and start using a surgical approach to response," he says.

3. Let the data speak. "Over the past 15 years, we've developed computerized reports with lots of data, but not many people are using it to do what we do better," Johnson says. For example, Johnson asked for an analysis of 10,000 fire alarm activations in his district. Two, it turned out, were actual fires. In fact, most fire and rescue calls are for minor incidents or false alarms. In response, Johnson instituted a response protocol whereby four small SUVs manned by a single paramedic now initially respond to most calls -- because most calls don't need a full firematic or emergency medical response. The "fly cars" handle calls like smoke alarm activations, smell of smoke, abdominal pain and so forth. "Why should a firehouse empty out when it's a 2 in 10,000 chance that the alarm is serious?" Johnson asks.

4. Work with your rank and file. Making significant changes in how the fire service does its work requires a high degree of cooperation with front-line staff. It starts with relationships based on truth and integrity, Johnson says. "Firefighters and management don't lie to each other, and they don't ambush each other. Otherwise it's a full-on fist fight. And that's not helpful to anyone."

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Bobby B | Commented January 7, 2011

I find it hard to believe a Fire Chief would make such ignorant comments. I have been on "sick calls" that ends up being codes (dead/ CPR). How can you judge a situation without being there? YOU CAN'T! There is a reason this guy is the "former Pres"

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Moe-liss | Commented January 8, 2011

Please be careful with broad "paintbrush" style statements on how some agencies can change their responses to save money. In the case of Virginia, the Administrative Code (the law) 12VAC5-31 REQUIRES an ambulance staffed with 2 personnel respond to medical emergencies & defines those qualifications. That is not for you to place a generic statement out there in public domain that could potentially open folks up for liability & risk management issues. How about the entire Scene Safety issues? If someone responds entirely alone, how can that be safe? You need to be a little more careful with how you deliver your message. As a former fire chief, one would think you would have thought all of this out before you spoke.

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