

**Exploration of the Addition of Full-Time Employees to Improve Staffing at
Bainbridge Township Fire Department**

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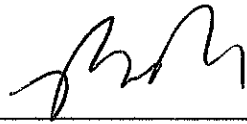
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Brian A. Phan

ABSTRACT

The Bainbridge Township Fire Department is currently experiencing staffing deficiencies. On-duty staffing minimums do not always meet set forth standards. The department also faces response time issues and deficiencies in handling multiple calls at once. Over the last 20 years, the request for emergency service volumes have more than doubled with runs totaling 600 in 1988 to over 1,300 currently. The population of Bainbridge Township was 10,916 in the 2000 U. S. Census. This population figure represented a 12.6% increase over the 1990 Census, which was at 9,694 residents. Population growth projections forecast the population to be at 13,414 by the year 2020.

Demographic information presented in the 2005 Bainbridge Township Facility Development Study projects "Bainbridge Township will experience a normal to slightly higher demand for emergency services in comparison with other communities of its size" in the future. Bainbridge Township Zoning projects that there are several tracts of undeveloped land that will likely be residentially developed at similar densities to those of recent times over the next 20 years. This speculation predicts 650 new housing units to be built in the coming years. Included in the development projection are two elderly care facilities that are currently under construction, one of which is significant.

The purpose of this study is an analyzation of the current situations that are presently affecting the Bainbridge Township Fire Department and identification of possible solutions to those problems using a descriptive research method. The author poses four research questions:

- 1) What factors or changing local conditions may impact future staffing deficiencies in the Bainbridge Township Fire Department?

- 2) What are alternative staffing options that could remedy the current and future deficiencies?
- 3) What may be the necessary changes in the current administration levels if alternative staffing methods were to be initiated?
- 4) What are the potential changes in departmental dynamics/relationships if alternative staffing methods were to be initiated?

Question number one has already been answered in the opening comments of this section. The answers to questions two, three, and, four are the compilation of past author reviews and this author's current survey. The problems that Bainbridge faces are increased staffing needs and decreased manpower, and are by no means unique. Many Fire Departments have experienced similar problems. Several authors have reviewed these situations and information pertaining to changing the workforce from volunteers, paid on-call, and part-time to full-time has been substantiated. In these publications, authors describe two general situations that led to the work force being upgraded. Those situations are increases in call volumes and decreases in availability of personnel to staff. Along with the work force changes, authors describe inherent problems with personnel and management associated with the changes. Results of this author's survey mirrored the information derived from the literature review.

It is this author's recommendation to boost the current part-time workforce by the addition of several newly hired Firefighters creating a larger pool of available employees to staff with a minimum of four Firefighters on duty at all times. Further, if this attempt were to fall short, a final recommendation would be to create a part-time/full-time combination department. The proposal would be to utilize a standard 24 hours on/48

hours off schedule with the addition of six full-time employees, two per shift with opposite days off, leaving at least one full-time member on duty most of the time. The current part-time workforce would then supplement this newly created workforce with a minimum staffing of four part-time firefighters on duty at all times. It should be anticipated that there would be inherent personnel issues with the creation of a combination part-time/full-time department. Fire Department administration should expect to make the needed changes to mitigate those personnel issues. A likely expectation would be that the full-time work force might unionize. It is the hope of this author that the addition of the full-time employees would come from the current part-time work force thereby reducing the chance for friction and poor labor-management relations. It is expected that the current ranking officer system would be able to function with the proposed change. Full-time administrative positions may need to be added. This suggestion is viewed as an appropriate solution to the current deficits and a combination department was supported by a Bainbridge Township initiated Facility Development Study that was completed by Emergency Consultants Services, Inc. in 2005.

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The Bainbridge Township Fire Department, like most fire departments across the nation, is experiencing growing pains. Ed Plomske, the former chief, stated, "When the hours of station coverage expands beyond 12 hours a day, the level of volunteer participation will decrease" and to no surprise, this prophecy became reality.

The problems this study will address are the declining number of part-time firefighters available as the staffing needs increase and current staffing levels do not always meet set forth standards. Currently the present staffing levels and available reserves are not able to respond to approximately 15 percent of the weekly call volume.

As the hours and days of part-time staffing increased, the level of volunteer participation decreased, so as to perpetuate the vicious cycle of fewer members responding off duty, and more station staffing required to handle calls because off duty members are no longer responding. The Fire Department that was once proud in its volunteer strength has now become "just another job" instead of the popular social environment it once was.

Because many of the members are working around a full-time schedule elsewhere, an additional situation has arisen in the difficulty of getting the part-time members to work holiday shifts. If they are fortunate enough to have a holiday off at their full-time employment, family commitments often leave them unavailable to staff this Department on these holidays. As staffing requirements increase, these shifts become more difficult to find enough members to fill the schedule. The anticipation is that, in the near future, the all part-time staffing will no longer meet the needs of the Fire Department and the community.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify and determine whether supplementing the all part-time workforce with full-time personnel could be a beneficial and cost effective approach to meet the Fire Department's staffing needs. The results of this study will be used by Fire Department administration to assist in correcting the current staffing problems and to address future demands of the community.

Research Questions

The following questions will be answered by using a method of descriptive research:

- 1) What factors or changing local conditions may impact future staffing deficiencies in the Bainbridge Township Fire Department?
- 2) What are alternative staffing options that could remedy the current and future deficiencies?
- 3) What may be the necessary changes in the current administration levels if alternative staffing methods were to be initiated?
- 4) What are the potential changes in departmental dynamics/relationships if alternative staffing methods were to be initiated?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Bainbridge Township Fire Company was founded in the year 1942. The all-volunteer organization was a private company, contracting with the 25 square mile township for fire protection. The company survived by holding fundraisers and soliciting donations from residents and business owners. In 1972, the Fire Company voted to become financed by the Township and turned most of the Fire Company-owned equipment over to the Township's control. In 1973, tax levies were instituted to fund the operation. In 1976, the political arena at that time created a full-time Fire Department, hiring several full-time firefighters and a full-time Fire Chief. This venture was short lived, as were the political leaders who created it, bringing about a small part-time workforce which staffed the fire station with two firefighters Monday through Friday 6:00AM to 6:00 PM. This staffing regiment continued until 1995, when it became apparent that, due to the increase in calls and the lessening availability of off duty personnel, additional staffing was needed to cover the station until 12:00 AM.

In 1995, a tax levy was passed to "increase the hours of staffing, and decrease response times." Within a short period, the fire station staffing went to 24 hours a day, seven days a week with two part-time firefighters on-duty. As the department became busier, a move was made to increase the number of firefighters on duty to three, to more effectively handle the call volume and to make it safer for the members who were on duty.

Today the department consists of 40 part-time employees that are paid hourly by the Township, with a pay scale that is dependent upon their EMS certification and their rank within the organization. The Fire Company still exists, contracting with the Township to provide manpower, basically serving as the back up to the on-duty personnel. New members that enter the organization start out in a paid on-call status with the Fire Company until such time as they

have completed the requirements set forth to upgrade to part-time status. Currently the department is staffed with four part-time firefighters on duty from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM and three part-time firefighters on duty from 6:00 PM until 6:00 AM. As each step occurred, the level of off-duty personnel participation (off-duty members responding back to the station on pager calls) decreased significantly, bringing back fewer members to assist on fire and EMS runs. A study of the Fire Department's operations was completed in 2005. One of the many recommendations of the 2005 study included increasing the on-duty staffing numbers. A request was made to increase to four part-time Firefighters 24/7 in June 2005 and was subsequently denied by the Township Trustees.

The situation, as it stands, is that over the years, the Department has transformed from an all-volunteer organization to a predominately all-part-time department. With that change, and the changes in the community such as commercial and assisted living developments (dramatically increasing the call volume), society (life in general is busier today than in the past), etc., most off-duty staff does not respond back to the station for calls when they are off duty. The current feeling of the majority of the department is that working at the station is a "just a job" and when they are done, they are done. The impact is that members only want to work when it is a convenience for them and not necessarily a convenience for the Department. This has created a mounting scheduling problem, resulting in a lack of adequate coverage during busy times.

This current trend will not only continue but will increase as time passes, creating a severe hardship for the Department. With this fact in mind, a strategy should be developed to provide stability of staffing to meet current and future demands. Results of this study should be used to develop a solution to the current situation: the need for staff to cover the shifts and to provide more continuity within the organization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous fire departments across the country are experiencing staffing problems and concerns similar to those facing the Bainbridge Township Fire Department. Coleman (2002) describes a combination department as any fire department that uses both full-time and part-time people to meet commissions and goals of the organization.

Many thoughts on the ingredients of a combination department are present. Powers (2003) stated, "It was obvious that fire departments use part-time or volunteer firefighters because of budgetary constraints, not because they make better firefighters." He went on to state, "When the inherent problems with using part-time personnel can no longer be controlled, elected officials and fire administrators will be forced to find funding to implement staffing changes." As fire departments are in transition, combination departments will always be in a state of uncertainty. Coleman (2002) states, "The reason that fire departments go into full-time career status ranges from economics to politics." Racine (2005) reported that at the "Twinsburg Fire Department, it takes five part-time firefighters to fill one full-time slot and that full-time employees could cover more hours than part-time employees."

Barnes (2002) reported that as the number of part-time positions per day is increased, a greater number of part-time employees are needed in the pool to draw from to fill all the positions. Full-time employees are more expensive but they can cover more hours with fewer employees.

Hyre (2000) stated, "Fiscal issues make a fully paid fire department simply not an option for many communities." Rielage (1993) noted, "The addition of career firefighters and a community's change to a combination fire department structure is often seen as an answer to such staffing problems."

Information suggests that although combination part-time/full-time departments certainly exist, it seems that there are inherent problems within such organizations. Problems such as concerns about fairness and equality, pay differences, union issues with part-time forces, and different standards. Jump (2002) discovered that in cases of combination staffing "much effort is required to maintain positive relationships between colleagues who are compensated on a full-time basis, part-time basis or in some cases even volunteer their time." Powers (2003) believed that the reasons for the difficulty of combination departments are the uncertainty caused by being in transition. As such, leadership in combination departments must be trained in transitional leadership, teambuilding, and promoting interdependence among individuals. He went on to point out that standards should be the same with both groups; communication should be detailed; compensation should be fair and equitable with benefits offered for part-time personnel. Career development opportunities should be provided, and there should be a solid recruitment program that focuses on attitudes and motivations as well as employee recognition. Coleman (2002) believes that any combination will work if a plan exists, and if not, no combination will work. The emphasis here is on developing a plan so that everyone knows what's expected of the various parties as the organization undergoes the transition from one staffing configuration to another. He continues to state, "The ones that are succeeding have something in common, beyond having a plan. There's a certain professional respect between the two types of staffing

configuration so that conflict is minimized when responding to alarms, taking care of fire stations and otherwise conducting business in the department.”

Longevity of staff is a concern. Jump (2002) reported that “full-time employees tend to work at least twenty-five years due to the pension system and that many volunteer and part-time personnel tend to serve shorter terms.” When looking at staffing models, this should be an important consideration to the employer. In 2005, the Bainbridge Township Fire Department had a “Facility Development Study” completed by Emergency Services Consulting, Inc. In the study, Kouwe (2005) suggested the addition two Fire Stations with two full-time positions for each station. However, the priority, Kouwe (2005) noted, was that the Township should direct its immediate attention to increasing the on-duty staff at the current station and the long-term sustainability of the on-call response system used by the Fire Department.

When staffing is discussed, it important to include the recognized minimum number of Firefighters required to complete firefighting operations. ICMA (1988) reported that “fire suppression operations have three basic functions: (1) rescue; (2) work involving the ladder, forcible entry and ventilation; and, (3) the application of water through hose lines. To raise ladders, ventilate, search, and rescue simultaneously takes quick action by at least four to often eight or more Firefighters, each team under the supervision of an officer”. NFPA 1410, 1500 and 1710 state that, “It is recommended that a minimum acceptable fire company staffing level should be four members responding on or arriving with each engine and each ladder company responding to any type of fire.” Ohio Administrative Code 4123:1-21-07 (C) (3) states that “In interior structural fires, a minimum of four employees shall be required, consisting of two employees working as a team in the hazardous atmosphere, who shall remain in voice and visual contact with each other; and two members who are located outside the hazardous atmosphere,

who shall be responsible for maintaining a constant awareness of the number and identity of those operating in the hazardous atmosphere and be prepared to perform rescue of those members if required”.

PROCEDURES

As the men and women of the Bainbridge Township Fire Department are aware, the Department has experienced some significant growing pains over the past several years. Although Bainbridge’s problems are certainly not unique, an opinion was needed on how to address the current and future staffing concerns. Through literature review and a survey of several departments, solutions to the department’s staffing deficiencies were explored. An answer to research question number one was derived from studying Departmental and Town records; Past departmental data regarding scheduling was analyzed as well as budgets, financial records, and information on levies to determine if and how alternative-staffing approaches could be funded. Research questions two through four were answered through literature review and by a comprehensive survey that was sent out to numerous departments across the state. Through unlimited e-mail chains, the survey was sent out. 100 surveys were returned with only 75 surveys that answered to a recent change within their organization and, finally, 60 surveys fit the required criteria.

Definition of Terms

Full-time firefighter- An employee hired to respond to calls of fire and EMS who receives salary and benefits and works more than 32 hours per week.

Part-time firefighter- An employee hired to respond to calls of fire and EMS and does not receive benefits and works less than 32 hours per week.

Combination Department- Any fire department that operates with any two or more of the following staffing models: full-time, part-time, paid on-call, or volunteer.

RESULTS

The method of research chosen for this project was descriptive. A survey consisting of staffing model-related questions was created using the on-line "Survey Monkey" service, which then mailed out the survey through an extensive e-mail system over the Internet. Through "Survey Monkey," the results of the survey were collected and then analyzed by this author. The results received were within the expected parameters that the author had envisioned. A comprehensive literature review was also conducted using past research documents, Fire Service publications, and recognized organizational standards. Review of Departmental and Township records, as well as the Facility Development Study that was conducted for the Fire Department in 2005, also provided solid information in the development of this project.

Results of the proposed research questions are as follows:

1) What factors or changing local conditions may impact future staffing deficiencies in the Bainbridge Township Fire Department? Review of the Facility Development Study, Township, County, and Departmental records provided the following information: Run volumes have more than doubled over the last 20 years with no signs of slowing down; Population growth showed a 12.6% increase since 1990 and is projected to grow 23% by the year 2020; Demographic projections forecast that "Bainbridge Township will experience a normal to slightly higher demand for emergency service in comparison with communities of its size" in the future; Bainbridge Township Zoning projects that 650 new housing units will be built in the coming years, including two elderly care facilities that are currently under construction, one of which is significant.

2) What are alternative staffing options that could remedy the current and future deficiencies? Bainbridge is currently operating a combination department utilizing paid on-call

and part-time firefighters. Research revealed two potential options:

- A) Increase the current part-time staff manpower reserve to provide for more flexibility and availability in scheduling
- B) Institute a combination department consisting of full-time and part-time Firefighters

3) What may be the necessary changes in the current administration levels if alternative staffing methods were to be initiated? Research revealed two potential options:

- A) No additional administrative changes
- B) Potential addition of full-time administrative positions

4) What are the potential changes in departmental dynamics/relationships if alternative staffing methods were to be initiated? Research identified numerous situations that may occur with operating a combination full-time/ part-time department. Examples of inherent problems that may arise are the creation of a unionized full-time staff, inequality of pay, benefits, status, treatment, standards, and training.

DISCUSSION

The situation of insufficient staffing at the Bainbridge Township Fire Department is not a unique problem. As I learned from my research, many organizations across the nation are experiencing similar staffing problems. Survey results obtained during my research were in line with the findings of other authors' views. This author realized that, overwhelmingly, the two reasons for some initiation of organizational change are: availability of staff for station coverage, or available personnel to handle calls, and; an increase in the run volumes that the organization is responsible for. Obviously an increase in run volumes directly correlates to the amount of

staffing needed to handle the increase. Powers (2003) stated that “when inherent problems with using part-time personnel can no longer be controlled, elected officials and fire administrators will be forced to find funding to implement staffing changes”.

I have been with this organization for 25 years now (10 years as Chief) and have seen a significant increase in activity that the Department is involved in. Over the years, our Department has experienced many changes and, with these changes, there has been a marked increase in staffing issues. Evaluation of the situation would serve to recommend some type of change. As previously stated, the Department has seen a notable increase in run volumes, as well as other activities such as Fire Prevention and Public Educational needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As this project began, the Bainbridge Township Fire Department had been dealing with the fact that it needed to increase the minimum staffing levels at certain times of the day and that it had been struggling with scheduling problems for some time. The many facts stated throughout this document have painted a clear picture of the current deficits and the future situations that could arise with the increasing population growth. As this author compiled the aforementioned information, a personal side of this dilemma was identified for this author. As the Fire Chief, this author has given over 25 years of blood, sweat and tears to this organization. I have put my life on hold many times since I began here in 1983. I have seen an enormous amount of change (most of which has been good). The recent changes, however, have certainly troubled me. It is understood that society itself has changed and that life for everyone is much busier than in the past. I share that feeling as my own life and family's lives are very demanding, much more than in the past. I have seen the Department change from a once small social club to a very high paced business with runs volumes more than doubling since I began. We, as an organization, know that another change is necessary to attempt to rectify the current situation. It may appear to the readers of this paper that the addition of full-time staff may be the easy solution to the problem at this point. While that may be the only answer at some point in time, it is this author's view that the addition of full-time staff at this time would create a whole new set of moderate to severe problems for the department.

To start this discussion one would have to first look at the dollars and sense of the matter. If the Department would opt to add a partial full-time work force, it would be suggested that a 24/48-hour work schedule be implemented to stay inline with other area departments. A recommendation could be that a total of six full-time employees be hired, two per each of the

three platoons with opposite days off. Starting salaries of these firefighters would be comparable to the full-time police officers' pay scales that already exist. It is envisioned that with the salaries and benefits that are required of full-time employees that it could cost an additional \$700,000 per year to operate the Fire Department. That, in effect, would only guarantee that one firefighter is scheduled per day leaving the other three to four slots to be filled by part-time firefighters. While this suggestion would begin to overcome the scheduling problem with a least one firefighter on duty, it would not fill the rest of the available slots out and in effect take members away from the already low reserve. With an already dwindling budget, it would be difficult as a taxpayer to sanction this additional cost that would not lessen the situation.

Beside the monetary issues, there are many other concerns that could realistically affect the organization. Ever though that the potential full-time members hired would be taken from the existing part-time employees, it is foreseen and has been reported by other authors that with implementation of a combination department consisting of full-time and part-time employees, that there would be the potential of inequality which either real or perceived could in affect tear the organization apart. With these facts demonstrated, this author does not recommend the addition of full-time staff at this time.

It would serve to reason that a better suggestion would be to make changes within the current part-time system that is in place. As it stands now, to be a member of the Fire Department, there are several criteria that have to be met. First, an applicant has to reside in a restricted area. The idea behind the residency is that the Department has long relied on its members that were off-duty to respond back to calls. As mentioned previously, the frequency of off-duty members responding back to calls is lessening and can no longer be relied upon to make up the staffing short falls. Another requirement is that once an applicant makes it through the

background process, that applicant usually would not be considered for a part-time position until one year later (one year probation) creating an obvious hardship on the organization. It would seem that a more modern approach to these restrictions would be to first open up the residency radius to provide for a larger area of potential candidates, therefore increasing the chances of recruiting more qualified people. Secondly, once the applicant has made it through the background process, that applicant would be hired part-time, worked into the schedule and be considered available manpower to cover shifts. The new members would then be provided the necessary training while working on their shift. The newly hired employees would still be require to serve a one year probation, but the probation would not be a condition of being considered for a part-time position. A third recommendation would be to increase the wages paid to off-duty members that respond back to calls. It is the concern of this author that the pay scales are far too low for reimbursement of those members that choose to come in off duty. While money is not always the answer, it is perceived that this may bring in more off-duty members. It is worth again mentioning that in the Facility Development Study that was completed in 2005, Kouwe stated that the Department "should direct it's immediate attention to the long-term sustainability of it's on-call response system." It is the feeling of this author that this would be money well spent. A fourth and final recommendation would be the initiation of an incentive or reward system for those members that work holiday shifts. It is generally the norm at area career departments to offer some incentive to those members that work holidays. It has already been stated that it is becoming more difficult to staff the station during holidays. Again, it is the feeling of this author that holiday incentives are a positive step towards solving holiday scheduling deficits.

While it is clear that there is no single solution to such a complex problem, the suggestions offered are seen as a modern step toward resolving the current issues that face the Bainbridge Township Fire Department. Certainly, it is thought that these suggestions will cost the taxpayers far less than hiring full-time employees and will not only maintain the integrity of the organization, but enhance it.

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APPENDIX 1- Staffing Survey

1) What type of Jurisdiction does your department cover? Examples- City, Village, Township, Fire District, Etc. _____

2) What is the population of the area that your department covers? _____

3) How many Fire Stations do you have? _____

4) Does your department run (check all that apply)

____ EMS _____ Basic Life Support _____ Advanced Life Support

5) How many incidents does your department handle per year?

_____ Fire _____ EMS _____

6) What is your departments' total annual budget? _____

What amount of your total budget is for personnel? _____

7) Does you department provide Fire Prevention activities?

_____ Yes _____ No

8) Does your department provide Public Education activities?

_____ Yes _____ No

9) What is the staffing make up of your department?

_____ Full-time/ Number _____

_____ Part-time/ Number _____

_____ Combination (please define the make up) _____

_____ Paid On Cal/Number _____

_____ Volunteer (not paid)/ Number _____

10) Please describe the make up of your department ranks by providing the number and employment status of each. Example- 3 full-time Captains, 2 part-time Assistant Chiefs, etc.

Assistant Chiefs

Deputy Chiefs

Battalion Chiefs

Captains

Lieutenants

Firefighters

Paramedics

EMTS

11) Has your Department gone through any changes in staffing in the past 12 months?

_____ Yes _____ No

If your answer is No, thank you for your time.

If your answer is yes, please continue with this survey.

12) What was the change?

13) What led to the change?

14) With respect to question 9, what did the make up of your department look like prior to the staffing change?

_____ Full-time/ Number _____

_____ Part-time/ Number _____

_____ Combination (please define the make up) _____

_____ Paid On Cal/Number _____

_____ Volunteer (not paid)/ Number _____

15) What personnel and/or administrative changes had to take place?

16) What conflicts arose from the staffing changes? (Examples: conflicts between firefighters or officers, labor-management conflicts, administrative issues)

17) Other comments?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. The information that you provided will be very useful.