

Step Back

And Move Forward

D o u g H a m p

On December 5, 1995, the city council of Paso Robles, California, agreed with the fire chief and firefighters of the Paso Robles Fire Department. On that evening, the "fire department" was eliminated. Here's what happened.

The Paso Robles Fire Department needed additional staffing, new or replaced equipment, improved facilities, and an increase in its general operating budget. Sound familiar? Taking an analytical approach to accomplishing these objectives, the department created an Objective-Based Plan in which target issues were identified dealing with specific programs, capital outlay needs, and the like. Each need or program was presented, with its anticipated cost and, when possible, options for meeting the need.

The plan took about a year and a half to complete. Everyone from the fire chief to the newest firefighter was asked questions about the plan and provided ideas for it. Members of the organization also asked what level of service was a reasonable one to provide. During a self-analysis, staff learned many interesting things about themselves and about the fire service in general. As chief, I was bothered that the plan was incomplete. There was something wrong. It was

**The Story of
One Fire
Department's
Transformation**

one of those projects about which you continuously wonder, "What if?" and "How about?" A proposal without an end.

A Plan Takes Shape

In January 1995, the Objective-Based Plan was submitted to the council for consideration. After reviewing the plan and weighing the urgency of local needs, the council approved the immediate hiring of four additional firefighters. However, it wanted further clarification of certain elements of the plan. With that issue to address, a councilmember was chosen to work as liaison with the chief and with the firefighters' association and was asked to report back to the council by December 1995.

During this time, staff members of the department had a nagging feeling that something was missing in the plan. They decided to step back and revisit it as if they were not fire personnel. Individually, they also agreed to look at the plan as if they were the local government manager, a councilmember, or a local citizen. One way to measure the community's perception of the department's work was to ask, periodically, a staff member or visitor to take a couple of minutes to draw on an easel how he or she viewed the fire department. Results showed that the department and all of the fire services were seen as one-dimensional fire and emergency medical providers, with no product. The drawings depicted fire as the nucleus of the department's existence.

In most departments, however, the fire call load in a given year is between 4 and 7 percent of all calls. How many of the calls make the front page of the paper? How many make the paper at all, or get covered by other local media? And even if they do, what is the product? How expensive is the service? Anyone, whether manager, councilmember, or taxpayer, would have to wonder if the cost was justified.

Remember, these observers were not

Disaster Awareness Fair

In April 1996, the department of emergency services hosted its first threat potential program with a disaster awareness fair. The focus was earthquake preparedness. In the years to follow, the fair will concentrate on one of five identified community risks.

The 1996 fair featured demonstrations, information booths, and equipment displays from emergency response agencies, public utility companies, private utility companies, private industries, health care and business professionals, and representatives from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the state office of emergency services, and San Luis Obispo County's office of emergency services

looking at this situation as a firefighter would. And at any moment, a major fire might occur. If you were the head of the water department, street department, police or recreation department, could you understand why the fire department should get more resources when other departments had the same needs?

Other questions that you as managers would need to ask would be: Does the community expect good streets? Water that tastes good? Places where children can play sports? Safe streets to walk?

Now, continue the self-analysis. At this point, readers, those of you who cannot maintain the viewpoint of one employed outside the fire service for a little while longer, can stop reading. The rest of you should take one step back and look at who and what a fire services department really is. If you cannot see the picture easily, think about these incidents:

- The Oklahoma City bombing.
- Floods in the South, North, East, and West of the United States.
- Earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes that move ashore.

- Hazardous materials incidents.
- Train, airplane, and automobile accidents with multiple or mass casualties.
- Wildland and structure fires during which people must be cut from entrapment areas.

Who's the first responder? The fire service, simply because of our sheer numbers if for no other reason. We have the most readily available and best-trained emergency response personnel. Most important, note that fire and emergency medical services are only two of our missions, not the center of our existence. Yet we continue to name them as our focus. That is the problem.

If a fire service does not educate its community and change the way it does business, fire personnel should not expect to see any change, now or in the future, in this misnomer. Emergency service is what we provide. Why not say it?

New Departmental Focus

The newly formed Paso Robles department of emergency services is a true emergency organization. The first thing we did in renaming ourselves was to identify the major threat potentials in the community: earthquake; hazardous materials; mass casualty by rail, air, or highway; floodwater; and fire and medical emergencies.

The revised Objective-Based Plan reflects the new departmental focus. The department has identified a valuable product and a new nucleus: community preparedness. We have created a reorganization and production matrix. The matrix identifies a budget year and a specific threat potential on which the department will concentrate on in that year. As an example, the city council in 1997–1998 can expect that the emergency services department will be giving guidance for budget requests for community earthquake preparedness. This process will include visiting local schools to educate children on how to prepare for an earth-

quake and how to behave during and after a disaster.

Simultaneously, the department will contact the business community and local industry to develop emergency plans for earthquake preparedness and recovery. Citizens will be contacted at home, through neighborhood readiness programs and community-based exercises, and the community's preparedness to respond and recover will be tested.

Each year, a different identified threat potential will be the area of concentration. Again, industry and business owners will receive information and invitations to send their employees to training sessions hosted by Paso Robles's department of emergency services. Councilmembers and taxpayers will know what effort is being applied, how tax dollars are being spent, and what the outcome should be.

Currently, all firefighters are being trained as certified instructors. Each program will be professionally offered because quality is the bottom line. Various community members and organizations have asked to join the department's community volunteer specialist program, and local talent will be used for specific programs. The goal is to

make the community an extension of the department. With an educational focus, financial opportunities may be made available through grants and special funding, along with substance for future budget requests.

Not Just New but Better

The new Paso Robles Department of Emergency Services will have a product, will be held accountable for it, and will develop tremendous community-based support. Members of the emergency services staff will have a certain number of years in the fire service and will be emergency response specialists addressing the community's threat potentials; staff will be educators and employees with marketable skills and strong prospects for career advancement.

Traditional fire department training programs continue; however, we now have specialized training for such dangers as mass casualties, hazardous materials, swift and high water operations, and the like. We still conduct code enforcement inspections, but every program now is focused on the department's new missions.

We continue to drive fire engines, work out of fire stations, and dress like

Paso Robles, California, located between Los Angeles and San Francisco, has a population of 21,000. In 1995, there were 2,123 calls for service in a city of 17 square miles.

firefighters, but we plan to look different in the future. **PM**

Doug Hamp is chief of the department of emergency services, Paso Robles, California. For copies of the Objective-Based Plan, contact him at 1000 Spring Street, Paso Robles, California 93446.

Reprinted with permission from Fire Chief magazine, published by Communication Channels, Inc., Atlanta, Georgia.