

HAWAI'I COUNTY FIRE DEPARTMENT
(June 13, 2002)

Organization and Responsibilities:

The Fire Department's goal is to prevent loss of life and minimize property loss from fire. They provide fire suppression services, emergency medical (pre-hospital) services, land and sea rescue services, and vehicle and other emergency extrications. The Fire Chief is appointed by and reports to a nine-member Fire Commission appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by the County Council. The department is organized into seven divisions: Fiscal; Personnel; Fire Prevention; Volunteer Training; Emergency Medical Services; Fire Auxiliary Services; and Fire Protection.

The Fire Chief coordinates the allocation of the department's resources, activities, and services. Their broad responsibilities encompass all aspects of fire safety. In addition, the Chief's duties include policy formulation, planning and administrative coordination, control and communications. The Deputy Chief's position (presently vacant) is responsible for directing fire suppression forces.

The Fiscal Division plans and coordinates the department's fiscal activities. It controls budget development and expenditures, manages purchasing, accounts receivable and payroll functions, prepares reports as required, serves as liaison with other government and private agencies on fiscal matters, and evaluates all fiscal organization procedures.

The Personnel Division administers the department's personnel functions, classifying positions, creating position descriptions, administer plans and benefits, ensure compliance with laws affecting employment, maintains an employee appraisal system, counsels for workers' compensation, and provides technical assistance to division heads on personnel matters.

The Fire Prevention Division coordinates fire education programs, conducts life safety and fire hazard inspections, corrections and enforcement programs, conducts fire cause and arson investigations, maintains fire prevention codes, and recommends fire safety laws to minimize loss of life and property. The division reviews new-construction plans to assure compliance with applicable fire safety codes, access to hydrants, and access by fire-fighting apparatus.

The Volunteer Training Division directs the training of volunteer firefighters.

The Emergency Medical Services Division provides pre-hospital life-support services emphasizing the treatment of trauma and acute medical illness patients.

The Fire Auxiliary Services Division maintains the department's equipment and provides communication services.

The Fire Protection Division provides direct emergency services, including fire suppression, control and removal of hazardous materials, and rescue.

The Budget Division directs and coordinates the formulation, preparation, execution, review and analyses of the County's operating budget, monitors appropriations and expenditures, and advises on budgetary and long-range planning matters.

Findings

Following its review of documents, including organization charts, statements of major functions, the proposed 2002-2003 Operating Budget, and testimony furnished by the Fire Chief and division heads and staff, the Cost of Government Commission finds:

1. The dual role training resulting in the ability of firefighters to also provide EMT (paramedical) services, which program is unique to Hawai'i County, is highly commendable.
2. The department is seriously understaffed and key vacancies exist, resulting in excessive overtime costs, lowered morale, and delayed building inspections.
3. The department does not charge fees for inspections and many other important services, and the State of Hawai'i does not pay for state-mandated inspections.
4. Fees collected go to the County's general fund.
5. Fire equipment is routinely called to the scene of auto accidents.
6. Fire equipment used by Hawai'i County and other state and federal fire agencies are not standardized.
7. Courier, janitorial, and other common services are not shared with other County departments.
8. The department's computer software system is old and inadequate.
9. Equipment and material requisitions at the station level are subject to duplication.

Recommendations

Having considered and reviewed the documents and testimony provided by the Fire Department, the Commission recommends as follows:

1. The County should, as soon as possible, provide funding needed to fill key vacancies, including the position of Deputy Chief.

Rationale: Because the department's services are among the most essential of those provided by County government, their efficient performance is in the public interest. The desired efficiency, however, is unduly compromised by delays in the performance of vital services such as inspections and lowered morale, if the department is understaffed. In addition, increases in costs due to greater staffing will be offset in large part by reductions in overtime expenses.

2. The department should charge fees for all required inspections, and seek, if necessary, charter amendments to permit the County to charge, and statutory amendments to require the state to pay for inspections mandated by state law. Such fees should be sufficient to cover the actual cost of such inspections, and should be credited to the department.

Rationale: Because fees for required inspections will facilitate hiring more inspectors, the delay in inspections should be reduced, thereby enhancing safety. Crediting fees to the department will provide an incentive to collect the fees and enable the department to use the revenue for inspection and other fee for service activities.

3. The department should evaluate the practice of routinely sending emergency vehicles (ambulance and fire trucks) to the scene of auto accidents. Although their presence might often be required, it may be possible to develop a triage system within the communications section to evaluate the need for fire fighting and medical equipment in given situations.

Rationale: The routine dispatch of emergency fire equipment to the scene of all auto accidents is expensive. It is more efficient and cost-effective to evaluate the need for such equipment when the report of an accident is received. Furthermore, unnecessary assignment of emergency vehicles could make them unavailable in the event of their actual need in another emergency.

4. The department should continue to work with state and federal fire agencies to achieve equipment standardization.

Rationale: Standardizing equipment will facilitate achieving economies in purchasing and maintenance costs.

5. The department should work with the County to develop cross-island courier and janitorial service programs that can be used by all county departments.

Rationale: Because cross-island courier and janitorial service programs are common needs of many county departments, economies can be achieved by sharing their use between departments.

6. The department should upgrade its computer system as soon as possible.

Rationale: Because the existing system cannot operate new software, its update is required.

7. Order logs should be kept at each station.

In the absence of a station supervisor, material and equipment requisitions are subject to duplication. Maintaining order logs should eliminate the problem.

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