CHIEF CONCERNS: HOW TO TALK TO LOCAL OFFICIALS ABOUT STANDARDS OF COVER

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The Standard of Cover planning process requires communication and collaboration between fire department officials, local leaders and the community.

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Trying to talk response plans and deployment with local municipal officials can be frustrating. Every fire chief has had that internal thought—"they just don't understand"—from time to time. I know I did. But I also know that when I served as a city manager, the fire chief probably thought that about me from time to time. Developing a standard of cover (SOC) for your community, however, must be a collaborative effort between the fire department, community officials, and the public. After all, the standard of cover defines how you and your agency will respond to emergencies that are being experienced by members of the community—so assessing the levels of risk that they are willing to accept are critical to a successful SOC process.

According to the Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI), the process of creating a standard of cover plan requires, among many things, a thorough examination of potential risks in the community, the current capabilities of the fire department, and a specific set of benchmarks that city officials and fire chiefs can use to measure success.[1] These components might seem straightforward enough, but the process is frequently derailed by misunderstandings between fire officials and their colleagues in government. Given the unfamiliarity with each other's roles and missions that city officials and fire chiefs often face as they negotiate, how can they stay on the same page and create a sufficient standard of cover plan that meets their community's needs?

In an ideal world, everyone involved in developing standards of cover would have a complete understanding of the issues impacting the plan. The reality is that the process is a team effort; a fire chief brings different information and a different perspective than a city manager or a chief financial officer. When such diverse viewpoints come together, conflict between priorities may occur.

RECOGNIZING DIFFERENCES AND EMBRACING SIMILARITIES

It's important to remember that many local services operate more proactively than the fire service: the parks department builds and maintains new facilities, libraries procure new books, transportation manages buses and roads. The fire department, however, is based on unexpected events. Firefighters prepare for the unknown

rather than the planned, making it harder to estimate the cost of protecting the community. As a fire chief, it's critical to remember that the concept of spending large sums of money "just in case" something happens on an infrequent basis is not the nature of many officials who have to balance residents' needs and demands with limited funding. But if you can help a municipal official understand that fire officials are requesting only what makes them confident the agency can confront that known, and reasonably unknown workload, the discussion is often more productive.

Differences in roles and perspectives are not the only obstacles to overcome when discussing standards of cover. No matter how well each person understands the goals of the other, there will always be a struggle when it comes to the budget. It's not uncommon for a fire department to take up 20 to 25 percent of a city or county budget. While the fire department might feel like it never receives enough funding, municipal officials might feel as though it is taking too large of a share. If this gridlock occurs it may be helpful to remember that everyone involved is committed to serving their community. If both sides can focus on the fact that standards of cover are meant to protect the community, and remember that a win-win situation could mean accepting an outcome different than original expectations, compromise might come a little easier.

Of course, standards of cover won't be the only thing on each person's plate. Fire chiefs and municipal leaders have a variety of other responsibilities to accomplish that require equal attention and care. But standards of cover are essential for ensuring the well-being of the community. Open and ongoing communication will greatly help during the planning process. Patience, on top of everything else, is vital to the process of creating and implementing standards of cover.

FINDING THE MIDDLE GROUND

In general, fire chiefs want a more aggressive approach for protecting the community, meaning greater staffing, resources and, ultimately, more money. Municipal officials, however, are often hesitant to take such a stance, and understandably so. One of the most important roles city and county leaders play in their community is maintaining a balanced budget, and this may not be possible if they feel the fire department accounts for too large a part of the spending plan. Here's where the standards of cover plan comes in. It calls for the most effective fire department to 'get the job done'—not necessarily the newest and shiniest one. Each side will likely feel that the other is trying to push the department into one of these two categories, and the way to overcome that tension and arrive at a middle ground is with an objective assessment of risk.

It's in looking at hard data that fire chiefs and city or county managers can mediate the bulk of their differences. Facts and figures can give a much better idea of a community's risk profile than the day-to-day observations of any one person. Having been on the frontlines for an entire career, fire chiefs tend to feel that they are consistently busy, and can never seem to quite catch up with the increasing demands of a growing community. On the other hand, most municipal officials can only really get an idea of the workload of the fire department if a chief informs them directly—which doesn't often happen outside of discussions about the budget—or from secondhand sources such as the media. Objective data causes both sides to look at the situation in a new light, and often allows for a change of perspective.

In a majority of cases, two outcomes occur when both parties really look at fire department data. First, fire chiefs often discover that they're not always overwhelmed, and that often no areas are significantly underserved. They see that they're actually doing a sufficient job in most respects, even if some room for improvement exists. Second, municipal leaders learn that the community's risk profile is much higher than they assumed. With the help of the data, they can better understand the fire department's needs and requests. Use of empirical data helps to bring the two sides together on the issue that divides them most: the budget. The risk assessment process can show fire chiefs that perhaps a new station isn't actually necessary, but also can show municipal leadership that maybe one new ambulance is needed. Getting a clear, unbiased view of the needs of the community, and not the needs of the municipal budget or the fire department, is key to successfully defining and enacting standards of cover.

THREE POINTS TO REMEMBER FOR CREATING STANDARDS OF COVER

1. Fire chiefs and municipal leaders took their positions for the same reason: to serve people in the community.
2. Objectivity is essential. Without an unbiased view of the situation, discussions risk becoming gridlocked.
3. It is ultimately the community that sets the standards for service in the area, often through their elected officials—not city administration, fire department leadership, or national organizations.

REFERENCES

1. Standard of Cover Template (CPSE-CFAI). Available online at: *https://www.iafc.org/topics-and-tools/resources/resource/standard-of-cover-template-cpse-cfai*

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