

ESCAMBIA COUNTY FIRE SERVICES
UNIFICATION PLAN



Overview

On March 20, 2008 the Escambia County Board of County Commissioners voted unanimously to unify all fire service resources in the unincorporated areas of the County, including the Town of Century, into one operating unit. This was a historical decision by Escambia County's elected officials and the first step in establishing a true combination fire service where volunteer and career personnel work together within one organizational structure. Greater effectiveness and efficiency are goals of the unification.

In addition, the Board of County Commissioners gave the following direction:

- a) Escambia County Fire Chief Ken Perkins and Escambia County Volunteer Firefighters Association President Robbie Whitfield will provide the Board with an implementation plan at the April 2008 Committee of the Whole Workshop; and
- b) The County Administrator will provide oversight of this transition, approve any time extension, if circumstances warrant, and provide the Board with periodic progress reports.

Escambia County's volunteer fire departments have served the local area proudly for many years. The dedication of their members has served to keep Escambia County's Fire Service predominantly a volunteer service, and thus keeping fire protection cost at a minimum for residents and business owners. This accomplishment is even more admired when one takes into consideration the tremendous increase in time and training requirements that are now required of the County's volunteer personnel.

In addition, Escambia County has a contingent of career personnel that are highly trained and motivated. Since the initial hiring of 36 career personnel over 8 years ago, additional full-time personnel have allowed the implementation of additional critical services to Escambia County residents. These services include advanced medical life support, hazardous materials response, urban search and rescue, technical rescue, public education, fire inspections/prevention, and a full-time position to assist the County Fire Chief in coordinating the efforts of all volunteer firefighting resources.

History has shown the process of unifying fire service organizations is a daunting task. The attributes that make fire service organizations strong; pride, tradition, identity, and organizational ownership are also the very characteristics that must be overcome in the unification process. Attitudes that are customer focused, objective, consensus building, and compromising must be commonplace for those that take the lead in bringing different fire service organizations together. Volunteer and career fire service leaders in Escambia County have demonstrated these attitudes in the past and are more than capable of insuring the unification effort is a success.

Unification Issues

The following list identifies known issues that must be addressed during the unification process. Though this list may not be all-inclusive and not necessarily in order of importance, it does represent the vast majority of critical concerns that require resolution.

1. Department Organizational Structure
 - Organizational Chart
 - Authority and Responsibility
 - Identification and Role of Fire Chief's Staff
 - Chain-of-Command
2. Establish Common Goals and Values
 - Vision Statement
 - Mission Statement
3. Rules, Policies, Procedures, Directives, and Guidelines
 - Submission
 - Approval
 - Implementation
 - Amending
4. Disciplinary Action and Termination
 - Volunteer
 - Employee
 - Process and Appeals
5. New Member/Employee Selection Process
 - Standard Application
 - Minimum Education Requirements
 - Background and Driving History
 - Physical Agility Test
 - Medical Physical Exam
 - Department Orientation
6. Written Job Descriptions
 - Emergency Responders
 1. All Ranks
 2. Minimum Requirements
 3. Performance Standards
 - Support Personnel
 1. Minimum Requirements
 2. Performance Standards

7. Annual Personnel Evaluations
 - Volunteer
 - Career
8. Standardize Department Communications Methods
 - Inter-department
 - Intra-department
9. Standardize Radio Communications
 - Channels
 - Terminology
10. Promotion Process
 - Education, Training, and Experience Requirements
 - Application
 - Selection
11. Identification and Reduction of Duplicate and/or Excessive Resources
 - Tools and Equipment
 - Operational Supplies
 - Apparatus and Staff Vehicles
12. Fire Station Staffing Plan
 - High Volume Areas
 - Low Volume Areas
 - Volunteer, Career, Part-time
13. Centralized Warehousing Program
 - Tools and Equipment
 - Operating supplies
 - Communications Equipment
 - Uniforms
14. Centralized Apparatus and Vehicle Maintenance Program
 - Process
 - Personnel
15. Standardized Training Process and Schedule
 - Firefighter I & II
 - Fire Officer
 - Advanced
 - Specialty Training

16. Standardized Record Keeping (Firehouse Software)
 - Personnel
 - Training
 - Incident Response
 - Tools and Equipment

17. Standardized Testing/Planning Process and Schedule
 - Hose Testing
 - Pump Testing
 - Ladder Testing
 - Hydrant Testing
 - Pre-fire Planning

18. Standardized Mutual Aid Agreements
 - Individual Departments
 - Escambia County

19. Annual Departmental Budget
 - Process
 - Approval Authority

20. Update County Fire Services Ordinance
 - Establishment of Department
 - Fire Chief's Duties and Responsibilities
 - Citizens Advisory Committee
 - Inspections and Permitting

21. Insurance Services Office (ISO)
 - Analyze Potential Impact of Unifying Districts
 - Identify Resources Required and not Required
 - Identify Potential Cost Savings

22. Joint Recruitment Effort
 - Volunteer
 - Career

23. Standardized Rewards and Recognition
 - Awards Committee
 - Annual Firefighter Appreciation Banquet

Action Plan

Both, Chiefs Whitfield and Perkins believe that positive and productive work sessions will ensure the solid framework required for a first-class combination fire department. Two recent meetings have served to reinforce the commitment of both leaders to make unification decisions based upon what serves the best interest of local residents.

In approaching the unification process, 3 to 5 issues will be addressed each month, and final decisions will be documented through countywide guidelines, rules, policies, procedures, and/or directives. Routine weekly meetings will ensure that progress is maintained and issues are addressed quickly as possible. The County Administrator will update all Commissioners on a regular basis, and a final recommendation will be brought to the Board of County Commissioners for implementation prior to October 1, 2008.