



TOWNSEND FIRE-EMS DEPARTMENT

Proudly serving the citizens of Townsend since 1875

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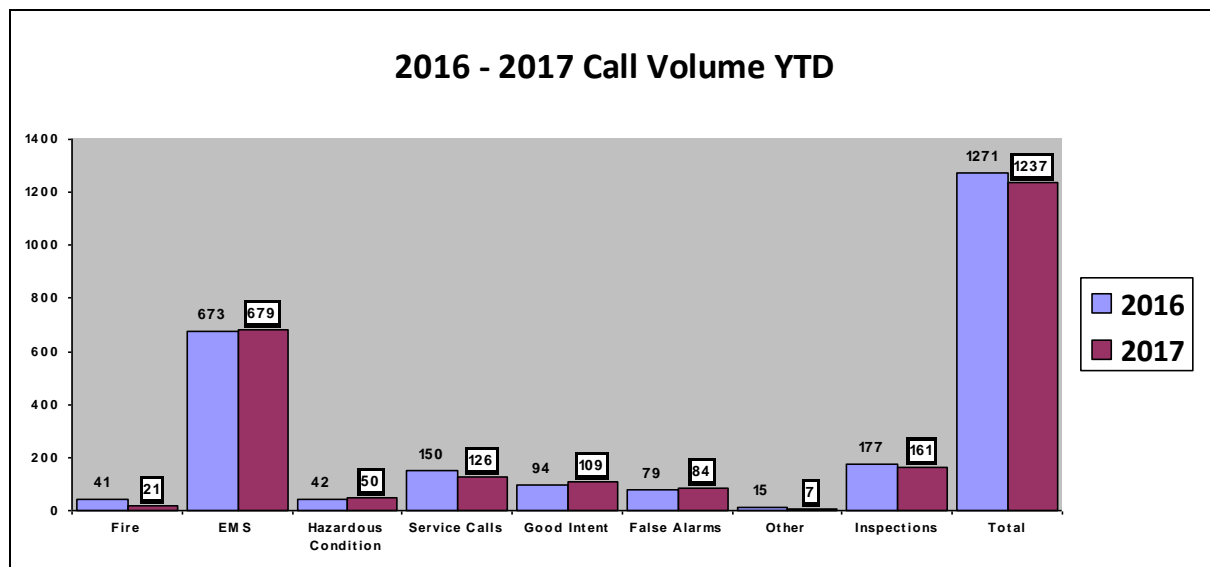
October 4, 2017

Fire-EMS Quarterly Report

ACTIVITY

My apologies for missing July quarterly report, I was away on vacation when it was due and missed the reminder on my calendar. 2017 started off very busy with several major events including four reported building fires, five chimney fires, a wind storm generating 24 calls over a ten hour period and a long day recovering an oil truck that rolled over carrying 2,000 gallons of heating oil.

Thankfully things settled down and slowed down during the spring and summer months. Below is a year to date comparison of 2016 and 2017 for the same period of time. January through September of each year. As you will see overall emergency call volume is down slightly by 34 calls. This is for two reasons, in 2016 we experienced a drought increasing brush fires from a normal year of 5 to 18 for 2016. Second we also experienced a drop in illegal burns this year. We continue to see an upward trend of increases in EMS calls. The fourth quarter of the year tends to be the busiest quarter with the start of winter and heating season. With that said it is likely the calendar year will end with approximately the same or slightly higher call volume as last year.



POLICY CHANGES

No significant policy changes took place over the summer. The officers of the department continue to meet on a monthly basis. Most of our time has been consumed with other items such as the transition to Nashoba Valley Regional Dispatch District, creating specification for a new Pumper/Tanker, and finalizing the bid specification for the new West Townsend Fire Station.

PERSONNEL

During the first quarter the membership of the department continued to decline. Unfortunately this trend is continuing over the summer with three members taking leave of absence for personal reasons, five members resigning from the department and one retired. As in the past the primary reason for the resignations was for other employment opportunities offering a higher pay. Secondary were long-time members undergoing life changes and no longer wanting to work a second job. For some they could no longer meet our minimum requirements of working one shift a month and we had not seen them for six months or more.

Over the summer we ramped up our recruiting efforts for Paramedics, posting an ad on Mass Municipal Association website, Town and Department websites, posting in the area hospitals and on the Town bulletin boards. To increase our candidate pool we dropped certified firefighter and five years' experience as a paramedic from the desired requirements. As a result we hired two new per diem paramedics.

Despite a major reduction in the hours we were short staffed in 2016 the trend for this year is headed in the opposite direction. As you will see in the chart below our staffing levels are once again dropping. We are struggling to fill shifts on a weekly basis and struggling to maintain adequate staffing. Townsend is not alone, as this is a trend here in New England. There is a shortage of Firefighters, Paramedics and Firefighter/Paramedics and the competition to hire the few that are available is increasing. During the month of August Pepperell Fire Department advertised to fill two vacant full-time positions for Firefighter Paramedic. They received eight application, four met the minimum requirements for an interview, two declined, two were interviewed and offered the positions and both declined.

Because of the demand for paramedics the pay rate is on the rise. Over the past year private services such as Wood Ambulance increased their starting pay by five dollars per hour to \$24.50. Municipal departments such as Rutland increased starting pay for full-time Firefighter/Paramedics to \$26.50. Per diem department such as Winchendon and Barre have increase starting pay to \$26.50 and \$28.00 per hour. Westford (which we have lost members to) is now paying full-time firefighter/paramedics \$25.40 – 31.26 per hour.

Two years ago we identified our pay rate as an issue and initiated a four year plan to increase the rate from \$18.75 to \$25.00, we are currently on year two and at \$20.50. As a result we stopped the bleeding for a year and reduced the number of short shifts by nearly 1000 hours. We are now very quickly falling behind the curve, losing members and struggling to replace them.

Our current staffing challenges and the challenges our neighbors are also experiencing raises serious concerns about our ability to sustain an advanced life support ambulance service. In order for a part-time per diem service to survive we have to have an incentive to recruit paramedics willing to work for us as a second job. Being a great place to work with great people and low call volume is no longer sufficient. Our call volume is on the rise, we are no longer a place you can go to work and sleep all night and be ready to go to work at your primary job the next day. We are supplemental income to nearly all our per diem personnel, their primary job and family come first as they should. If they have time and the compensation is sufficient to make it worth their time we have a work force. If they don't have the time or the compensation is not worth the effort our workforce disappears.

The principal behind a per diem service model is reduced cost by avoiding the cost of benefits paid for full time staff. Cost such as health insurance, vacation, sick time, longevity and retirement. In the private sector such as hospitals per diem staff typically are paid a higher wage than full-time as an incentive and the employer still saves money. For example our largest expense for full-time employees is healthcare. Each full-time employee cost us \$3.92 per hour for single person plan, \$7.82 for a two person plan and \$10.63 for a family plan. If we took the average of \$7.47 and increased per diem wage rates by this amount we would be in current competitive wage range at \$27.97. We would still be saving the expense of all other benefits.

It is not my intention to create concerns dooms day is coming. However we need to be aware of the situation and the potential for the current system to fail. As the hours of short shifts increase the risk of not having sufficient staff to answer medical emergencies increases. The likelihood that we will not have advanced life support available when one of our residents needs help is increasing. If Pepperell does not find additional paramedics to fill vacancies or if they lose additional staff our problem will be compounded if they look to us for help. We currently have a long standing agreement with Pepperell to provide ALS intercept service.

Over the next six months it is going to be imperative that we closely examine our service model and seek out solutions. A significant increase in wages may revive our current system or at least prolong its life. It is time to look outside the box and examine options such as significantly increasing per diem pay rates at special and annual town meeting, adding additional per diem, full-time staff or regionalization of services.

2016-2017 Shift Shortages

	ALS Short (HRS)		No ALS (HRS)		NOBODY WORKING		Fire Short (HRS)		Total	
	2016	2017	2016	2017	2016	2017	2016	2017	2016	2017
January	24	9	10	0	0	0	10	4	44	13
February	74	18	0	19	0	0	10	1	84	20
March	20	18	0	27	0	0	20	11	40	56
April	0	0	14	7	0	0	0	0	14	7
May	14	20	14	5	0	0	0	18	28	43
June	34	17	14	28	2	0	0	11	50	56
July	34	36	0	32	0	0	30	4	64	72
August	10	38	0	47	0	0	0	30	10	115
September	10	15	14	76	0	0	0	11	38	102
October	14		14		0	0	10		38	
November	0		28		0	0	0		28	
December	0		14		0	0	10		24	
Total	234	161	122	251	2	0	90	189	448	484

The chart above contains data for 2016 and year to date for 2017. “ALS Short” represents the number of hours each month we dropped to one Paramedic on-duty and relied on off duty personnel to respond to complete the crew. The second column (highlighted) is what keeps me up at night. “No ALS” represents the number of hours we had no paramedics working and had to drop to a basic life support (BLS) service. As you can see we are 2/3 of the way through this calendar year and the number of hours we have not had ALS available has more than doubled. Also important to note the total number of hours we have been short have exceeded last year’s total with three months remaining in the year.

BUDGET

Budget wise we are in good shape. Because we have been short staffed we are seeing a savings in wages. We are currently underspent in by \$16,000 for the first quarter of the fiscal year. These are funds we will keep an eye on and should consider using for a wage increase towards the end of the year to entice people to fill vacant shifts.

GRANTS

October and November are always a busy time of year for grants. I attended FEMA Assistance Grant workshop last week. Every year the high priority items for funding shift slightly. Since the taxpayers approved a new Tanker/Pumper at town meeting we no longer need funding to purchase this vehicle. It appears based on our needs and the grant priorities sending four personnel to training to become paramedics is our best bet for funding this time around. We have a few weeks before this grant application period opens. During this time we will need to decide what we are going to apply for and obtain support from the board of selectmen if time allows.

The application period is currently open for the Mass Ambulance Certified Public Expenditure program. Last year we participated in the lengthy process of certifying our ambulance cost with the program. As a result we received a reimbursement of \$15,158 dollars. I intend to participate in this process again this year and anticipate similar results.

WEST FIRE STATIONS STATUS

Since the last quarterly report the west station project went out to bid for a second time. We received six bids on the project. Three of the bids were within budget. Mass General law requires to utilize the lowest qualified and reliable bidder. While reviewing the bids the Architect, Town Attorney, Fire Station Committee, Town Administrator Kreidler and myself found the lowest bidder is not reliable therefore we are rejecting the bid and moving on to the second lowest bidder. At this time we are not sure if this will slow down or stop us from moving forward with this bid process.

COMMUNICATION CENTER

For the latest information please refer to "NVRDD Transition Update September 21, 2017". In summary we are at a standstill and have been for months waiting for NVRDD to pay vendors that are owed money and then show proof of payment to Mass 911. Once they have the proof, Mass 911 will release the grant funds allocated for Townsend. With these funds most of the items promised such as IMC/Tri-tech software, radios, phone system etc can be purchased. Realistically we are looking at another twelve months before we have fully transitioned to NVRDD. Computers for police and fire vehicles along with the software were not included in the grant as promised so these items may take even longer.

Respectfully

Chief
Boynton