

## **Chicagoland Fire Departments Work Together for State-of-the Art Training Facility**

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The more you sweat in practice, the less you bleed in battle. This age-old axiom is one I use and live by, but in today's environment of budget cuts and lean operations it's not always easy. We all know it's getting tougher each year to ensure firefighters are properly trained, prepared and confident when heading in to a fire or other emergency situation. There is a greater need for creativity come budget time and a greater appreciation for the resources and support our neighbors can provide when times get tough.

Never before has community support, regional cooperation and good old-fashioned sharing been more important. As our budgets get leaner, more is expected of us. At the same time, the number of fires is decreasing. There were 1,550,500 fires in the U.S. in 2004 – down more than eight percent since 2002 and 21 percent since 1995 – according to the United States Fire Administration (USFA).

While this decrease in fires is good news, it also can have an unfortunate affect on our fire departments and firefighters. Fewer fire calls means fewer opportunities for less seasoned firefighters to experience a variety of fire situations and learn new and critical skills. A house fire at 3 a.m. is not the place to see and learn new things. However, it also means that the more experienced firefighters, who haven't retired yet, have fewer chances to hone and challenge their expertise and pass along valuable skills and experience to the newer folks.

Additionally, with the changes in our country and world since September 11, 2001, there are many relatively new situations and emergencies for which we need to be prepared, including terrorism and biohazards. While these responsibilities and risks are increasing, the available funds are decreasing for many of us.

This greater need for readiness, along with fewer real-world situations to help accomplish the necessary on-the-job experience, means it is more important than ever to have comprehensive and up-to-date training tools. At the same time, paperwork and time constraints make it difficult to obtain the use of structures scheduled for demolition. Having reusable and accessible facilities and technology that realistically simulate real-world fire and rescue situations is critical to the effectiveness and safety of our departments, as well as the safety of the communities we serve.

There were 3,900 U.S. citizen deaths due to fires in 2004 and 117 firefighters were killed while on duty, according to the USFA. We will never know how many of these deaths could have been prevented if firefighters across the country had all the resources they needed to learn and practice.

### **New Tools, New Opportunities**

Here at Buffalo Grove Fire Department in the Village of Buffalo Grove, Ill., we rely upon neighboring communities in Lake and Cook counties to help us break the sweat necessary for preparedness and safety.

As part of a cooperative partnership, the Buffalo Grove Fire Department, Long Grove Fire Protection District, Lincolnshire-Riverwoods Fire Protection District and Wheeling Fire Department together created the Combined Area Fire Training Facility (CAFT) training grounds and technology.

The original training facility was a two-story structure with computer controlled natural gas burners to simulate single-room fires in two different immobile burn rooms. While it was effective in teaching new recruits proper methods of advancing a hose line and basic water application without a high heat environment and blackout smoke conditions, its value stopped there. The immobility of the facility left little room for variety. Newer firefighters were limited in what they could learn, and veteran firefighters were not challenged.

The updated two-acre facility contains a tractor-trailer tanker, a chemical rail car, a confined space pit, a flammable liquid pit, a 25-passenger airplane (previously owned by Wayne Newton), classroom facilities and an upgraded live fire training burn facility. Additional space on the lot allows us to bring in cars to practice extrication techniques and train on new equipment.

Our state-of-the-art Class A live fire training burn facility, partially funded by an \$80,000 grant from Fireman's Fund Insurance Company, safely provides firefighters with realistic heat, smoke and visibility conditions to properly learn and practice hose line advancement techniques, search and rescue, ventilation, self rescue and rescue of firefighters in distress. The two-story structure with an attic allows us to burn National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) approved materials to help recreate real-life fire situations, but also uses the old structure's natural gas technology to allow for quick reset and repetition of certain drills.

The live fire facility includes a state-of-the-art Phase II flashover unit made by Swede Survival Systems™. This provides our firefighters with hands-on experience of controlling and escaping flashover conditions that occur when super-heated gases at the top of a structure fire reach a high enough temperature to ignite.

### **Regionalize to Find A Solution**

In Illinois and in the Chicago area, regionalized support and response is our way. Throughout the state, emergency response organizations use a model designed by the Mutual Aid Box Alarm System (MABAS) that facilitates the sharing of resources to provide better and quicker responses to fire and emergencies. This is not only effective in serving our own communities better. For instance, it allowed for quick mobilization of personnel and equipment to help out on the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina.

After years of working with our neighbors on a daily basis, partnering on this project was a comfortable and effective solution for our region. We are accustomed to the benefits

that come from relying upon each other. We cover a diverse area serving 111,183 people that includes low-income apartment buildings, million-dollar single-family homes, high-rise structures, homes with 3,500-foot driveways, light industry, and major commercial businesses. Despite our diversity, we recognize that all of us face the same struggles and therefore enjoy a comfortable and productive relationship, even when it comes to day-to-day operations. It follows that we also support each other's training and staff development efforts.

A comprehensive training facility is not cheap. Over the past 10 years, the CAFT facility cost more than \$2 million to upgrade and maintain. For the latest upgrade, the four core departments provided and applied for the necessary funds, including a joint grant request submitted to the Fireman's Fund Heritage<sup>SM</sup> program in 2004. However, organizations and communities beyond these borders will benefit from the investment, as well.

Other Chicago area departments, automatic and mutual aid agencies and police departments use the training facility and classrooms, and the Lake County Specialized Response Teams use it for hazardous materials, dive rescue and technical rescue training. With no other regional training facility within 50 miles of our CAFT, this facility is a necessary tool for area agencies and departments to stay on top of their skills and the industry's technological advancements.

### **The Bottom Line**

While ideally departments want to avoid altogether the budget issues we all face, this is not realistic for most of us. The difficulties faced by the country and our communities make it more and more difficult to run lean and effective fire departments with well-trained firefighters. These issues aren't going away any time soon. However, regionalizing resources, as our four departments did when upgrading our NAFT, is one possible way to make the situation more manageable.

The more neighboring districts and towns can share their resources and support each other's efforts, the more all of our communities benefit. Any way we can foster

cooperation and regional efficiencies, the more economically we can provide the highest level of service despite our mutual budget woes. Ultimately, we can more successfully protect our communities and our firefighters.

Working together can help us all get the job done better.

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