



Volunteer & Combination Officers Section of The International Association of Fire Chiefs

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Public Policy Review: Community Fire Protection as an Essential Government Service

The Volunteer and Combination Officers Section (VCOS) of the IAFC, the Tennessee Fire Chiefs Association (TFCA) and the Southeastern Division of the IAFC (SEAFC) have been closely monitoring the recent events in Obion County, Tenn., and the resulting media and community reaction to the loss of a home that was not covered under the local fire-protection policies.

The issue has turned into a hotbed of national political debate, and the VCOS, TFCA and SEAFC believe that it is critical to move beyond talk to action to help ensure such an unfortunate series of events does not occur again.

Fire protection everywhere, but particularly in rural or less-populated areas, requires a community approach in order to create and sustain appropriate public policy that provides for the protection of the community, the effectiveness of the fire department and the fiduciary responsibility of the elected leaders. Coordinating services requires cooperation among the governments of various jurisdictions and between policymakers and the fire department. It is vital to a positive outcome for the citizens and the safety of firefighters. When poor public policy is created by policymakers, accepted by the public and enforced by the fire department, no one wins.

The VCOS, TFCA and SEAFC encourage that:

- All fire departments that find themselves in a situation where the responsible governmental agency does not provide service should initiate a review of the applicable policies, especially ones that have a "do-not-respond" clause. We understand the many departmental, political and community-based issues that motivate a jurisdiction to move to a subscription-based service; however, best practice would not approve a subscription fire-protection delivery system that declines to respond. We encourage any jurisdiction with such a system to seek alternatives.
- All fire departments review local policies on mutual- and automatic-aid agreements. We encourage you to have both types of agreements so the closest available resources will be dispatched to all incidents.
- All fire departments ensure that your citizens and responders are properly educated on all implications of public policy relating to fire protection and emergency response.
 - There are various methods that can be used, including the agency website, local news media and a general mailing with the dual purpose of general communication with your community and focusing on this particular issue. Some agencies have successfully utilized a listserve.

- All fire departments speak with your elected officials and community leaders about this critical issue. Key issues to raise include the following:
 - Fire protection should be considered an essential government service that should be funded through taxes or fees paid equitably by all. In the event a public-safety tax system is not available in your area or state, other methods may include a comprehensive donation system utilizing an outside vendor or water/trash/sewer bills with an attached donation directed to the agency.
 - Support of first responders goes beyond funding concerns. It is very important to communicate that fire and rescue services require sufficient funding to provide a minimum of service, whether volunteer, part-time paid or full-time firefighters.
 - If funding is the major driving force behind the policy, educate leaders on the availability of private cost-recovery services.
 - Consider the moral and ethical dilemma that current policies place on responders, not to mention the physical danger to the public of fires burning out of control with a no-response policy. With a no-response policy, civilians may take unnecessary risks to stop the spread of the fire.

The VCOS, TFCA and SEAFIC are willing to offer assistance in ensuring that this kind of tragedy does not happen again. The VCOS, TFCA and SEAFIC will continue to monitor the events surrounding this issue as well as examples and best practices from other communities with similar challenges, and they will continue to share their findings and recommendations with members of the fire and emergency service community.

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