

# A Different Perspective of Fire Department Accreditation

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Examination is akin to  
agency soul-searching.  
| **BY RON HOLT**

Any organization, be it a hospital, educational institution, a human service agency, or other professional specialty, pursues certification/accreditation with a high degree of trepidation. Dealing with an outside agency with its own set of rules and standards followed by a peer inspection to ensure compliance requires a reevaluation in mindset and organizational psyche. This may be especially true in the fire service often perceived as a profession bound by decades of tradition, inward thinking and reluctant to change.

Why then should a fire department consider acquiring Commission on Fire Accreditation

International (CFAI) accreditation as a viable, cost-effective option for becoming a preeminent agency into the 21st century? Why should an agency allocate significant fiscal/staff resources to pursue an objective that may seem difficult to justify especially when there are several competing priorities for that organization's resources?

One of the immediate benefits of seeking accreditation is that it requires an examination of an organization's conscience. It prompts answers as to how, when, where, and to who a fire service organization provides services to carry out its mission. Compliance with a series of CFAI categories, each with a set of performance





indicators, some of which are pass-fail core competencies requires an organization to critically evaluate/analyze its modus operandi for providing services to the community/citizens it is dedicated to serve. This requires a realistic, soul searching; analytic approach which may hurt both organizational and personal psyches BUT will, in the long run, ensure a better, more organizationally mature department.

Akin to the soul-searching process, is an immediate need to perform written short- and long-range planning documents. The development of strategic plans, integrated with the budgetary process, requires a fire service agency to examine its current operational/fiscal position AND project its needs into the future based upon an analysis of geographical, demographic, and financial parameters, just to name a few. Organizational planning is a buzz word recognized by all but practiced by few, the accreditation process makes a fire department focus on its planning elements to a greater extent than just paying the concept "lip service."

The pursuit of accreditation has the additional benefit of ensuring a department critically analyzes its performance variables in order to strive for continuous quality improvement. The development of a standards of cover document — which encompasses response time data, risk/hazards plans, and the allocation and concentration of staff/physical resources — mandates that an agency:

- Describe what it does,
- Evaluate how well it does it,
- Describe its plan for the future, and
- Lists references/records.

The fire service suffers for its lack of quantitative data to justify its levels of service, striving for

accreditation gives the individual fire department a data base for taking its case to the decision makers AND the citizenry.

One of the subtle benefits of pursuing accreditation is the creation of collegial relationships with sister accredited departments. The sharing of information among peers may have a dramatic impact of allowing fire service agencies to incorporate best practice policies/procedures of its peer agencies and, most importantly, avoid the "blind alleys" already traveled. Accredited agencies are most willing to share their experiences, both good and bad, with no hint of jealousy or provincialism. Through formal meetings sponsored by CFAI and private conversations and agency networking, accredited agencies are able to share a knowledge base that may not exist anywhere in the fire service. Within this context, it should be realized that CFAI's peer assessors are not "hired guns" whose expressed purpose is to doom an agency to failure. Quite the contrary, they are unpaid, objective, professional fire service volunteers dedicated to insuring an applicant's success while still maintaining the rigorous standards of the accreditation process.

During this time of economic hardship/duress, accreditation allows agencies to "circle the wagons." Achieving accreditation gives departments an objective approach to the policy makers utilizing hard data backed by a prestigious, international agency championing best practices in a continuous quality improvement model. Even if the fiscal resources are in short supply, the policy makers are more compelled to listen to agencies which have the CFAI logo on their letterhead and apparatus.

The breath of CFAI's catego-

## CPSE History

**1986:** The International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) and the International City-County Management Association (ICMA) met to develop the concepts and design for continuous improvement of the fire services industry.

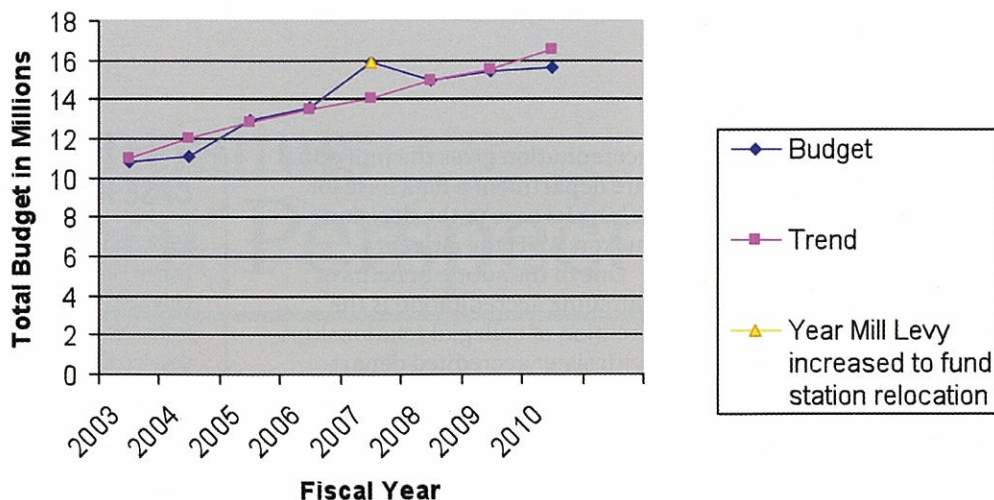
**1996:** The IAFC and the ICMA executed the Master Trust Agreement, establishing the Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI) to award accreditation to fire and emergency service agencies and to pursue scientific research and education in the public interest.

**2001:** The original trust was dissolved and the Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI) was incorporated as a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation, governed by a board of directors that oversaw two commissions: the Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI) and the Commission on Chief Fire Officer (CFO) Designation.

**2006:** To reflect its larger focus and its importance to all-hazard response, the corporation's name was changed to the Center for Public Safety Excellence (CPSE). The Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI) became an entity under CPSE, continuing to assist organizations in making the transition from tactical deployment to strategic response. The name of the Commission on Chief Fire Officer (CFO) Designation changed to the Commission on Professional Credentialing (CPC), reflecting the diversity of emergency services.



## SCFD #1 Mill Levy Since Accreditation



ries ensures every facet of a fire department's menu of services receive careful scrutiny in the assessment process. Strategic planning, fire suppression, technical rescue, hazardous materials, fire prevention, EMS programs (a significant element of the fire service), fiscal/personnel programs, terrorist incident remediation, among others have specific criteria for compliance. A department achieving accreditation has successfully complied with these requirements OR have given reasonable arguments for non-compliance. However, it should be realized that non-compliance with core competencies is grounds for withholding accreditation.

Sedgwick County Fire District No. 1 has been accredited since 2003 to the present time. During this period, the following benefits have accrued to the district:

- The number of fire stations has increased from 8 to 9.
- Three (3) new fire stations have been constructed.
- Utilizing ProQA, initial dispatch times have been reduced from 90-120 seconds to approximately 60 seconds.
- As a result of accreditation, SCFD No. 1 has established improved purchasing plans for PPE, hose, apparatus, etc.

- ISO ratings have improved, resulting in significantly reduced insurance premiums for a number of Sedgwick County residents.

- The district's "bottom line" budget has increased 44.3% from 2003 to 2010 (\$10,849,367 to \$15,657,272).

Looking at a crystal ball in reverse, it is the author's supposition that these positive outcomes would not have occurred OR would have been significantly delayed if the District had not acquired its accredited status.

I have had the privilege over the past couple of years to serve on the Commission on Fire Accreditation International as a commissioner selected by ICMA to represent County Managers. During my relatively short time on the Commission, I have become absolutely convinced that accreditation has significant benefits to the departments that seek and attain it. At this time, there are 138 fire departments in the world that have achieved this. These advantages can be addressed as follows:

In my experience as noted above, accredited departments have a better track record in securing the fiscal resources to acquire:

- Additional stations,
- Additional staff, and

- State-of-art apparatus and equipment.

The mutually beneficial, emerging relationships between CFAI and the ISO can and will have a significant positive effect on an accredited department's ISO rating with the subsequent saving of literally hundreds of thousands of dollars of citizen insurance premiums.

The accreditation categories/performance indicators leads to more realistic departmental Key Performance Indicators, since it makes fiscal/operational sense to integrate actual performance against exemplary performance standards outlined by the CFAI self-assessment guidelines.

These are just some of the things that have convinced me that fire service accreditation is the wave of the future, which will distinguish the departments deemed outstanding in the 21st century and beyond; our public constituency will demand no less. At Sedgwick County Fire District No. 1, regardless of who the chief is, the Accreditation Model is the blueprint that will be used from now on for the fire service. Remember, fire department accreditation is a quality improvement process that never ends.

*Ron Holt is the commissioner of CFAI.*



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