

Formation of a County or Regional Fire District Officer's Association

Why?

Whenever members of the fire service or any discipline get together, they begin to discuss the challenges that affect them and their operations. Let's face it, fire district officers have a variety of challenges to choose from; especially financial, human resource, day to day operations, government oversight, training, standards and we could go on.

When the group comes together there is never a lack of subjects to talk about and when "group think" gets engaged we can not only commiserate but we might just find a solution to the challenge that we are facing.

A discussion group are individuals who typically share a similar interest, in our case governing a fire service organization, who gather either formally or informally to discuss ideas, solve problems, to make comments and most importantly share information, as long as there is communication everything can be solved.

If fire district officers gather together on a regular basis to share information it would be a huge step. These types of gatherings will help you to realize that rather than your challenges and issues remaining behind the closed doors of your fire station, they exist in your neighboring districts and departments also. Perhaps one of your peers has the answer to your problem or has contact information for something you need or has experience with a manufacturer, equipment or service that they can provide advice about, good or bad.

One of the primary benefit of an organization is that it provides an opportunity for fire district officers to develop bonds with their co-officers.

Who?

Normally fire district officers are considered to be; Commissioners, Treasurers, Secretaries; yet often forgotten are the Fire Chiefs who are approved by the Board of Fire Commissioners. Don't forget your fire service legal counsel, they can provide invaluable guidance if they are willing to attend meetings, even if it's only occasionally.

This group provides a good cross section of disciplines who can provide information and communication to the entire group and will cover both administrative and operational challenges.-

What?

The "**what**" has already been identified, the purpose of the group is to create communication on a highly specialized discipline; *the fire service* and the challenges that the fire service encounters on a daily basis.

Short Term Goals

The first step in forming a group of likeminded individuals is to identify who they are in your region and how large your organization should be. Remember if individuals are inconvenienced they will not participate in person.

- How many fire districts are within a radius where it is reasonably easy to get together on a regular basis?
- Start off simple, this is a discussion group, getting together to exchange information and in some cases to empathize.
- There should be a group leader, someone has to facilitate the discussion just to keep order and to keep the conversation moving.
- It's recommended that someone take notes, the only problem is; if you're taking notes you won't be involved in the discussion. Just produce meeting *notes* instead of formal minutes. If there are action items, assign them and they will provide a basis for the next group conversation.
- You don't need to start with a formal organization, with officers, or by-laws or rules and regulations, if the group holds together, that can come later.
- Where to meet? We all have a fire station, we all have a place to meet, move around and see how the other half lives.
- If you want snacks or drinks (non-alcoholic) you can all chip in or bring your own. Like I said this is an informal communication exchange setting.
- Seek out training that is appropriate with the members of your group or in conjunction with members of adjacent fire district officers. Work together to be as inclusive as possible and the group will grow.
 - Again, it doesn't have to be fancy, identify some subjects that you want covered and seek out presenters from state or regional organizations who will be willing to work with you.

Long Term Goals

- Once the core group is established and you have been successful; perhaps you'll think about branching out.
- The group can be formalized by electing officers, establishing a checking account, collecting dues
- Remember keeping it simple is OK, your mission statement should read, "To communicate and exchange information"
- Once you establish a bank account you are entering the big leagues, there has to be someone responsible for the funds and there needs to be reporting and accountability.
- You may think about filing for a sales tax exemption, but be ready to file for and defend your not-for-profit organization status. Filing for an exemption may require the filing of tax documents proving not-for-profit status and remember there are different rules for federal taxation and state sales tax; they are two different animals.
- Define your mission statement, identify the officers of the organization and adopt a simple set of By-Laws which define simply how the organization is governed. Borrow from friends who have already been through this.
- By-laws establish and protect the rights and specifically the duties and responsibilities of an organization's members, board of directors, executive committee and others. They also determine how those in charge are nominated or elected and they help settle any disputes among parties.
- What does your organization do? The informal organization is the interlocking social structure that governs how people communicate and work together.
- The formal organization is more inclined to develop specific goals related to fire district management.

- It's prudent to assign sub committees to focus on certain topics such as legislation, policy, operations, finance and others

How are these organizations structured elsewhere?

- They are from the very formal and structured to the informal group gathering occasionally to discuss mutual challenges. Do what is best for your group.
- Many regional organizations are able to organize and hold regional training, some hold elaborate installation banquets or just get together over a pizza. One thing that you can always be sure of is lively discussions. Don't hesitate to communicate with other regional associations or the state association to obtain local training.

Where Can We Get Help?

- There are several regional fire service organizations in the state and any one of them would be capable of providing assistance.
 - *The Association of Fire Districts of the State of New York
 - *The Capital Area Association of Fire Districts
 - *The Monroe County Fire District Officers Association
 - *The Erie County Fire District Officers Association
 - *The Ulster County Association of Fire Districts
 - The Central Region Association of Fire Districts
 - The Essex-Clinton County Association of Fire Districts
 - The Westchester County Fire District Officers Association
 - The Suffolk County Fire District Officer's Association
 - The Nassau County Fire District Officer's Association

There is no need to rush formal organization.

Take the developmental time you need. Continue the informal gatherings and allow many fire district boards to become invested in your concept. There is time to form a formal entity in the future, but developing a common purpose and focus takes time. You will know when it is time to form your association after a series of well attended gatherings demonstrate the need for more.