

Legeros Fire Blog Archives 2006-2015 - Reader Question: « Run Numbers For 2014 » Vintage Photo of Raleigh Why Should Taxpayers Support Continued Funding Fire Departments with Fewer Calls?

Reader Question: Why Should Taxpayers Support Continued Funding Fire Departments with Fewer Calls? 02/19/15 135 W - + 9 - 6

This reader question was posted to [yesterday's run numbers thread](#) and asks a great question about support for funding of fire departments with low(er) run numbers:

As a Wake County resident and taxpayer, why should I support continuing to fund a fire department that only runs 756 calls a year? Wouldn't it make more logical (and fiscal) sense to let Raleigh or some other neighboring department handle there area? Just seems like a waste of resources from a laymen's perspective.

Jeanne Palusen - 02/19/15

Let's post the responses over here instead over there, and leverage an excellent opportunity for public information and education. And maybe some good discussion. We'll keep the other thread open for more run number postings.

A good question, and often times an inflammatory one because it questions the usefulness of an agency. It's still a good question, but not as easily answered by looking at a department's end of year numbers. The end of year numbers are not representative of the cost effectiveness. In fact, lower call volume might be a sign of a better than average agency because there are less calls for service because of increased public safety awareness programs that have resulted in less need. We work to reduce our work load, so fewer calls might mean better value. This is simply one of several views to address the question. Alas, there are Raleigh and Cary stations that ran fewer than a whole county department.

Sasser ([Email](#)) - 02/19/15 - 08:18

Most fire department calls in this day and age are medical-related. Areas on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale tend to generate more medical calls than other areas, for a number of reasons (lack of transportation to hospital, reliance on the Emergency Room as a primary care provider, "abuse" of the 911 system, etc). So, that can help explain a discrepancy in calls.

When fire stations and fire districts are designed, there are a number of factors that go into play. What areas can be reached within 4 minutes? 6 minutes? Fire station locations are geographic more than anything else. You want a designated area to fall within a designated response time. When you call 911 for a life-threatening emergency such as a heart attack or a house fire, you don't care that the engine company responding only ran 500 calls last year. You just want them there NOW.

Mark - 02/19/15 - 09:26

"Most fire department calls in this day and age are medical-related."

So you aren't a fire department then, are you? You're an EMS agency that coincidentally happens to sometimes put out fires :)

Not that I'm disagreeing with anything Mark said, just pointing out the obvious observation from that statement.

To go back to the original question, if dept X went away and had their area covered by RFD does it really matter? As a taxpayer I'm still paying taxes for fire coverage, who cares what department provides it?

Paul - 02/19/15 - 10:16

I have a question for the original poster: if "only" 756 calls seems low then what do you consider an acceptable about of calls to keep a department open? That number also doesn't tell what kind of calls said department responded to. For example 756 structure fires is different than 756 sudden illness calls.

D. McKay - 02/19/15 - 11:23

I would like to tack on to D. McKays post: if you think 756 is a low number for a dept. then what would you think about a dept that only ran 117 calls in a year as mine did. granted my dept is not in wake co.

A. Byrd - 02/19/15 - 11:37

To me a valid question to ask on this is how many calls should a department run? Also where were the calls run at, if out of 756 calls the majority were run in the city and not the county then the county budget is spending money that the city should be expending. This also goes both ways.

Scooter - 02/19/15 - 11:40

Primarily, when we consider fire coverage, we have to look at it as an insurance policy. A policy which is driven by local standards of cover, ISO requirements and community needs. Departments have to be placed and located within certain distances of residences to ensure fire flow coverage and to meet citizen's needs. This need for a fire station actually has little to do with the number of calls that are run out of a fire station. The total run numbers do not reflect the need for fire protection. It has more to do with the potential for loss if a fire station were not there.

Also, water supply issues impact the ability to contract with cities for coverage. For example, Raleigh does not own or staff tankers, which are imperative to water supply operations in areas that are even adjacent to city territory. This has created an interesting dynamic in Wake County where the municipalities have grown irregularly.

Finally from a coverage standpoint, is it equitable for city taxpayers who have chosen to pay for city services to subsidize the response for suburban or rural calls? If I were a Raleigh taxpayer I would not want my tax dollars funding a tanker which will provide coverage to an area of unincorporated Wake

County that does not generate any city taxes. This goes back to the reader's question about making logical or fiscal sense. When it comes to spending tax dollars; it is all based off of the efficiency at which the tax dollars are spent in order to reach the standard of service that is desired. Community needs and values can often determine level of service and as a result, the cost of delivering services. Within Wake County some departments have two people per engine, some are staffed with 4; some stations also staff multiple units. Even comparing the cost of municipalities is not as easy; Raleigh staffs their engines with four personnel, Cary staffs their engines with 5. Standardization of the level of service and as a result, cost, would require a county-wide fire service that holds the same standards for all citizens, whether incorporated or not... This is discussion for another day.

While coverage has driven many of the station placement and staffing decisions, we also have to consider cost, since it is really at the heart of the reader's question. While it is difficult to compare the level of service funded within the fire tax district, we do have the data to compare some regular metrics, such as cost per call, cost per citizen and cost per square mile. This can help us get to the cost effectiveness of a particular department.

Mike pulled together some of this information a few years ago show in the below link.

<http://legeros.com/ralwake/photos/weblog..>

While this data is a few years old, we can still draw some conclusions from this. As shown in this comparison, some of the slower departments are less costly to run on a per call, per person and per square mile basis than busier and even municipal stations. There is no formula for calculating which fire department is most cost efficient because we do not have the data to support every variable that would go into the equation. There is also inconsistency among the different chosen, and funded, levels of service as discussed above.

Departments should review efficiencies to ensure that fire service is provided in the most cost effective manner possible, including consolidations and contracted services. We have to understand that volume does not always equate to level of service or cost effectiveness.

Schultz - 02/19/15 - 12:38

To explore Scooter's point, an interesting spreadsheet would be incidents per district. This may be a better indicator, as it would exclude responses to other areas and be a better indicator of need. I bet the County could provide this. If you get to the point all your calls are in someone else's district, shouldn't you just be part of them?

Jones - 02/19/15 - 14:11

It's an interesting argument. The only problem is looking solely at call volume doesn't reflect on the "usefulness" of a department.

The volunteer fire department I'm with now runs around 400 calls a year (and slowly increasing as the urban interface drifts into the district) with about 35% of that being strictly medical first responder runs. We're mostly rural with plenty of farmland, woodland and a mix of medium and low income areas. But... and this is big... **most** of our calls are people that REALLY need us. Our average response from the time we are

paged to the first unit arriving on scene is under 5 minutes. If we get called out, chances are there's a very real danger. Whether it's a brush fire threatening a neighborhood, a serious (sometimes fatal) motor vehicle accident (the roads in our district are some of the most dangerous in the county for overconfident teen drivers due to sharp curves and steep hills), structure fires (mostly mobile homes) and of course, any and all sorts of serious medical emergencies. We **very** rarely get called out for nothing.

Now in contrast, the EMS department I was working with prior to my current location ran around 3,000 calls a year. I'd say that 80% of those calls were people that didn't need anything more than a taxi service with blinky lights attached. We were called out to the "low income areas" multiple times a day for headaches, stubbed toes, toothaches and people otherwise "not feeling good". We did have our share of "bad" calls, fatal MVAs, serious medical emergencies and the like but for most part, our shifts consisted of playing taxi for people that didn't have a way to the hospital and couldn't afford to see a doctor.

If you were to run out of the same department but out of "Station 2" located out in the sticks by a few miles, again surrounded by farmland and such, you **very** rarely got called out unless someone legitimately thought they were dying. The people out there were very adamant about taking care of themselves and whenever the tones did drop, we knew to always expect the worst. Station 2 averaged around 300 calls a year and our response was usually under 8 minutes at the farthest reaches of the district.

Now I will say, some departments are territory hungry and want to take over as much real estate as possible, even if this means stretching themselves thin and providing services that are sub-par due to personnel restrictions and extended times getting on scene (20+ minutes).

So really... just because a department doesn't run a "set" number of calls each year (or day, month, etc) doesn't mean they're not benefiting the community. As stated earlier, it could be due to socio-economic conditions, geographic location and a myriad of other factors including the departments actively engaging the community on public safety and the legitimate use of 9-1-1. If a department is "only" running X-amount of calls per year, maybe they're doing things right. Or maybe they've bitten off more than they can chew. There's more going on here than you may think.

Mullen - 02/19/15 - 17:44

One thing I didn't see addressed is that Wake County is one unified fire tax district. If that lady is opposed to supporting a fire department (presumably the district in which she lives) that only ran 756 calls last year, does she realize that her, and everyone else's fire tax dollars are supporting not only that particular department, but all the other county departments? Does she know that some of these departments ran fewer than 756 calls last year? Does she know that if her fire department is out on a major call (extended scene time) that another fire department in the county may have been asked to cover her department's district, thereby leaving another district uncovered or partially covered? I agree with the folks that have questioned what amount of calls per year constitutes an acceptable number of calls. I wonder if she understands that if the county department that covers her community (if it even is a county department) is closed and that district contracted to "Raleigh or some other neighboring department", that her tax dollars are still going to fund the coverage, regardless of whose name is on the side of the truck. People don't (or shouldn't) care what name is on the truck or what color the truck is, as long as it comes when they call 911.

I understand that people want to know where their tax dollars go. It's human nature and it's not a bad thing. I don't like giving any more of my pay to taxes. But no matter where I live, I want to know that when I call 911, I'm going to have the quickest, most professional and able-bodied response from whichever agency I need at that time. And that, to me, is money well spent, regardless of how many calls my fire department runs every year.

Duda ([Email](#)) - 02/23/15 - 10:35

Duda, Just like Mr. Legeros said excellent perspective "but" one thing is missing.

Like you said "You want to know that when you call 911, your going to have the quickest, most professional and able-bodied response from whichever agency you need at that time. And that, to you, is money well spent, regardless of how many calls my fire department runs every year."

What the county fire service is still missing is minimum performance objectives some will say the county does but lets look at the training of a county volunteer firefighter for example, lets also look the minimum training for a county career firefighter.

A Volunteer Firefighter minimum required training.

- 1) Wake County Essentials of Firefighting School Levels I & II (Volunteer New Recruit School is only two weekends only 32 hrs)
- 2) NC OSFM Hazardous Materials Responder Level I (Two weekends 32 hrs Certified)
- 3) NFA Incident Command System "ICS- 100, 200, 700, 800" (One weekend 16 hrs)
- 4) Blood-borne Pathogen's (maybe 8hrs depending on the department)
- 5) Maybe a department cut-off

Maybe the firefighter has received a total of 88 hrs of training and they are ready to respond to your emergency at your house?

A Career Firefighter minimum required training.

- 1) NC OSFM Firefighter I & II (Between 309 hrs to 340 hrs to be a Certified Firefighter)
- 2) NC OSFM Hazardous Materials Responder Level I (Two weekends 32 hrs Certified)
- 3) NFA Incident Command System "ICS 100, 200, 700, 800" (One weekend 16 hrs)
- 4) Blood-borne Pathogen's (maybe 8 hrs depending on the department)
- 5) NC OEMS EMT (175 to 200 hrs to be an EMT)

The Career firefighter has received a total of 596 hrs of training and then they are ready to respond to your emergency calls at your house.

Let me tell you first "Yes" I'm a Wake County Volunteer Firefighter.. I'm just saying that not all volunteer's are trained to the same level as the career firefighters. There is also a question about who is doing the training at some of the county fire departments.

Why does this county not have one set of rules (SOP / SOG's) for all the fire departments? With auto aid all the departments respond with each other it would it not make sense for the departments to have the same rules and procedures for fire ground safety.

Too many "Chiefs" beating there chests saying the county is not going to tell me what to do....

For the safety of the firefighters and the citizens some changes need to be made to make the Wake County Fire Service is safer for all.

Standards - 03/02/15 - 01:47

To Standards, That may be the minimum "required" training in your department, but I can promise you that is not across the board. Each agency sets its own "standards". I know there are many that make no distinction between "volunteer" and "career". What is required of one is required of the other. Granted it may take a couple of years to obtain FF certification, or EMT for a "volunteer". But the chances of a 100% "minimally trained" volunteer rig showing up in this county is slim. Most will get on the road with a combination of career (or fully certified) and members still in training. It's honestly little difference in their departments and in a city department with new recruits just coming out of an academy. A certification does not mean that they can do the job any better. Experience also counts in the grand scheme. As a matter of a fact a lot of "volunteers" in this county are full-time firefighters in other departments. What a great thing! Also it is hard to dictate SOP/SOGs county wide as each agency is different, each agency responds to different types of districts with different types of apparatus and staffing. That's where mutual aid training comes into play. And we have some standardized things going on such as accountability, radio systems, etc.

While I believe there needs to be county wide performance indicators and response standards, it would ultimately serve to do nothing more than to drive the "volunteers" out of this county. Which is one thing the county CANNOT afford.

looking out - 03/02/15 - 08:47

All of these comments bring forward many good points, opinions and perspectives. There is one thing that is for sure. There is no one solution to fix things and make it so there is no question of how money is spent, if its being spent in a "legitimate" manner or are you getting your moneys worth out of your local FD.

Through all this reading I did a quick look to see where this person lives to see if they are in fact a City or County resident. Through my investigation it appears that this person does not Reside or Exist according to the wake county real estate records. I would hope that someone didn't start this blog thread to cause friction between fire departments in an attempt to air out flaws or issues that don't exist.

All that said, people should look at the big picture that the fire department and medical services these fire departments in wake county provide are second to nobody in the US when looking at a save rate. People should try to thank these men and women for what they do and not attempt to call out or put down the work that these firefighters do.

Chris - 03/02/15 - 10:50

Chris, real estate records only show property owners. Even renters have to pay county taxes, so that doesn't mean she doesn't exist. Besides, no one else uses their actual name on this blog (not even you), so why do you expect her to?

J.J Gittes - 03/02/15 - 16:42

Name: (real name preferred)

E-mail: (optional)

Web Site: (optional)

Remember personal info?

Yes

No

Comment:

/ [Textile](#)

Comment moderation is enabled on this site. This means that your comment will not be visible on this site until it has been approved by an editor.

To prevent spam we require you to answer this silly question

What are the FIRST TWO LETTERS of the word 'fire'?

[\(Register your username / Log in\)](#)

Notify: Yes, send me email when someone replies.

Hide email: Yes, hide my email address.

Small print: All html tags except and <i> will be removed from your comment. You can make links by just typing the url or mail-address.