Fire Service Performance Measures – How Do We Measure Up?

The Washington State Legislature has adopted House Bill 1756, which requires fire departments across Washington State to measure a fire department's capability to respond to an emergency 911 call for service. A fire department's ability to respond to an emergency call within a certain identified time is commonly referred to as a “performance measure”. Furthermore, it requires the evaluation of Board adopted levels of service, deployment (emergency response) delivery methods, and response time objectives on an annual basis. The evaluations are based on data relating to the levels of service, deployment, and the achievement of each response time objective.

The annual compliance report will compare the actual response times or performance measures to nationally recognized standards. When the standards are not met, the fire department to explain the predictable consequences of failing to meet the adopted performance measure, and address the steps necessary to correct deficiencies in order to achieve compliance.

Performance measurement in the fire service is important for several reasons. Historically, the fire service in general has only been able to give citizens an average response time to all emergencies which is not a fair and accurate depiction of service levels received. Specifically for the RFA, the arrival of personnel with advanced life support (paramedic) capability before the onset of brain death, and the arrival of adequate fire suppression resources before flash-over is a critical event during the mitigation of an emergency. For these reasons, performance measures, comparable to that of industry standards, relate to the organization and deployment of fire suppression operations, emergency medical operations, and special operations.

The evaluation is intended to provide elected officials and the community with a true picture of how well the RFA is doing in achieving the adopted response objectives. The RFA has adopted via Resolution the intent and purpose of complying with the law. The Resolution includes each of the required elements, including the establishment of service delivery/response time objectives. The objectives were developed using recognized standards from the National Fire Protection Association. However, the RFA recognizes that it will take several years to achieve the adopted delivery/response time objectives. For this reason, success will be measured by the successful reduction of response times, and progress towards achieving these objectives.

In order to develop the response performance measures, the RFA service was divided into six geographical response areas based on population density; three within the City of Centralia and the Urban Growth Boundary (UGA), and three outside the same said boundary. The City of Centralia and the Urban Growth Boundary (UGA) response objectives are based on a suburban setting, whereas outside the City of Centralia and Urban Growth Boundary (UGA) the objective is based on rural objectives.
The RFA anticipates that performance measures will provide a means of defining program service levels both at the operational level and at the strategic level. Whether measuring fire suppression, emergency medical services, fire education, arson investigation, or any other fire service delivery program, performance measures can provide clarity of mission. Additionally, performance measurement should provide a rational methodology to report program accomplishments to managers, customers, and policymakers. Performance measures are intended to assist the RFA to clarify the purpose or mission of a program or how quickly we can respond to and mitigate an emergency.

Performance measures can also provide a means to clarify programs in terms that are understandable to citizens (our customers), internal stakeholders, and elected officials. These are typically formulated as inputs, outputs, and outcomes. Program costs can be calculated by evaluating the efficiency, effectiveness, and equity of the program or the specific performance measured.

The RFA intends to utilize the performance measurement outcomes to gain insight into, and make judgments about, the effectiveness and efficiency of our emergency response, programs, processes, and personnel. Information (data) collected about the program can be used to evaluate program outcome performance for customers and how well the programs are meeting the expectations of the RFA and the community. Ultimately, the reporting process will provide our citizens the opportunity and means to measure and review the performance and capabilities of their fire and emergency medical services. For those interested, the specific performance measure criteria can be reviewed at the RFA website at www.riversidefire.net.