



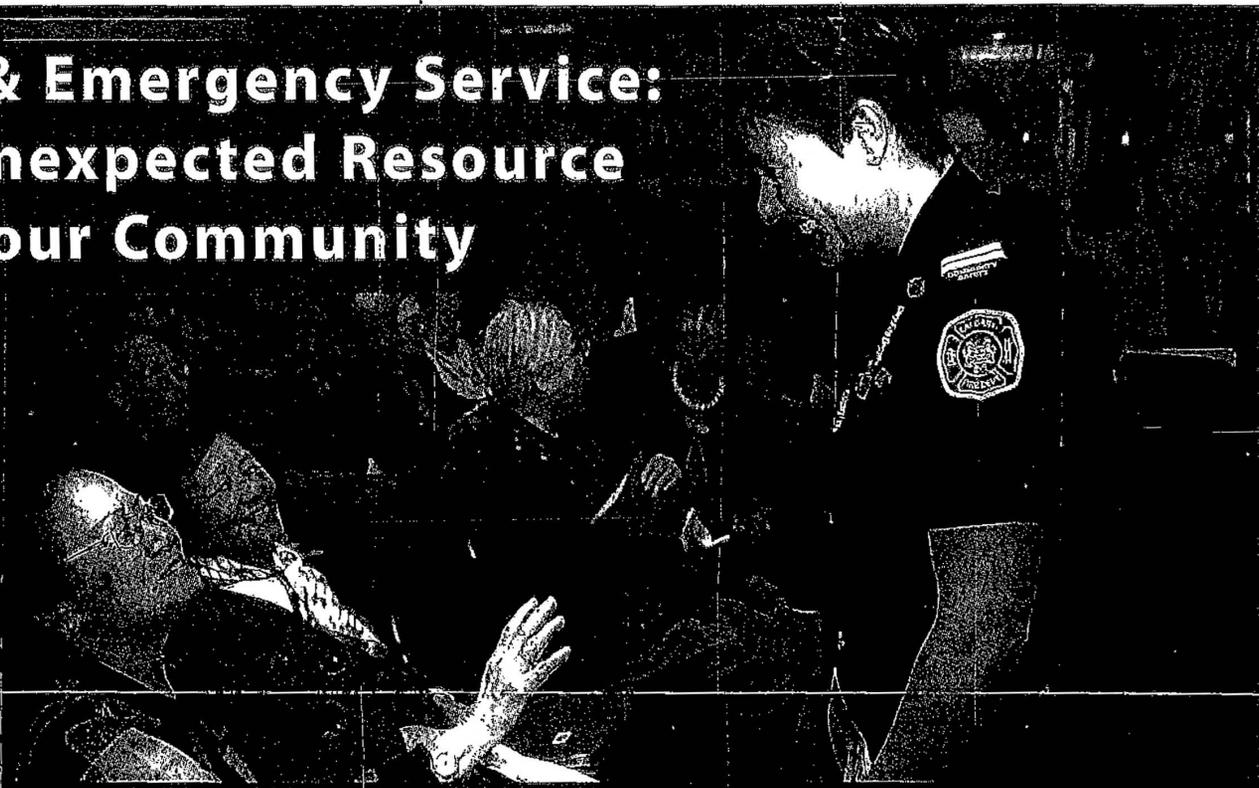
On Scene

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Beyond in the know—be in the lead.

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Fire & Emergency Service: An Unexpected Resource for Your Community



Building Community, Building Resources

I recently surveyed several new fire chiefs, asking what was lacking in their education and preparation for becoming a fire chief. I was surprised to hear several mention they didn't learn how to assess their community culture and expectations—information they needed.

Not to oversimplify the solution to this, but the best way to learn about a community is to become involved and engaged in the community.

Soon after I became fire chief, I was invited to speak at one of the local Rotary clubs; I've been having breakfast with the group weekly ever since. It didn't take me long after joining Rotary to realize the benefits of belonging to a service/civic association.

There are many personal and social benefits, but even more so, I have found that it's a way to keep a finger on the pulse of the community.

I learned early on in my experience the many benefits of being involved and engaged in the community:

- When chiefs get out into their communities and people get to know them, it builds trust in the chiefs as leaders. When there

- As chiefs interact with individual citizens and groups, they can determine what public education may be needed and where.
- Chiefs also learn what the citizens' concerns are so they can be addressed and how to

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are controversial issues before a community and tough decisions to be made, the community will be more likely to support these chief and their departments.

- When engaged with citizens, a chief will learn the community culture and the expectations citizens have of their fire department.

present information to the community so it's effective.

- Chiefs will find that their bosses are often happy about their engagement since community managers and mayors will hopefully get good feedback from the public.

Please see "Building Community," Page 3

Building Community, Building Resources

cont'd from page 1

- Chiefs will find as they work with citizens in their communities that it's a great personal experience.

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I asked some friends for input on this issue. Chief Kelvin Cochran of Atlanta feels chiefs must take responsibility and take charge for marketing the value of their departments to its constituents. He states that to meet this obligation, fire chiefs must be predictable, visible, accessible, approachable and accountable:

- **Predictable** – Establishing and balancing expectations of what services and programs the fire department provides in our all-hazards environment based on assessing community risks.
- **Visible** – Being engaged in meaningful public interactions with neighborhood and community groups, business and civic organizations, festivals and other community events to take advantage of every opportunity to inform, educate and build relationships within the community.
- **Accessible** – When citizens or business leaders need to get to the fire chief to have their needs met, the opportunity is available, and it doesn't take multiple emails or phone calls to make it happen.
- **Approachable** – Demonstrating the personality and character (at all times) so stakeholders feel personally connected to the fire chief even if they have only seen them from a distance or on television. When approachability really works, citizens feel a true sense of ownership of their fire department and their fire chief.
- **Accountable** – Establishing a reputation in the community that all questions—even scrutiny—are welcomed. It provides an opportunity for the fire chief to justify credible actions with data, science and stories, but also to take responsibility when operations aren't carried out to our standards and their expectations.

There are several thoughts about how chiefs should be involved in the community. Some chiefs will join a specific club or group within their communities. Others believe that chiefs shouldn't align with just one organization or club, but try to be present at all community events when invited.

Chief Kevin McGee from Prince William County, Va., said

that "the public generally values the presence of the chief at community functions. I try my best to accept every invitation I receive to attend a community event."

While a chief may not be able to attend every event, Chief Joanne Hayes-White of San Francisco thinks it's important to spread community-service involvement throughout the ranks. She will often designate a battalion chief or engine or truck company to an event.

A great example of spreading the involvement down the ranks is a new program Chief Rob Brown from Fresno, Calif., kicked off called C-BEST (for Community-Based Emergency Service Tactics). This program empowers captains at their 24 stations to imbed themselves in the communities in their first-response areas.

Is there anything chiefs should be cautious about as they go out into their communities?

Chief McGee mentions that you have to avoid being pulled into the middle of a community debate—being pulled to take one side or another. There are occasions when a community group may want to exploit a public official to advance their agenda in some way.

Chiefs and department members who go out into their communities must realize that citizens will listen carefully and remember everything that's said. You have to be aware of your responses to questions and even what you say in the most casual conversation.

"People don't care what you know until they know you care. They want to know that their fire chief cares enough to be out and involved with them."

Community involvement may be a significant commitment of a chief's time, but it's definitely worth it in the end.

During the recent economic downturn, many departments across the country became targets of the citizens in their communities. Community support was absent during budget cutbacks and the departments suffered.

But chiefs and their departments that had invested time in their communities before the downturn had the support of their constituents and fared much better during these troubled times.

Chief McGee summarized the importance of chiefs being engaged with their community: "I believe it relates to the old adage that people don't care what you know until they know you care. They want to know that their fire chief cares enough to be out and involved with them." ☞

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