

## **Fire & EMS study assessed the county's safety standards**

By Jason Fair

As the public safety director and chief of the Charlotte County Fire and EMS Department, my foremost responsibility is to safeguard the welfare and security of our community. Over the years, our county has undergone substantial residential growth and commercial development. This trajectory is poised to intensify as we see new proposals for development and our population steadily increases.

To assess how the standard of service we provide will be affected by this growth, we commissioned a standards of coverage study in 2022. We needed to take a deep dive into our operation and see how we are meeting service demands and how we need to adjust as that demand grows.

Charlotte County Fire and EMS, funded through ad-valorem taxes and the Fire MSBU assessments, is an all-hazards response agency comprised of hazardous materials, technical rescue, marine operations and airport rescue and fire fighting. Our departmental divisions include operations (emergency response), fire prevention, training, support services and emergency vehicle maintenance. These divisions are made up of 22 civilian members and 277 certified firefighters and paramedics, which operate out of 17 stations throughout the county.

The last five years have seen more than an 18% increase in demand for service, with a call volume of nearly 38,000 calls in 2022. In that five years we have increased our units by one ambulance, but is this enough? That is where the standards of coverage study comes in, providing an unbiased, data-driven analysis.

The study defined three specific areas where we are currently and helped us strategically plan: call concurrency, unit hour utilization and peak call times.

Call concurrency refers to the ability to simultaneously handle multiple emergency calls within a specific zone and is expressed as the percentage of time overlapping emergency calls come in. The three highest results were 49%, 35% and 32%. During these peak percentages, we have been able to meet the demand by allocating resources from other zones and prioritizing responses in areas where additional units are not available, but continued growth requires a more substantial approach.

Next is unit hour utilization. This is defined as the amount of time a specific unit is engaged directly on a call in a 24-hour period. The International Association of Fire Fighters and the International Association of Fire Chiefs recommend a planning threshold of 25-30% while best practices would not exceed 30%. The balance of time is for ensuring equipment readiness, training and community engagement such as safety surveys and pre-plans of commercial buildings. We currently have four units running above 25%, which serves as the planning trigger for additional resources to meet call demand.

Managing peak call times is of paramount importance to ensure efficient emergency response, public safety and the optimal use of resources. The study showed our highest volume of emergency calls are between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. with a steady plateau from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. This high-level information allows us to identify patterns and more effectively coordinate our readiness to respond.

These standardized benchmarks, as well as response models, proposed developments and growth trends of the county, served as a foundation in our strategic planning.

So, what does this plan outline? Looking in the next five years we're planning to add three new stations, one of which is currently funded through 1% local option sales tax. The same approach of sales tax is planned for the additional two stations, but the equipment and personnel would need to be allocated from other funding sources as sales tax and impact fees are not eligible.

These three stations would support an advanced life support fire engine and an ambulance, which includes five personnel per shift for three shifts. Also, we would add three ambulances working daytime shifts. This helps meet the peak call demand while staffing for 12 hours versus 24 hours. The balance of the plan refers to staff. We would bring on coverage staff, which would help support leave and reduce overtime and mandatory staff holds. Additional support staff will assist in the daily management and maintenance of our growing operation.

We take our charge to serve you and our community seriously. This is why we have been internally reviewing operations and conducting a standards of coverage study. This process put us under the microscope not only in reviewing the details of our service, but also engaging the community through work groups to define expectations.

This process detailed a plan that positions us to best serve you in your time of need. Charlotte County Fire and EMS is made up of a team of incredible men and women whose fundamental drive is to do just that, serve the Charlotte County community.

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