

Introductory Post 02/06/2013

We are constantly getting suggestions as to things people would like to see posted on this page. Unfortunately, time is a factor when maintain this page as well as our website. Never the less, going forward we are going to make an effort to post things that may help the citizens of Berwick better understand what we do and why we do it. That being said, the following informational snippet will probably shed some light on terminology and how information is obtained for future posts.

The Berwick Fire Department reports all of our calls to the State of Maine who in turn reports them to the United States Fire Administration. The official name for this reporting system is the "National Fire Incident Reporting System" or NFIRS. NFIRS is comprised of multiple forms and very specific coding for things such as incident type, actions taken, resources used, materials, or equipment involved, response times, staffing levels, etc. The "guide" for properly completing the reports is roughly 500 pages long in itself.

Why does this matter to the residents of Berwick?

This is the extremely short explanation of why we classify call types the way we do when you see our annual reports or response numbers online or in the newspaper from time to time. On top of that, any time you see any response statistics or incident reports from our department, they are typically taken from information in the NFIRS system.

2012 calls for service statistics 02/07/2013

During 2012 the Berwick Fire Department responded to Fifty Two fires. This includes and fire, not just buildings. Fifteen of these calls were mutual aid to other communities.

We responded to three hundred and thirteen emergency calls that were not fire related. Such as: motor vehicle accidents, hazardous materials spills, carbon monoxide incidents, Medical Emergencies, etc.

One hundred and eighty eight of those emergency calls were medical emergencies. We are able to provide Emergency Medical Technicians in just under six minutes on average; that's about five and a half minutes before the ambulance. Emergency medical training is integral to the fire service, even for "traditional" fire and other emergency calls. As a result of having the training and equipment anyway, we are able to provide a potentially lifesaving medical response at a minimal cost.

We also responded to two hundred and six non-emergency calls including false alarms, un-permitted burns, flooded basements, etc. thirty of these calls were mutual aid to other communities.

In addition to the above noted calls for service, we also handled fifty fire prevention calls for service. These include fire code violations, wood stove inspections, fire prevention education at the schools and preschools, and other similar activities.

To give you an idea of how calls break down throughout the week, three hundred and ten of them, including all of the fire prevention calls, were week days while fulltime staff are on duty. Two hundred were on week nights, and one hundred and eleven were on weekend days. Both of which are covered completely on an on-call basis.

What is Mutual Aid 02/09/13

Our previous post mentioned "mutual aid given" and "mutual aid received" in our run statistics for last year. Mutual aid refers to assistance given to, or received from, another community. Most fire departments, with the exception of the very large metropolitan departments, do not have enough

personnel to handle larger incidents alone. There are also instances when volunteer or on-call departments are unable to get enough staffing to even handle small calls because no one is available when the call comes in. For that reason, pretty much all fire departments have mutual aid agreements with neighboring communities.

The Berwick Fire Department is a member of the "Community Mutual Aid Association". This association has around a dozen member departments in the area from both Maine and New Hampshire. Any member of the association will provide mutual aid to any other association department free of charge. This is an indispensable resource for all communities involved. One thing to keep in mind is that with all of the benefits that the Town of Berwick realizes from this agreement, the only way that "mutual" aid works is if we are able to provide the same services in return. So, even if it looks like we provide more mutual aid than we receive, if we receive mutual aid from three towns for one call, we have to actually provide mutual aid three times, once per town, to repay it. Luckily, nobody keeps track of who owes who.

What is Automatic Aid 02/10/13

To carry on with the mutual-aid discussion from the other day, there are also agreements referred to as automatic-aid. Automatic-aid is essentially the same as mutual-aid except that it is, as the name implies, automatic. Ordinarily, mutual aid requires one fire department to request another fire department before they are dispatched. Automatic-aid agreements are predetermined based on response times or hazards associated with certain calls or areas. In this case, both fire departments are dispatched at the same time without the need for anyone to specifically request more help for any individual call.

In Berwick, we have automatic aid with South Berwick Fire for much of Portland Street and part of Route 236 as well as the side roads off from them. This is due to the location of the South Berwick Fire Department and their ability to reach those areas of Town faster than we can from our location in downtown Berwick. We provide automatic-aid to North Berwick for alarm activations or fires at the Noble High School with our ladder truck.

This is one of the ways that area fire departments have worked together over the years to keep our respective communities safer.

January Calls for Service 02/11/13

The following is a list of the total number of calls for service by incident type that the Berwick Fire Department responded to in January 2013:

- 0 - Structure fires
- 0 - Vehicle Fires
- 0 - Other Fires
- 1 - Pressure Ruptures, Explosion, Overheat
- 24 - Medical Aid calls
- 9 – Other rescue calls (includes most motor vehicle accidents)
- 7 - Hazardous condition calls
- 6 – Service Calls
- 11 – Good Intent Calls
- 0 – Severe Weather or Natural Disaster Calls
- 3 – Fire Prevention/ Life Safety Code Enforcement Calls
- 1 – False Alarms/ False Calls

62 – Total calls for service

Valentine's Day and EMS 02/14/13

Happy Valentine's Day! It's the holiday that makes your heart skip a beat.

Speaking of which, if it's a cardiac event and not your significant other that makes your heart skip a beat or causes chest pain, fast treatment is crucial to your health. Sorry, we can't help with your significant other. We can however help with cardiac events.

The BFD currently has 6 licensed Emergency Medical Service providers on our roster and the majority of our members are CPR certified. We have an average response time of just under 6 minutes from the time we are dispatched to EMS calls. When we arrive we are able to provide Basic Life Support (BLS) such as aspirin, oxygen, and if necessary CPR and defibrillation. We typically arrive on scene about 5 ½ minutes before the ambulance which has Advanced Life Support (ALS). That 5 ½ minutes could very well save your life or the life of your valentine that caused the chest pain in the first place.

Also fellas, if you forgot that today was Valentine's Day, we can help treat your injuries after you show up without flowers too.

What is ISO 02/16/13

Unless you work in the insurance industry or the fire service, you probably aren't overly familiar with the Insurance Services Office (ISO). ISO provides advisory services and information to many insurance companies. The aspect of their services that is most applicable to individual fire departments is what is called the Public Protection Classification (PPC).

"ISO's Expert staff collects information about municipal fire protection efforts in communities throughout the United States. In each of those communities, ISO analyzes the relevant data and assigns a Public Protection Classification (PPCTM) — a number from 1 to 10. Class 1 generally represents superior property fire protection, and Class 10 indicates that the area's fire suppression program does not meet ISO's minimum criteria." – ISO website FAQ's

Having been through the ISO review several times here in Berwick, we can tell you that it is an extremely in depth process that takes into account Fire Department facilities; type, number, age, and condition of apparatus and equipment; staffing levels; response times; training levels; water supply; etc. Every item is given a point value and used to determine a community's overall PPC. Berwick is currently rated as a 3/8b.

Our ISO Rating and what effect does it have 02/18/13

As stated in a previous post, communities are rated by ISO to determine their Public Protection Classification (PPC). Each classification level requires that you meet a minimum set of standards. The better trained, equipped, and performing the local Fire Department, the better the community's PPC.

"Virtually all U.S. insurers of homes and business property use ISO's Public Protection Classifications in calculating premiums. In general, the price of fire insurance in a community with a good PPC is substantially lower than in a community with a poor PPC, assuming all other factors are equal." – ISO website FAQ's

With our current equipment and staffing levels, Berwick Fire has improved from a 5/9 to a 3/8b in the last audit. In dollars and cents, that means that the improved protection gained from an

increased cost in the Fire Department budget is typically substantially offset by the savings in property insurance rates that result. The upgrade from 5/9 to 3/8b alone is estimated to save the residents of Berwick between \$96,000 and \$190,000 community wide annually. It is such a broad estimate due to the large number of other factors that go into setting insurance rates for any individual property.

That's right, better service, increased protection, and saving you money too. Thanks for supporting us so that we can better serve you.

What is NFPA 02/20/13

No doubt you have heard or seen NFPA in the news, at town meetings, or even stamped on the bottom of consumer products. It's a subtle little acronym that you may not even have noticed or chocked up to the normal government alphabet soup. What many people don't know is what NFPA actually is or how it affects you every day.

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) is an organization that develops consensus standards for everything fire related, from building codes, to smoke detector design, to fire department operating procedures and requirements. The standards are developed by industry experts and affected parties to whatever the standard covers. They are then reviewed and updated on a regular basis. The standards that they develop are given such a high degree of deference that a large number of them are adopted into law. Even the standards that are not adopted as law are typically, or should be, followed as the MINIMUM industry standard. And why not, they were developed by experts in the field.

You will see NFPA standards in play every day at the Berwick Fire Department from enforcement of Life Safety Codes NFPA-1 and NFPA-101, to the design of our trucks NFPA-1901 and NFPA-1906, to the training requirements of our members NFPA-1001, NFPA-1002, NFPA-1021, NFPA-1041, to the performance requirements of our department NFPA-1710 and NFPA-1720 (these last two will most likely be referenced fairly heavily in the pending fire department review).

Now this post is turning into alphabet soup, so we leave you with this. The NFPA is a very important part of our profession as the goal for the minimum performance of our job. Now that you have a basic idea of what the NFPA is, future posts will mention what some of those basic requirements are.

NFPA 1710 02/23/13

NFPA 1710 is the Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations, and Special Operations to the Public by Career Fire Departments.

Note that it specifies "Career Fire Departments". This is because it is impossible for any department that does not have fully staffed fire stations ready to respond to fully meet this standard. Don't let the fact that there is another, less stringent, standard for on-call or volunteer departments (NFPA-1720) confuse you, fires don't burn slower here. The standard just acknowledges that responses take longer and by the nature, there is going to be more fire loss with smaller departments.

NFPA 1710 requires the initial fully staffed engine to arrive within 5 minutes and 20 seconds from being dispatched with a full first alarm to arrive within 9 minutes and 20 seconds from being dispatched. This includes 4 and 8 minute response times plus a little over a minute for firefighters to get their gear on and get the trucks on the road. A standard full first alarm includes 2 fire engines and a ladder truck with minimum of 4 member crews each in a hydranted area. The needed apparatus goes up dramatically out of the hydrant district or on larger fires.

NFPA 1720 02/24/13

NFPA 1720 is the Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations and Special Operations to the Public by Volunteer Fire Departments.

As noted in our previous post, this standard takes into account more realistic travel times for volunteers since they do not typically staff the station. The slower response times do not mean that the fires burn more slowly, just that they tend to burn longer before being dealt with as a result of firefighters having to travel from home.

NFPA 1720 requires 6 qualified people on scene of a fire within 14 minutes for a community with the population density that Berwick has. This is the initial response and not the total number of people required. This type of staffing and response time requirement is primarily geared towards performing a rescue if someone is still trapped in the building alive and stopping the fire from spreading to other buildings.

Any fire where the building or more than one victim is saved with this type of response is a true testament to the above average abilities of the firefighters on scene. Traditionally, the fire service has always endeavored to achieve the same or even better results with less resource as the availability of staffing dwindles and budgets are cut. The can-do attitude helps us to achieve truly great things with the resources we have. Unfortunately, it often leads to unrealistic expectations of what we can actually accomplish, both from ourselves and from the people that we serve.

Staffing requirements at other incidents 02/25/13

The NFPA standards noted previously don't specifically address the staffing and response requirements for non-fire incidents such as motor vehicle accidents and special rescue calls. The response times from those standards are typically used for a reference, just over 5 minutes for 1710 and 14 minutes for 1720. The difference lies in the staffing requirements.

Every incident is so vastly different that it is impossible to predict the exact number of personnel or apparatus needed beforehand. However, a quick staffing study of a 2 car motor vehicle accident where there are 2 people injured and one of them is trapped reveals the following at a minimum.

A pump operator and a firefighter on a hoseline in case the fuel, batteries, or other unknown hazards in either vehicle catch on fire, a minimum of two firefighters to perform stabilization of the vehicles and extrication of the trapped patient, 2 EMS providers per patient to deal with injuries and patient packaging (this falls to the fire department until adequate ambulances arrive on scene), and an incident commander/safety officer. For a fairly basic call, that adds up to 9 people. Yes, it can be done with less, but every responder that you take out of the equation makes the scene that much more dangerous for us and the patients involved.

How we stack up to NFPA Standards 03/02/13

With all of the posts about NFPA, how does the Berwick Fire Department compare? The following response stats are AVERAGES for calls in 2010, 2011, and 2012 combined. All times are from the time of our first tone.

>> Structure Fires (Only members meeting a minimum of Firefighter-1 level or Driver/Operator are counted):

- *First suppression apparatus (engine, ladder, etc.) on scene - 12:09
- *Time to meet 6 person (NFPA 1720) initial staffing requirement: 21:00
- *Total number of Berwick Firefighters that respond to the scene: 7
- *We met the NFPA 1720 standard on 22% of calls (time and staffing)

>> Non-Structure Fire, Non-EMS, Fire Calls (brush fires, car accidents, alarm activations, CO calls, etc.):

- *First apparatus (engine, ladder, Squad, etc.) on scene – 10:19
- *Time to meet 6 person (NFPA 1720) initial staffing requirement: On average, not met.
- *Total number of Berwick Firefighters that respond to the scene: 3.4 (how do you get .4 firefighters? Remember, this is an average)
- *We met the NFPA 1720 standard on 9% of calls (time and staffing)

>< EMS Calls:

- *First unit on scene (vehicle type is irrelevant): 5:48
- *Time to meet 6 person (NFPA 1720) initial staffing requirement: Not relevant to EMS calls
- *Total number of Berwick Firefighters that respond to the scene: 1.7

The takeaway from all of this is that we are, like most departments, short staffed on scene when compared to the industry benchmarks. The result of this is increased reliance on mutual aid, contingent on their availability and response times.

Luckily, we have a department full of people dedicated to providing the best possible service with the resources we have available, as well as neighboring communities that are willing to help whenever they can because they know that we will be here for them whenever we can.

Response times from Home 03/03/13

Our previous post showed some response statistics for the past three years. If you had the chance to read it you would notice that it takes 10 – 12 minutes from the tone on average for a fire truck to arrive on scene. If you were wondering why, maybe this will help explain it.

Our members live a bit over 2 miles from the station on average. The speed limit response at that distance to the station is roughly 3:45 not accounting for traffic, lights, etc.

The average distance from the station to fire calls is a bit under 3 miles. The response at that distance from the station is roughly 4:45.

If you allow a minute to get out the door of their house to their vehicles and a couple of minutes to get into the fire station, geared up, and back out on the road with a the fire truck that gives you a total response time of 11:30. It's amazing how close theory comes to reality in this case. Don't forget to add another couple of minutes for the 911 call to go through dispatch before we get toned out.

Remember though, these are all averages under ideal conditions. We have nine members over 3 miles from the station and four of those are over 5 miles away. Our furthest call was almost 10 miles away. When you start doing the math on those it can take some time.

The point of this post is, much of the time we have a great response and it seems like we are there in no time. But, if we seem to be taking a while, we are doing the best we can with the distances that we have to cover.

Steps in place to improve response 03/05/13

As you can see, our response is not perfect. We have taken steps to improve it over the last several years but we still have work left to do. This is one of our town's symptoms of a nationwide problem.

Response times and staffing can be negatively impacted by many factors. Some of the more pronounced and common challenges include, but are not necessarily limited to:

- Available time from our members. Even with 30 members, the true question becomes, how many are in town and able to respond at any given time? Time is a commodity that gets scarcer every day for most people.

- Increased demands on the fire service. We are no longer just a “fire” department. We handle any and all hazards that we are called to these days. Even, the traditional “fire” calls have become more complicated and dangerous and will continue to do so. This is due to ever changing technology, building construction, and hazards inside buildings.
- Increased training requirements to become and remain proficient in the constantly changing areas of our profession as well as to comply with regulations.
- Changes in society. Look at all of the social organizations that are shrinking and struggling. Some are still hanging on, but how many of their meeting halls sit empty or are repurposed today? The fire service is in the same boat. On top of that, the time and effort needed is making it more of an actual job every day. It’s hard to get people to volunteer for work.

Subsequent posts will outline some of the things that we have done over the years to attempt to improve membership and response.

LOSAP Program 03/06/13

In 1996 the Berwick Fire department began a Length of Service Award Program (LOSAP). This program includes a small retirement and life insurance for our members.

Berwick has historically proven to be an excellent training ground of firefighters. We have produced many on-call firefighters that have gone on to become career firefighters in other municipalities as well as our own. Due to our training and performance as a department, members that start here have also done very well in transferring to other volunteer/ on-call departments in the case that they have moved away. During the 1990’s the Berwick Fire Department saw this trend and realized that we were losing valuable individuals. They weren’t leaving because they were unhappy here, but because of time commitments and further advancement in their careers.

Our department, in an attempt to be proactive on the issue, began the LOSAP. No one takes this particular job for the money but the small amount of compensation and protection provided through this program assists in recruitment and goes a long way towards retention of trained experienced personnel that we already have.

Call Dept. Pay Scale 03/08/13

Members of the Berwick Fire Department have been paid on-call since the early 70’s. It began with a small stipend of around \$1 a point where different point values were assigned to fire calls, trainings, meetings, etc. Over a period of time, points became more roughly based on hours than the number of calls attended. The stipend was also adjusted up to the area of \$3.

In 2003 as part of the petition to hire a part time firefighter, enough funding was added to the Fire Department budget to increase the pay per point to minimum wage. This has been modified since that point to include pay increases based on certain certifications. The highest that an on-call member can make currently is \$13.50 per point with a fairly impressive resume.

This has helped with recruitment as well as encouragement for members to increase their training level and department participation. It’s not a lot, but for some of our more active members it can be a small part time job.

Full-time Firefighters 03/09/13

In 1994 the Town hired the Fire Chief as a part time position combined with code enforcement to help deal with increased administrative demands. This position was and continues to be the local

Emergency Management Director as well. The Chief's position became fulltime in 2000 to help with increasing demands and shrinking availability of on-call members.

The department struggled with diminished and unreliable daytime response as a result of Prime Tanning closing in 2001. In 2003 a petition was started to hire a part-time firefighter during the day. That petition was placed on the town ballot and passed. Unfortunately, part time status made it very difficult to utilize that individual during off hours. The position was eventually made full time in 2005 as a result of the hour limitation hampering the department's ability to provide coverage.

More and more staffing and response issues prompted the town to apply for a SAFER grant and hire two additional fulltime firefighters in 2008 to help provide reliable coverage during weekdays.

Shift assignments of personnel as well as staffing levels are always being reviewed for optimal effectiveness. We would not be surprised if the currently in-process review from Municipal Resources Inc. will make some recommendations in this are also.

Proposed Budget 3/10/13

Driver Standby Incentive 03/12/13

In the fall of last year, to help with a developing problem with getting certified drivers we implemented a standby program. With the program, drivers sign up for periods of time where fulltime staff is not on duty. During that time they must remain in the area and available to respond to any calls.

In exchange for taking standby shifts, drivers are paid a small stipend on top of their regular pay based on the amount of time they commit. The funding for this was taken from the yearly stipend that our officers were paid for their additional responsibilities.

Although the program has only had moderate success, it has shown its worth on several occasions and is still developing. This type of program in other communities has proven to be very useful and will hopefully become a strong asset to our department.

Basic FF training 03/13/13

The term "Volunteer Firefighter" is one that deserves a tremendous amount of respect. However, it is also one that is very often misunderstood.

Start with the term "firefighter". There are plenty of people out there that bill themselves as "firefighters" just because they are on a department. Although in the strictest terms that may be true, to give the term firefighter its due respect, there is much more to it than that. An actual firefighter must have the training and experience to back up that title. Anything less is a disservice to the profession.

A "Volunteer" according Merriam-Webster is "a person who freely offers to take part in an enterprise or undertake a task". Maine Statute, paraphrased, defines "volunteer firefighter" as a firefighter who receives no compensation. However, paid on-call firefighters are typically grouped in with volunteers during casual discussion.

There are quite a few volunteers out there. There are far less that are deserving of the title Volunteer Firefighter. In subsequent posts we will discuss some of the training that is required to be a firefighter whether they are volunteer, paid on-call, part time, or career. They all do the same job and anyone claiming to be a "firefighter" with less than adequate training combined with real world experience is doing the entire profession a huge disservice.

Emergency Medical Training 03/15/13

In previous posts we mentioned that we have licensed Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT). They are monumentally valuable to our department since our very existence as a department is based on helping people who are sick and injured or situations that could injure people.

The State of Maine licenses emergency medical personnel at several levels of training. An Emergency Medical Technician - Basic (EMT-B) receives at least 110 hours of classroom training, plus field experience, before being granted a license. Re certification occurs every three years. The next EMT level is Intermediate (EMT-I) which requires at least 350 hours of training and clinical time. A Paramedic (EMT-P) has extensive training that takes at least 1000 hours. Most paramedics have chosen medicine as a career. Each level comes with its own abilities and limitations. They all require a minimum number of continuing education hours every time they get re-licensed.

What is Firefighter Level 1 & 2 03/16/13

So you want to be a firefighter. What do you have to do? Here two oversimplified rules

>Rule#1: Stay alive and uninjured and go home to your family at night if at all possible.

>Rule#2: Do everything you can to keep the people you are called to help alive and protect their property.

How do you accomplish those goals? You will need at least a basic idea of what you are doing. To get that, you need Firefighter level 1 and it is very helpful to get firefighter level 2. In fact, they are so important that Maine teaches them as one class. The class is taught over the course of 5 months and takes several hundred hours to complete.

It's also important enough that Maine Law Title 26 Chapter 28 requires training in accordance with NFPA standards. The standard for firefighter training is NFPA 1001. Not so coincidentally, the Maine Firefighter 1 & 2 program is designed specifically to meet the objectives of that standard.

What are our Driver Training Requirements 03/17/13

Why are your posts always referring to "certified drivers"? Can't all firefighters drive the trucks?

Unfortunately, or fortunately depending on your viewpoint, no not all drivers can drive the trucks. Berwick has for years used a driver training program put out by VFIS. In 2011, the State of Maine enacted training requirements for drivers that requires certain minimum training requirements. Luckily for us, the curriculum that our State training agency began to deliver to comply with this was the very VFIS curriculum that we had already been using. Some of the components included in our training program based on the new requirement as well as departmental need are:

>An Emergency Vehicle Operator Course which takes approximately 16 hours. This covers laws and basic principles of operating a large emergency vehicle.

>Basic pump operation training as required by NFPA 1002 takes roughly 16 hours plus enough practice time to become proficient.

>Individual apparatus training and drive time. We require 5 hours of drive time per truck. This is only half of the VFIS recommended 10 hours but we work hard to balance the need for training with an attainable program.

>Finally a test of proficiency on vehicle operation including driving, pump operations, and operation of any special functions the apparatus performs. Anyone who does not pass or does not feel comfortable gets more training before re-testing.

>To top it off, we re-certify every driver on every truck they drive every 3 years per the state requirement.

The most recent member to become a certified driver with no prior fire service background took roughly 50 hours of training before becoming certified to drive his first fire truck. He has done an outstanding job and is a valuable asset to the Town of Berwick. It goes to show the huge amount of dedication that it takes to be a member of this department and that is something that we can all be proud of.

Standard Dept. training Requirements 03/19/13

Our job is ever changing and if everyone is lucky, we don't get any particular type of dangerous call with a high level of regularity. This is good for residents but not so good for our skill level. The more rare and complex a type of call is, the higher the chances are that we have lost some proficiency in dealing with it. At the same time, that is when that we need experience and proficiency the most.

To help maintain proficiency and bring the newer member up to speed, we do regular training here at the department. At the moment we do 2 trainings per month. One is a company level training consisting of smaller groups typically training with hands on type skills and equipment to maintain proficiency in the basics. The second training is a department wide training that is typically either classroom training or larger department wide drills. Any specialized training such as pump operator, driver training, basic firefighter training, etc. is done in addition to these regular monthly trainings.

That's an average of 4-6 hours of training or more each month per person. Due to schedules, it takes a minimum of 5 different days to provide an opportunity for all of our members to attend each of the two monthly curriculums.