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THE CONSEQUENCES OF SELF-DEPLOYMENT

IN 2005, THE UNITED STATES SUFFERED through several major disasters that went beyond the scope and resources of first responders. A management rule in the fire service is to staff for the usual or routine and have contingencies in place for the unusual event. After September 11, every municipality or jurisdiction in the country should have established contingencies for bringing resources to the scene of a major incident.

These contingencies usually rely on mutual-aid agreements for initial assistance at the scene of a disaster. Local and state emergency management agencies then have contingencies for bringing additional needed resources, which generally respond in an organized manner.

Firefighters have many good qualities. One of those qualities is the want or need to help, especially our brother and sister firefighters and also civilians. One problem that surfaces during major emergencies is the self-deployment of the firefighters. As I said earlier, the want and need to help are ingrained in us. However, this want and need must be tempered by restraint and common sense.

My first thought is for the incident commanders at these major incidents. These often are chaotic and confusing scenes, especially in the first 12 to 24 hours. The additional pressures of accounting for and managing firefighters who self-deploy from other jurisdictions only add confusion to an already confusing scene. Incompatibility in communications and safety equipment often compounds this confusion.

My next thought is for the firefighters who self-deploy. I know I have a procedure in place that protects me if I am dispatched to an incident under mutual aid and I am injured or killed while operating at that scene. I am not sure that contingencies are in place to protect self-deployed personnel should they be injured or worse at a scene to which they were not called.

I'm not sure how to handle self-deployment. I do know that during these times, civilians in communities not affected by the disaster (specifically your community) still have house fires and heart attacks. I also know that they (whoever "they" are) know how to get a hold of us if they need us. Finally, I can sleep better at night knowing that if I call you, you will come!

-John "Skip" Coleman, deputy chief of fire prevention, Toledo (OH) Department of Fire and Rescue, is author of Incident Management for the Street-Smart Fire Officer (Fire Engineering, 1997) and Managing Major Fires (Fire Engineering, 2000), a technical editor of Fire Engineering, and a member of the FDIC Educational Advisory Board.

Question: What should be the consequences of self-deployment to major events?

Rick Lasky, chief, Lewisville (TX) Fire Department

Response: One of the biggest challenges a firefighter can face is to not respond to a disaster or large-scale emergency unless requested to do so. A lot of this can be attributed to the way it was back in the "olden days," before organized mutual-aid plans, when you responded to your neighbor's event or an event a distance away knowing they needed your help in most cases but didn't have a way to request it.

As we witnessed on September 11 and with some of our country's biggest disasters, self-deployment has helped in some cases but also, in a completely innocent way, has made many other incidents more difficult to manage. There is a big difference between responding to neighboring departments' emergencies, especially those with which you have automatic- or mutual-aid agreements, and responding to a large-scale incident out of state or a great distance from where you are located.

As difficult as it is for firefighters to sit back and wait for the "official call" to respond, in most cases it's the only way to ensure an organized deployment of resources and personnel. A friend of mine described just how difficult it was to manage incoming resources at an incident in his jurisdiction when he didn't know firefighters were coming and he couldn't plan accordingly. In some cases, those arriving on their own made the incident more difficult to manage. He explained that many of those who self-deployed were appreciated and knew how to work within a structured system, but others, despite their good intentions and good hearts, were more of a hindrance than a help.

Firefighters who self-deploy to an incident, in most cases, are not covered if they are injured. In today's lawsuit-happy world, if there is no mutual-aid agreement, there are liability issues to be concerned with. Whether there should be consequences for self-deployment should be left up to that department's organizing body and leaders-the department itself, the mutual-aid group, the chief's association, and the county governing body, for example.

Craig H. Shelley, EFO, CFO, MIFireE, fire protection advisor, Advanced Fire Training Center

Response: As we all know, self-deployment can wreak havoc on operations, whether they be large-scale major disasters or routine fires and emergencies. An incident commander, when developing the incident action plan, must be cognizant of the units and staffing that have responded or will respond. Tactical objectives are based on these parameters and the current status of the situation at hand. With self-deployment, an incident commander will have difficulty coordinating operations and adequately planning for the effective use and deployment of resources based on anticipated response protocols and expectations.

Self-deployment can be likened to freelancing. Countless injuries and deaths have resulted when fireground freelancing has occurred. Multiply individual freelancing by a factor of 5, and you have what can result when departments or individuals self-deploy to an operation. Much has been written regarding accountability, and accountability lapses have been cited in firefighter death and injury reports. How do

we account for self-deployed individuals and adequately provide for their safety?

At incidents where self-deployment has occurred, a full investigation should be conducted. Based on the circumstances, some form of discipline or consequence of action should take place. Perhaps individuals who self-deploy should be suspended or given another form of punishment consistent with department guidelines. If a department is involved, perhaps a meeting chief-to-chief to discuss the issue or a referral to a state organization would be warranted. When a department is involved, the solution may be a lot more difficult than when an individual is involved.

It would be unwise to cancel mutual-aid agreements or the like, because that will affect instances where the help would be needed and requested. Perhaps having a prepared agreement between departments in a state or county fire service organization can be a solution. Additional training may be required to teach the importance of fireground accountability and the dangers of self-deployment.

Nicholas DeLia, chief, City of Groton (CT) Fire Department

Response: This issue has become a critical one as we attempt to better organize and control our scenes and improve the safety of the assigned firefighters. Self-deployment during major times of crisis only exacerbates the issue. The intent may be to help, but adding some unknown number of personnel tends to stress an already fragile, if not failing, system. For many years, the use of roaming bands of energized help has been used with varying results. I have heard them referred to as mercenaries, gypsies, and juice balls that have invited themselves to other departments' calls. If we take the emotion out of the equation, the problem of adequately accounting for and supporting these helpers still exists.

In today's world of managing our folks for the best and safest outcome, strict discipline on everyone's part, including their chiefs, should be the call of the day. I believe members who self-deploy need some downtime to consider whom they are committed to serve and the effect they could have on the receiving department and its command system.

From the chief's perspective, the use of nonrequested personnel should not be supported or encouraged. If additional resources are needed, they should be called for. It doesn't do much good to discipline firefighters for self-deploying if they are used and thanked when they do.

Bobby Shelton, FF/EMT-1, Cincinnati (OH) Fire Department

Response: In times of natural or manmade disasters, it is natural to want to reach out and help those who have been impacted by the event. If this is true for the citizens of an area, how much more does it apply to us in the emergency services? By definition, our job is to help in times of crisis, to lend our expertise to help alleviate some of the suffering.

However, to borrow from the Emergency Response Guidebook, with which all of us are familiar: "Resist Rushing In!" (top of page 1). It says that as a safety precaution to make sure we are well aware of the dangers and maybe consequences of a particular action.

In firefighter training, we preach over and over about the dangers of "freelancing" and the trouble we can get into. Isn't self-deployment a form of freelancing? No matter how well intentioned, no matter what the circumstance, it is freelancing.

This year, we have had an unprecedented number of natural disasters-unprecedented in their scope, the

number of states affected, and the number of people affected. We preach accountability to our firefighters in training. How can that accountability be maintained if we self-deploy to an event? The Mississippi Emergency Management Agency got in touch with the Ohio Emergency Management Agency and requested help during Hurricane Katrina. The Cincinnati Fire Department sent 60 people who volunteered to go to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, for several weeks. There was no question of freelancing because everyone had an assignment. There was accountability because everyone knew what his assignment was and who was in charge.

The question of whether there should be consequences for self-deployment poses quite the conundrum. On the one hand, we as emergency workers do what we do because we want to help not just the public but also our fellow firefighters who have been affected by the incident. On the other hand, the National Incident Command System (NIMS) was designed and implemented to help maintain command and control and so that the incident commander could know what his resources are at a given time and in a given place.

In the final analysis, it is up to us to police ourselves. It is up to us to discipline ourselves and to wait for a call to assist. As difficult as it may be, in the long run it will be a benefit to us and will make for a smoother operation in the impacted area. If that discipline cannot be maintained, then some sort of consequence will have to be implemented for members or departments who fail to follow procedure.

Ron Hiraki, assistant chief, Gig Harbor (WA) Fire & Medic One

Response: As firefighters, we have a desire to help other people, but our training and experience should cause us to ask if we will be a help or a hindrance. There are a number of "hurdles" to consider before any deployment. Do we need any "consequences" if we have considered all of the hurdles?

Logistics: Have you been released from duty in your home fire department? Who will fill in for you? What equipment will you take? What about personal protective equipment? Do you own your ladder truck? How will you get resupplied once you're there? How will you get there? Are you going to pay all your expenses?

On-scene: The success of the fire service depends on training for a coordinated effort and teamwork. How effective will we be if we all jump in our cars and show up at an incident? A fair amount of effort is always needed to organize many individuals compared with assigning an organized group to a specific area or task. Were those well-meaning bystanders at your last big incident a help, or did you ask them to step back?

Putting your community and your family at risk: If you and a number of people from your fire department self-deploy, who is left to protect your community? If you are injured on a self-deployment, will you have medical and disability coverage? Who will take care of your family?

Let's all be ready to help, but let's do it by using the teamwork for which the fire service is known.

John Salka, battalion chief, Fire Department of New York

Response: Self-deployment is not proper and does not contribute in a positive way to any event. We don't accept or condone self-deployment to "routine" incidents, and that same standard should be observed for major events. Having said that, some self-deployment has been the response of available and equipped firefighters to incidents that were not managed effectively. I have read reports and articles

describing major events where self-deployed units and members made the difference between success and failure.

We must also differentiate here between self-deployment and freelancing. Self-deployed units or companies may respond and arrive at an incident uninvited or before being requested, but they may then await proper orders before going to work at the incident. Their arrival at the scene was not requested, but they still may end up providing effective and well-managed assistance to the incident commander.

Freelancing is dangerous, unsupervised fire scene activity that should receive the most severe consequences. Firefighting is dangerous enough without fireground commanders having to deal with undisciplined firefighters or officers taking actions without orders or direction from the incident commander. I can tell you that any fire company or firefighters caught freelancing at an incident I am commanding would be spending lots of time at future incidents standing next to me in the street.

Jeffrey Schwering, lieutenant, Crestwood (MO) Department of Fire Services

Response: Self-deployment is another word for freelancing. The fire service can't afford to look the other way on this issue. It is in our nature as firefighters to want to respond and attempt to make a difference. Although our intentions are good, self-deployment is not.

Every fire department in this country has rules that need to be followed. Every department is accountable for its actions. We all have some type of city, county, state, or federal mutual-aid system in place. The rules and consequences should be clearly spelled out; follow them. If not, your members or the department should and will have to answer for the members' actions, as outlined in your perspective agreements. Be proactive; take the time to ensure that all departments operating under these mutual-aid agreements understand them.

Whether the incident is small or large, self-deployment, freelancing, and lack of accountability and responsibility will lead to an increase in injuries and fatalities to firefighters. Incident commanders will call for the help they need. Self-deployment only makes us part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Gary Seidel, chief, Hillsboro (OR) Fire Department

Response: There are two significant issues that jeopardize safety, accountability, and the success of an operational plan at emergency incidents. One is self-dispatching; the other is freelancing. Both issues need to be addressed as conditions that absolutely will not be tolerated.

If the incident commander has no knowledge of self-dispatched personnel being on the scene or even part of the dispatched assignment, not only are you putting you and your (self-dispatched/freelancing) crew at risk, but you are also putting the dispatched resources at risk if/when your company becomes compromised.

Early in my career, I witnessed an incident in which a company self-dispatched to a major fire. At this incident, the incident commander had the luxury of adequate resources on-scene. As soon as he realized there was a self-dispatched resource on-scene, he calmly asked the officer and crew to come to the command post. He had the company stand by until he had time to address them. He told them there would be no self-dispatching of units on his fire scene and to get in their apparatus and return to quarters.

As you can imagine, word spread not only on the fireground but also throughout the department. The result ensured that all members recognized that self-dispatching would not be tolerated. Later that shift, the IC also had a strong conversation with the company commander.

In this case, there were sufficient personnel already on-scene to mitigate the incident. Some departments do not have the luxury of sending a company home during emergency operations; however, this issue still needs to be addressed as early as possible and in the same manner: Self-dispatching will not be tolerated.

Thomas Dunne, deputy chief, Fire Department of New York

Response: The fire service has a quasi-military structure to ensure controlled, safe operations. Sometimes, though, it seems we are more “quasi” than we should be.

Firefighters are some of the most motivated people in the world. However, when they self-deploy to a major event, they can potentially disrupt the operation, cause injury to others, and exacerbate the situation by requiring rescue themselves.

A department must consider two questions if personnel have self-deployed to a major incident. First, is the necessary command structure consistently enforced? Second, are personnel sufficiently educated on the dangers of uncontrolled and unreported actions?

If the source of the problem is inexperience, some serious training is in order. If, however, a person knew and disregarded the dangers just to get a “piece of the action,” disciplinary action is called for. That individual should not be allowed on any emergency responses until he is willing to follow the department’s procedures.

Whether you are withdrawing personnel from a fire building, dealing with hazardous materials, or handling a terrorist attack, the goal remains the same: to act as a team and minimize the danger as much as possible. In this post-9/11 era, the ability to comply with this concept has become as essential as the ability to operate a hoseline or raise a ladder.

Mike Bucy, lieutenant, Portage (IN) Fire Department

Response: Self-deployment to major incidents should get the people involved a stiff fine, at least, and possibly jail time. These individuals’ names should also be entered into a national database so that subsequent violations would lead to jail time. Think about it: If a citizen wandered onto our scene, we wouldn’t think twice about having that person confronted by law enforcement. This is no different. The people who self-deploy are glory seekers not versed in incident command and its simple premise of scene control. Do we really want that type of person on our scene? The Federal Emergency Management Agency should be set up to allow rescuers to show up unannounced to a “camp” or check-in point; the rescuer can wait there for deployment. Even this solution has a logistical nightmare potential.

Jim Grady III, chief, Frankfort (IL) Fire Department

Response: This is an age-old problem that will continue because of our “helping” nature, but we have to think smarter and act appropriately. Also, we are being held to a higher standard and accountability of tax dollars along with the use of equipment.

Perhaps the best way to suppress this is to make a department that self-dispatches to a major event ineligible for federal funding through the various grant programs. This can also apply to reimbursement for deployment to that specific event.

This is not the cure-all but a penalty for not following protocols and policies established for rendering aid. We as chiefs must keep in mind that self-deployment prior to official declarations can lead to insurance and pension issues that could be devastating to a fire department. This can also put us as administrators in a very vulnerable position.

In Illinois, we have had several incidents. The use of passwords for entry into incidents has worked well, as has having dispatch centers verify the agencies dispatched.

Randall W. Hanifen, lieutenant, West Chester (OH) Fire-Rescue

Response: Ultimately, the consequence should be the return of the firefighters or EMTs to their home jurisdiction without using their services. This may be difficult given the severe need for help directly following a major event. I would propose that the fire service develop a firefighter version (FERT) of the Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) model. The fire service has provided personnel to US&R and DMAT, but much of the work needed directly after a disaster involves logistical support and humanitarian aid. Firefighters and EMTs are excellent for both positions, but they only add to the problem when they show up unequipped to care for themselves and without a dedicated assignment. Through a FERT program, firefighters could be assembled at a predetermined location. They could be deployed with the proper self-care items (clothes, PPE, and so on) and transported to designated locations with designated jobs. An on-line class could cover the basics to obtain the certification for the team. This program would allow the fire service to show up in force but in a professional and coordinated effort.

Mitch Brooks, lieutenant, Columbus (OH) Division of Fire

Response: The consequences for self-deployment should be the same as for freelancing. After all, it's the same thing. Local and federal officials have a hard enough time taking care of the disaster at hand, let alone dealing with freelancers trying to "help."

All the people who self-deploy cause a logistical nightmare and cause agencies to redirect needed resources to deal with them instead of the needs of the community.

There needs to be a program or a policy that gives people that truly want to help a way of getting involved immediately after a disaster. This could be accomplished by having a national call-up list per region or maybe a contact number that can be called to offer assistance for any event.

Billy Jack Wenzel, training/safety officer, Wichita (KS) Fire Department

Response: It is in our blood. Firefighters are action-oriented personalities. We would not want it any other way. Every time we have a major incident or every time there are smoke signals (a column of smoke rising in the sky), our action-oriented firefighters respond. We know this is going to happen. It has happened throughout my career. I have done it. So the question is, where is the accountability? What is in place to control and account for self-deployed resources? It is not effective to make a policy that

says, "No off-duty firefighter should respond." It may sound good, but this goes against our nature.

We need to have a marshaling area, a visible area, at every major incident that has been practiced and exercised. From that point, self-dispatching resources can be utilized, ideally in noncombat roles. There are plenty of support functions that assist the incident. Another question is the accountability of responding "off duty." Chiefs, we need to make sure we have a policy that accounts for and supports all members. Too often, arriving chiefs enter the scene alone and without being assigned-sometimes even without proper PPE. This is where we have the potential for serious problems and injuries. Everyone needs to be held accountable, and part of accountability is being assigned and working in teams. So the next time the smoke signals rise, we all need to remember it is our job to reduce incident stress. Accountability is part of the key-personal and incident accountability.

Michael J. Lopina, firefighter/paramedic, Lockport Township (IL) Fire District

Response: Self-deployment is a big problem that, at least in my area, has finally been addressed in the past few years. As far as punishment goes, the violating agency should receive a hefty fine from the local or state government. If the department belongs to a mutual-aid organization, that organization's board should level the fine. If not a member of a mutual-aid organization, the county or state should impose the fine through the state's Fire Marshal's Office. In addition to a fine, the department's chief should be suspended or automatically released. There is no place for self-deployment, especially given that a subversive group could use that avenue to disrupt our rescue and recovery efforts severely.

In Illinois, if there is a Mutual Aid Box Alarm System (MABAS) or task force deployment to a stricken area, incoming departments are given a password to gain entry to the area. This was put to the test in Utica, Illinois, when a group of perverse fire buffs tried to gain entry to a tornado-damaged area using their very real pumper from their fictitious department. Without the password and other credentials, they were dealt with by the presiding law enforcement agency.

Brian Singles, firefighter, Hampton (VA) Fire Department

Response: There are two sides to the consequence coin. On the good side of self-deployment to major events is that every red-blooded firefighter throughout this country is willing to help out his fellow firefighter in time of need. Big or small, major or minor, it doesn't matter. That's why we are called firefighters.

In the past, the fire service has deployed specialized teams to all sorts of disasters, in this country and abroad. That makes us all very proud to wear the uniform of a firefighter.

In some of those cases, firefighters have been turned around because too many have shown up at these events, and that's okay. Just because they cannot lend a helping hand doesn't mean that they are not with the working firefighters in spirit. In my opinion, the cheerleaders on the outside keep the working crews going,

On the bad side of the self-deployment issue is that it causes confusion for the incident commanders at these major events, who are to keep a tally of all who have shown up to help. It also takes away from what we in the fire service have developed and perfected in the incident management system. I know it is hard for firefighters to just sit on the sidelines waiting to be called in to help, but it is something we all must make ourselves do.

When we are called to the emergency scene as part of a specialized team or just because the emergency happened in our community, we will all be more than willing to help out. Firefighters know that when a disaster happens, we are always the first on the scene.

Tom Sitz, lieutenant, Painesville Twp. (OH) Fire Department

Response: If receiving a federal or state grant, you should lose the funding. You should also be prohibited from applying for any other grant money for two years.

Christopher J. Weir, EFO, division chief, Port Orange (FL) Department of Fire & Rescue

Response: Efforts should have been made four years and four months post-September 11, 2001, to have plans in place to establish the response of resources should a fire service organization become overwhelmed with a catastrophe. If not, we should get a plan together now. Such plans identify what is needed, who responds, and when that response is appropriate and complies with all NIMS and local protocols. However, despite any plan of action, it amazes me that departments or individual members not on a response list respond anyway. Mainly, it's the way that we react during times of crisis, since it's our way of wanting to help in any way, shape, or form. However, restraint is in order.

Unfortunately, what we have learned from disasters and 9/11 is the logistical, legal, and accountability nightmare that self-response produces when responders are not invited or listed as resources. Those departments that self-respond do not take into account their personnel's needs to be properly housed and fed. Legally, who is responsible for workers' compensation, labor, and human resource issues when a self-responding member is injured or, God forbid, killed? Who is responsible for expenses such as overtime, fuel, and travel? My question to those who self-respond is, "Did you at least ask that jurisdiction if it needed your resources or expertise prior to your unannounced self-response?" If the answer from that jurisdiction is, "Thanks, but no thanks," then you should not go.

Yes, there should be consequences if a department or rogue member decides to self-respond when not invited or on a predetermined resource allocation response list. The main consequence is to just turn those uninvited responders around and protect the community to which you are assigned. In addition, the self-responding department or its members should eat the cost of fuel, overtime, and other related personal expenses. Other consequences may be a formal written reprimand from any or all of the following: DHS/FEMA/USFA, state fire enforcer, fire chiefs associations like ICHIEFS, and perhaps the governing body of the municipality that lost personnel resources because of the self-response. Maybe this is harsh; however, in this day and age, it is necessary.

If you're not on the list, remain in your community and provide your citizens with full protection until such time as you are called. ■

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