



**INTERNAL AUDITOR'S
REPORT ON
VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER/EMT
PARTICIPATION**

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You asked the internal auditor to determine the actual number of actively participating volunteers within the Fire & Emergency Services Department. In making this determination, the internal auditor received personnel roster and certification input from 15 Fire Station Chiefs, dispatch records from the Mesilla Valley Regional Dispatch Authority (MVRDA), and a personnel roster and participation reports from the Fire Administration. Finance supplied records of the stipend payouts that have occurred since the inception of the Stipend Program.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

As outlined on the Doña Ana County (DAC) website, the DAC Fire & Emergency Services Department consists of the Fire Administration overseeing 4 districts, operating out of 16 Fire Stations. The Fire Administration's mission is to provide quality fire and emergency services to the citizens of Doña Ana County. While both paid and volunteer staff support this mission, the focus of this report is upon volunteer Firefighters and Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs). These volunteers respond to calls for service in their communities such as fire emergencies, emergency medical service calls, natural disasters, and public service assistance calls, as well as participate in community events to promote the prevention of fires and other emergencies.

PROCESS

The Audit determined that 15 of DAC's 16 fire stations have volunteers on staff, with only NMSU reporting all paid staff (NMSU-Student Volunteers are also paid). Of the 15 fire stations that have volunteers, Anthony & Doña Ana have both volunteer and paid staff. The internal auditor referenced the most recent stipend statistical data of June – November, 2020, for the 15 fire stations that staff volunteers. This data included 1) trainings received, 2) meetings/events attended, and 3) incidents to which volunteers responded. While all three data sets reflect volunteer participation, the internal auditor focused upon the number of incidents to which each rostered volunteer (per station) responded. For the purposes of this report, those who responded to more than one but less than 5 incidents during the June - November, 2020 time period were considered to be **minimally active** volunteers while those who responded to five or more incidents during the June - November, 2020 time period were considered to be **active** volunteers. After acquiring the number of minimally active and active volunteers, the Audit reviewed Stipend Program payment data.

ANALYSIS

As the majority of DAC's Firefighting/EMT forces are volunteers, their importance cannot be overstated. While the Fire & Emergency Services Department website purports some 300 volunteers, the Audit's data collection indicated approximately 241 rostered volunteers, 59% of which appeared to be inactive. Herein, the Audit reviewed and analyzed data purporting the number of times volunteers at each fire station responded to incidents during the 6-month period under review, finding that only 41% (100) of the 241 rostered volunteers responded to more than one incident, but less than five (minimally active). And, 27% (65) of the 241, responded to 5 or

more incidents (active) during this 6-month period. The number of rostered (minimally active and active) volunteers challenges the accuracy of the website's purported 300 volunteers.

Statistical analysis acquired from the MVRDA revealed that as a whole the 15 fire stations collectively responded to approximately 77% of incident calls during the period reviewed. But the Audit noted wide variances per station, between the MVRDA response rates and the percentages of fire station volunteers who responded to incidents. Further inquiry revealed that 1) at least one fire station did not consistently report all of its incident responses, and 2) fire stations in the North and South Districts often experienced error messages when inputting incident response reports. These error messages prevented an unknown number of reports from being finalized, causing them not to be counted by the Fire Administration's Emergency Reporting Software (ERS). This can result in the following trifecta:

1. Reports that contain errors are not counted by the ERS, and thus are not included in statistical data. This not only contributes to inaccurate Fire Administration records, but consistent error messages received by station chiefs can give the impression that reporting is not very important, and frustrate both the station chiefs who actively attempt to input incident response results as well as the efforts of the County to acquire higher Insurance Services Office (ISO) ratings.
2. Error messages prevent reports from being transmitted to the State Fire Marshall's Office, which directly affects the county's ISO ratings. The county is required to write incident reports that record its responses to each incident, and these records should be available for reference at the state level for ISO audit purposes.
3. Reports contain data concerning which volunteers responded to incidents. Unreported data can deprive active volunteers from receiving credit for their efforts, denying them of stipend payouts as well as retirement points. This undercuts the Stipend Program's goal of encouraging and rewarding volunteer participation.

During a recent Fuel Card audit (December 2020) the internal auditor learned of the Fire & Emergency Services Department's lack of compliance in incident reporting. This lack of compliance was the result of incident reports remaining incomplete, in part due to error messages received when fire station leadership attempted to submit their reports. In May of 2020, when the error messages were first discovered by Fire Administration, correspondences with an ERS Administrator indicated that the errors could be corrected by updating the current software codes. However, it was not until November of 2020 that the ERS Administrator realized that correcting the error messages would require complete new software coding. At that time, the Fire Administration's Training Officer began to manually make corrections so that individual reports would be complete; this served as a temporary corrective action for the error messages. During the current inquiry however, it became apparent that the Training Officer was neither able to catch up nor keep up with the volume of incomplete reports in the ERS.

MVRDA records consistently capture incident calls, responses, and non-responses as they occur, for primary and secondary areas of responsibility, per fire station. While Fire & Emergency Services data collected by the internal auditor supports the conclusion of a core group of individual volunteers at each fire station who consistently answer incident calls, the

completeness of this data could not be verified due to the aforementioned ERS discrepancy (error messages preventing reports from being completed).

Since its inception (in 2019), the Stipend Program has paid out \$211,111.77; \$165,790.28 (79%) of which has gone to minimally active and active volunteers. Of the 100 minimally active and active volunteers, 79 (79%) are stipend recipients, and the remaining 21 (21%) do not yet participate in the Stipend Program.

The chart below captures the numbers and percentages of the aforementioned data. The data in the three columns on the right were acquired from MVRDA.

June '20 to November '20		Fire & Emergency Services Department						
Fire Station Area	Number of Rostered Volunteers	Number of Minimally Active Volunteers	Percentage of Minimally Active Volunteers	Number & Percentage of Active Volunteers	Number of Incident Calls Per Fire Station	Number of Incident Responses Per Fire Station	Percentage of Incident Responses Per Fire Station	
1	DONA ANA	11	8	73%	4/36%	840	698	83.1%
2	ANTHONY	18	2	11%	0	894	743	83.1%
4	LA MESA	13	6	46%	4/31%	212	165	77.8%
5	ORGAN	17	8	47%	5/29%	539	400	74.2%
6	RINCON	18	9	50%	7/39%	74	64	86.5%
7	LA UNION*	20	2	10%	1/5%	98	72	73.5%
8	RADIUM SPRINGS	11	7	64%	6/55%	129	102	79.1%
9	CHAPARRAL	15	10	67%	8/53%	464	349	75.2%
10	MESQUITE	15	2	13%	0	282	164	58.2%
11	GARFIELD	15	8	53%	7/47%	138	122	88.4%
12	FAIRACRES	14	5	36%	3/21%	400	298	74.5%
13	SOUTH VALLEY	24	14	58%	10/42%	386	266	68.9%
14	SANTA TERESA*	22	4	23%	0	319	226	70.8%
15	LAS ALTURAS	7	5	71%	3/43%	141	95	67.4%

16	CHAMBERINO	21	10	48%	7/33%	196	157	80.1%
	Grand Total	241	100	41%	65/27%	5,112	3,921	76.7%

NOTE: Station Area # 3 (NMSU) is not included, as it is manned by only paid staff.

When incident calls are unanswered by a particular fire station, 1) neighboring fire stations, 2) the American Medical Response, and 3) other mutual aid agencies are called upon to respond to the incident to ensure that a response occurs.

* The ERS data gathered for these fire stations do not include an accurate number of incident responses, as compared to MVRDA data. Herein, only 11 reports were submitted for the La Union, and 26 reports for the Santa Teresa fire stations.

CONCLUSION

The Fire & Emergency Services Department website is clearly inaccurate in its account of the number of volunteer Firefighters/EMTs, and should be corrected as necessary. A more pertinent concern is that of current recordkeeping deficiencies. It is Fire Administration leadership's responsibility to both 1) address the current system errors that prevent reports from being completed in a timely manner, and 2) follow up with Fire Station Chiefs as necessary to acquire complete incident response records. An apparent example of the lack of follow up is noted when viewing the Santa Teresa fire station, which singularly serves the entirety of District 4 yet purports records that indicate no active volunteers. The internal auditor attests to the inordinate amount of time and effort it took to acquire the requested statistical data from the Fire Administration for this report, which further underscores a lack of sound recordkeeping. While it was beyond the scope of this inquiry, the Audit acknowledges the risk that the Fire and Emergency Services Department did not receive grants it applied for, due to incomplete reports. Incomplete reports could also negatively affect future grant opportunities. Thus the Fire Administration should consider the following recommendations -

1) To address and correct the error messages and thereby the current reporting discrepancies, the Fire Administration proposes creating fire station identification numbers within the ERS that will allow for a) report data to transmit to the State Fire Marshall's office, and b) statistical data to be collected into and from the ERS. The proposed correction should also allow for older reports to be added into the ERS and State Fire Marshall's office as well. Per Fire Administration leadership, implementation of this corrective action is due to occur during the week of March 15, 2021. The Audit supports this proposal, and adds that fire stations should be notified that - the reporting deficiency has been corrected and - reports are expected to be submitted within 48-hours of returning from an incident call.

NOTE: The 48-hour time limit for reports is already within Fire Administration guidelines.

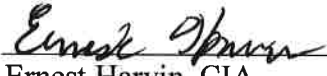
2) Fire & Emergency Services Department personnel should on a monthly basis (for the next 12-month period), ensure that an audit is conducted on the ERS. A monthly station-by-station comparison of MVRDA statistical data to individual fire station ERS reporting should allow for a reconciliation of the data sets, supporting complete recordkeeping and allowing for follow up on any discrepancies. This will not only reinforce to fire station leadership the importance of timely reporting, but it will also allow the ERS to be monitored for any reporting glitches. All

incidents of non-compliance should be recorded, addressed with fire station chiefs, and reported to the county's Fire Chief. The Fire Administration should also ensure that formerly submitted reports (ones with initial error messages) have been added to the ERS. It would also be prudent for fire station chiefs to store and hold incident reports for up to one year (on a secured drive), in the event the ERS experiences future data glitches.

The Audit notes a suggestion by Fire Administration leadership that this tasking may be delegated to Mid-level management. So long as Fire Administration personnel are following up on the task's completion, the Audit supports the proposal.

3) Better utilize the Stipend Program to reward those who are active, by requiring a minimal amount of points to be acquired during each 6-month period, per category. The Stipend Program awards points to those who 1) participate in incident response, 2) attend meetings/events, and 3) partake in training. Incident response and acquiring training directly affect ISO ratings. By requiring the acquisition of a minimal amount of points in each category, during each 6-month period, the Fire Administration will set a threshold of points required before a volunteer qualifies to receive a stipend payment. This would allow the Fire Administration to better reward active volunteers (in the form of larger stipends) and encourage more participation by less active volunteers. This minimal point threshold should coincide with ISO standards to insure that those who receive stipend payouts have also contributed to the county's goal to uphold and improve upon ISO standards. Specific language for this recommendation should be included in the Stipend Program SOP.

While the Audit utilized a nominal amount of volunteer activity as a starting point, after a 6-12 month period the Fire Administration should revisit the volunteer activity level to consider if more robust participation is warranted for volunteers to be considered minimally active. Finally, recommendations that are implemented by the Fire Administration should be chronicled in an SOP and distributed so that standards are established and made known to all involved.

 18 September 2023
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