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Sirens wait for medical calls, not fires

Firefighters' duties shift as city sees fewer blazes

BY JIM REDDEN

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When Bob Palmer suffered sudden cardiac arrest at his Mount Tabor area home on July 19, a well-trained medical team arrived within minutes and saved his life.

The team, which included a paramedic and four emergency medical technicians, did not come from a hospital or urgent care center. They were all firefighters based at Portland Fire & Rescue Station 19, located at Southeast 73rd Avenue and Burnside Street, just a few blocks from Palmer's house.

"If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be alive today," said Palmer, 65, a Multnomah County administrator and Portland Community College board member.

Many people still are surprised when they call 911 to report a medical emergency and firefighters show up.

"They say things like, 'I called for an ambulance and got a big red truck outside my house and a bunch of firefighters in my living room,' " said Portland Fire & Rescue spokesman Lt. Allen Oswalt.

In fact, the role of firefighters has changed dramatically over the past few decades, both in Portland and across the country. Fighting blazes now is a small and dwindling part the job of being a firefighter. The largest and fastest growing part of the job is responding to medical emergencies – and that part is increasing as the population grows and ages.

The seismic change in firefighters' jobs not only means firefighters need very different skills and training than they did decades ago. It also means fire officials – including those who run Portland's fire bureau – are forced to rethink how their stations work, the sort of equipment they need and the most efficient staffing ratios for responding to the variety of dispatch calls they now get.

Statistics compiled by the Portland fire bureau confirm the dramatic change in the traditional firefighter job.

According to the bureau, the number of fire calls dropped from 2,738 in the 1996-97 fiscal year to 2,352 in the 2005-06 fiscal year, the most recent year for which complete figures are available.

Over the same period, the number of medical calls jumped from 24,630 to 40,283 – a more than 60 percent increase.

"Firefighters are now the front line of the country's emergency medical system," said Dr. John Jui, medical director of Emergency Medical Services for Multnomah County.

At the same time, the bureau could improve the efficiency of many of its medical responses. The bureau currently dispatches a full-size fire engine and four-person crew on virtually all medical calls, even though many of them involve minor injuries or illnesses. The bureau only has two smaller vehicles specifically designed for medical responses – and those were just funded by the City Council in July.

"Six out of 10 people will ask why we send fire engines on medical calls, and that's a good question," said city Commissioner Randy Leonard, a former Portland firefighter. "The system is very good at saving lives. A lot of people are alive today because the fire bureau responded to them. But we could be more cost-effective."

Requirements change

Television news provides extensive coverage of fires, especially large ones that damage homes or businesses.



L.E. BASKOW / TRIBUNE PHOTO

Portland firefighters tend to a passenger involved in a crash on the Morrison Bridge earlier this year. Firefighters respond to more medical emergencies than blazes these days, requiring them to be trained EMTs or paramedics.

just two hours, the crew responded to a sick Portland Police Bureau employee at nearby Southeast Precinct, an elderly woman suffering heart problems in her home, and a two-car accident at Southeast 53rd Avenue and Glisan Street, where it turned out no one was hurt.

To old-timers like firefighter Ethan “Averitt” Reed – a 43-year bureau veteran – the changes have been dramatic. When he was hired in 1965, the vast majority of calls involved fires. Providing medical care almost was an afterthought.

“When I first joined the bureau, all you had to have was a basic first-aid card from the Red Cross,” Reed said.

The increasing number of medical calls has changed the basic qualifications of being a firefighter. Now all have to be Emergency Medical Technicians – both new hires and veterans like Reed.

That means taking up to two terms of courses at a community college or a specialty school on such topics as anatomy, physiology, diseases and hazardous materials. Maintaining EMT certification also requires hours of continuing education, which the bureau itself offers.

Many Portland firefighters also are trained paramedics, which requires the equivalent of an associate’s degree. Today the bureau has so many paramedics that at least one serves on all four-member fire engine crews.

One one hand, it’s easy to understand why firefighters respond to medical emergencies.

As Palmer’s experience shows, when someone’s heart stops, it must be restarted within just a few minutes to prevent permanent brain damage. Fire stations are strategically located throughout the city so that crews can reach fires within minutes. The same is true for medical emergencies.

“Emergency responses have naturally defaulted to fire agencies (across the country) because of the geographic locations of the stations,” said Portland Fire Chief John Klum.

But as Leonard said, it is harder to understand why fully staffed fire engines are dispatched on such calls.

The answer, according to Oswald, is that firefighters are still firefighters. Even when they are out on a medical call, they still must be ready to respond to a fire.

“An engine needs a four-member crew,” Oswald said. “If two of them are off on a medical emergency, the engine can’t wait around until they get back before it’s dispatched.”

By coincidence, the bureau also has determined that four people are required to provide emergency medical care in the most extreme cases, such as sudden cardiac arrest.

Four people are needed to operate defibrillators, perform CPR, insert IV lines and document the treatment so that physicians who follow up know exactly what happened.

But smaller crews in smaller vehicles could be sent on less-serious calls – provided they are based at stations that still have enough firefighters to fully staff an engine in their absence.

Two new vehicles added

That, in fact, is what is happening at Station 19. It is one of two stations to receive an ambulance-sized vehicle called a Rescue a few months ago. The City Council authorized the two Rescues for the budget year that began July 1.

The cost difference between a Rescue and a full-size engine is significant. Rescues only cost around \$150,000 each, compared with \$563,000 for a fire engine.

Staffing costs also are cheaper – between \$500,000 and \$600,000 a year for a two-person crew, compared with \$1 million to \$1.2 million a year for fully staffed engine. It also costs less to maintain Rescues.

Klum would like to deploy more Rescues around the city. He believes four more at strategic locations would improve both medical and fire coverage.

“Ideally, if money were no object, four more (Rescues) would make a real difference in our response abilities,” he said.

Although Klum knows city resources are tight – and may be getting tighter because of the faltering economy – he plans to ask for at least two more Rescues in next year’s budget.

“It’s worth considering,” Leonard said.

Building safety improves

Of course, firefighters would not have enough time to respond to medical emergencies if the number of fires wasn’t declining. Only firefighters have the training and equipment to fight blazes. And some are so large that they pull crews and engines from several stations – and sometimes from neighboring jurisdictions.

But fire numbers are trending downward, not just in Portland but across the country. According to the National Fire Protection Association, fire departments responded to approximately 1.5 million fires last year, a decrease of 5.2 percent from the year before and the lowest total since 2004.

The relatively low number of structure fires is even more remarkable. Out of 3,682 fire calls last year, the bureau responded to fewer than 800 fires in residential or commercial structures. In comparison, it responded to more than 600 motor vehicle and trailer fires and roughly the same number of grass, bark dust and tree fires.

The decrease is especially significant because population increases mean there are more residential and commercial buildings than ever before. But improvements in safety standards, construction standards and fire prevention education are achieving their purposes.

Because of such things as mandatory sprinkler systems, fire-resistant doors, upgraded electrical wiring and better-maintained properties, structural fires are less likely to start and spread.

That is why the bureau has been able to reduce the number of firefighters from about 880 in 1980 to about 740 today – even though the population of the city grew from just over 366,000 to around 575,000 in that time.

“The number of fires is holding pretty steady, despite the increase in density,” Klum said “But that doesn’t mean our workload is decreasing.”

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