

DDES Fire Marshal's Office Fire Investigation Unit

Report No. 94-5 -- Report Summary

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The study of the Fire Marshal's Fire Investigation Unit was requested by the King County Council.

The primary purpose of the King County Fire Investigation Unit is to investigate the cause and origin of fires that occur within the jurisdictional limits of unincorporated King County. There are two types of fires, accidental fires and incendiary or arson fires.

Fires determined to have resulted from accidental causes need to be accurately documented and forwarded to officials responsible for fire and building code enforcement. This information is important to any comprehensive fire prevention program. It is used to evaluate the effectiveness of current building and fire codes, the fire safety of appliances and products, and the effectiveness and need for public education programs.

For fires determined to have resulted from arson, it is necessary that the responsible person

(s) be identified, apprehended and held accountable in a court of law. This is important in reducing the number of fires by making it known that those persons who choose to commit an act of arson will be identified and held accountable for those acts.

OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

Review the current organizational structure of the current Fire Investigation Unit and determine whether it promotes an efficient and effective fire investigation function.

The study was limited in scope to a review of the current organizational placement. Alternative designs were evaluated by committees organized and/or appointed by the County executive in the past to determine the most appropriate organizational placement of the Fire Investigation Unit.

SUMMARY STATEMENT OF FINDINGS

The general conclusion of the study was that the current organizational placement of the Fire Investigation Unit should be continued. The study, however, recommended that the County negotiate a revision to the union contract to allow "bumping" in the Fire Marshal's Office of less senior employees only by more qualified senior employees. In addition, the study recommended that the Fire Marshal develop a fire information system.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding II-1. The current organizational placement of the Fire Investigation Unit in the Fire Marshal's Office is reasonable since control and accountability of the fire investigation function are centralized.

The Fire Investigation Unit is currently organized within the Fire Marshal's Office. All Fire Investigators must now complete fire investigation training at the National Fire Academy and criminal investigation training at the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Center. Upon completion of training, the Fire Investigators receive a limited law enforcement commission. Prior to this organization, fire investigation and criminal investigation were separate functions. Fire investigation was conducted by Fire Investigators reporting to the Fire Marshall and criminal investigation was conducted by a police Sergeant and one detective who reported to the division Commander of the Department of Public Safety. This bifurcated organization structure impacted the timeliness and efficiency of fire investigation.

The study recommended that the current organization, location, composition and

management of the Fire Investigation Unit should be maintained and be given the opportunity to demonstrate its capability in performing the fire investigation function. However, performance measures and standards should be developed and data collected to monitor and assess unit success in meeting its goals.

Finding II-2. The operation of the Fire Investigation Unit was hampered by a staff reduction in the Fire Marshal's Office in 1993, resulting in experienced fire investigation staff being "bumped" by senior, though unqualified, staff.

The 1993 layoffs at DDES resulted in Fire Investigators being "bumped" by more senior employees who did not have fire investigation skills or experience. Agreement with Local 519 required layoffs to be implemented according to classification and seniority. Thus, until the "new" Fire Investigators completed training and received their partial police commission the county's fire investigation capability may have been hampered.

The study recommended that the Department of Development and Environmental Services and the Office of Human Resource Management should negotiate a revision of Reduction-In-Force language in the Local 519 union contract (current contract to expire on December 31, 1994) to prevent "bumping" of employees in the same classification by senior employees who do not possess the qualifications or skills necessary for the job.

Finding II-3. A centralized fire reporting system is needed to assist fire investigators in determining fire patterns which could be useful in the prevention of fires, apprehension of arsonists, and determination of fire resource needs.

The study found that there was no centralized fire reporting system in King County. The Fire Marshal's Office tried to collect information about fires occurring in King County by asking fire districts and city fire departments to report all occurrences of fires. However, not all fire districts and city fire departments participated, data provided were not comparable, and the Fire Marshall's Office did not have the capability to process, analyze, and disseminate the information collected. The lack of a centralized fire information reporting system impacts the quality and speed of fire investigation. An example provided by professionals in the field was that it was a newspaper article that noted the pattern of arson fires in a recent arson case. This observation eventually led to the apprehension of a serial arsonist. Thus, it is important that a centralized fire information reporting system be developed.

The study recommended that the Fire Marshal and the Fire Investigation Unit with input from the Fire Investigation Oversight Committee, the Fire Chiefs Association, Fire Commissioners Association, and other interested parties (i.e., insurance industry) should develop a personal computer-based fire information system (FIRS) which would accumulate information necessary for fire prevention, fire investigation, and fire services planning countywide. Specifically:

II-3-1. Determine what information would be necessary and important in fire prevention, fire investigation, and fire services planning;

II-3-2. Develop a fire information reporting system defining how, when, and what information should be reported to the Fire Marshal by incorporated city fire departments and King County fire districts;

II-3-3. Develop procedures for the dissemination, data sharing, and/or access to fire information by incorporated city fire departments and King County fire districts and other law enforcement agencies.

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