

Fire Department Staffing Isn't Just an Operational Issue, it's a Liability Issue.

Across the country, agencies continue to operate with reduced staffing levels while call volume, complexity, and community expectations increase. When resources don't match demand, the consequences extend beyond response times—they can directly impact firefighter safety, incident outcomes, and legal exposure.

Standards like NFPA 1710 and NFPA 1720 were established for a reason. They define minimum staffing and deployment benchmarks intended to ensure effective and safe operations in both career and volunteer departments. For example, NFPA 1710 recommends an effective response force (ERF) of 15-17 firefighters assembled on scene within 8 minutes 90% of the time. They are responsible for (in the first 8 minutes) to:

Establish Command

Water Supply

Fire Attack

Search and Rescue

Ventilation

Rapid Intervention Crew (RIC or RIT)

Forcible Entry

Ladder Placement for Access and Egress

Utilities Control

Exposure Control

This is for low hazard single family structures.

For high hazard structures, (high rise buildings, large commercial and industrial facilities) an ERF force of 43 firefighters assembled within 8 minutes 90% of the time is the NFPA 1710 recommendation.

Similarly, ISO evaluations consider staffing as a critical component of a community's fire protection rating, impacting not only safety, but also insurance costs for residents and businesses.

And then there's OSHA's "2-in, 2-out" rule, a baseline safety requirement during interior structural firefighting. When staffing levels fall short, departments may be forced into

delayed entry, defensive operations, or in some cases, risky deviations from established safety protocols.

From a legal perspective, inadequate staffing can become a focal point in litigation. Whether the issue involves delayed response, excessive loss, failure to rescue, or firefighter or citizen death or injury, questions will be asked:

Were nationally recognized standards followed?

Was staffing consistent with department policy and training?

Did resource limitations contribute to the outcome?

These are not theoretical concerns, they are real issues being examined in claims and courtrooms.

Fire and EMS professionals, leaders, and decision-makers, must continue to evaluate whether department staffing models align with both operational demands and nationally recognized standards. The cost of understaffing isn't just measured in budgets, it can be measured in outcomes, safety, and liability.

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