

# Mutual Aid or Band-Aid®?

When mutual aid is no longer mutual

By Billy Goldfeder



## Dear Nozzlehead,

I am a firefighter in an urban/suburban area that used to thrive with heavy staffing. While almost all the fire departments are volunteer, years ago it would be nothing to get every rig on the road—and quickly! It would have to be a huge fire before any help was called for or really needed.

However, these days so many of the fire departments in my county are unable to “get out” and it’s a real problem. While EMS is something that we have almost accepted as being delayed, fires are also delayed, further endangering the public! While some departments do better than others, some absolutely cannot get a crew on the road for a call in any kind of a decent time.

We can’t be the only area in North America with this problem, can we? What is the solution? How can we solve this problem while remaining 100% volunteer, something we are very proud of?

— Idling on the Island

I feel insanely strong about the fact that we have to act as if we are personally having “their” fire. In other words, forget looking at it as a responding firefighter; look at it as if *your* house was on fire. OK, so now what do you want done?

That’s the template to use. If it is *your* house on fire, with your family and stuff in it, what do you want done? Now take a look at *your* fire department and see how your department would turn out and handle *your* fire.

For example: It’s 10:00 a.m. on a weekday morning, and there is a fire in a bedroom. One occupant gets out and others may still be inside. Someone dials 911. So what will happen next in your town?

Your tones will be activated, the outdoor sirens and horns will start blowing, and the text messages and pagers will beep. Now what?

- Who responds and how many?
- Are they qualified and trained interior firefighters?
- Are command officers available and responding?
- How many company officers will turn out?
- How long will it take everyone to get to the firehouse?
- Will there be enough drivers?
- Can you establish water?
- Can you stretch and operate two to three lines?
- Can you vent?
- Can you search/rescue?
- Can you do all of the above tasks simultaneously?

So many fire departments live the above scenario every day—with their heads in the sand. They ignore the fact that they absolutely *know* few members are coming anytime soon. They “hope” someone will show up. They hit the tones again. They blow the fire siren again. And they wait.

OK, so now we have waited. Maybe a chief is on the road responding, but there is still no response from the members. Now what?

The little fire has become a big fire. How’d that happen? There are lots of questions. Maybe not at your last fire, but eventually someone is going

## Dear Idle,

You have picked one of my favorite subjects: responding to and operating at fires. However, I have found, over the years, that I tend to do much better when there is fire apparatus also responding with plenty of staffing to get ALL the tasks done, and done simultaneously, as much as realistically possible. I have been at fires by myself, awaiting apparatus arrival, and have found it to be very lonely. I once even drew a face on an old soccer ball so I would have someone to give orders to. Wilson and I lost the building.

I am going to start this discussion with a focal point that I have used before: It is *not our fire*. So often as firefighters we talk about “we had this fire” or “we had that fire,” whereas, in reality, we didn’t have anything. Some poor bastard had a fire. It was *their* fire, and *they* dialed 911 and expected the fire department to arrive with some clue as far as actually knowing what to do with *their* fire. Crazy, I know.

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to ask: "What took you so long?" At that point, no one cares about the rich and proud history of your fire department. They just want to know why you collect fundraiser money or taxes and then the trucks don't come with plenty of firefighters to quickly fight the fire.

First, please don't act as if you didn't know *that* was going to happen. Look at your run records; the poor or lack of a response was totally predictable because it's happened before. It's the norm. But since you are proud to be 100% volunteer, you stick with the so-called program.

What program? What pride? The program that has no assured response? The pride that is nothing more than lettering on the rig? Pride that the trucks often cannot get out or do so with few crew members, with unqualified members, or with such delays that the fire is now worse?

Then someone decides: Let's call mutual aid!

Then that "other" department, the one that has perhaps a little better record of turning out, goes to your fire. Yep, mutual aid.

Mutual my a\$\$.

*Mutual* aid should not be a "regularly scheduled Band-Aid™" that your community counts on without being able to at least provide a decent first-alarm response. In other words, if your department is regularly calling neighboring departments because your

department is unable to get trucks out, then there is *nothing* mutual about it. As I've written here before, it's MOOCHual aid; you take from "them" because you are unable to provide basic service, and you have little to offer them in return when they need the help. This cannot be a one-way relationship.

Now, to be clear, I am not talking about a community that is able to get out, or one that staffs its apparatus and then the balance of the first alarm is made up of other communities also responding, and then you do that for them. *That* is mutual aid, automatic mutual aid. What I am talking about are communities that cannot get their own apparatus out as a part of a first-alarm assignment and have to call for help because they have failed their community—and their members.

Failed their members? Sure. Odds are, when your department is getting the trucks out, it is by a small group of active, and exhausted, members who do their best and carry the load. Who else turns out to support them?

So what do you do? Go back to my first paragraph; make your decisions based on what is best for the public. That may not be easy, but it is the *only* reason your fire department exists. We tend to forget that from time to time.

By the way, before I go any further, a quick aside about your EMS comment. You have "accepted"

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delayed EMS? Seriously? Who is "we"? Your fire department?

Forget the public for a second and consider this: If your mom or your kid is choking or having a medical emergency, a delay of 10 to 15 minutes is acceptable? Oh, that's different, right? Come on. It's time for your department to get its act together and maybe even get out of the EMS business if you can't handle it. Or, hire some career personnel. Whoa. Hire someone to do a job you do for free? Well, you're actually not doing it. Remember what you wrote me?

I totally get the pride of a well-trained, well-staffed, and well-led volunteer fire company. And to be that in 2015 may not be easy, but that's how it works. The town has changed but not the fire department. The fire department has ignored the world changing around it. People aren't turning out. Why not? Maybe your internal BS keeps them away? Maybe it's time to understand that people don't join fire companies to do fundraising anymore; they barely have time to train and make runs. Maybe it's the run volume? Figure it out.

When I meet old timers, I always love to ask them, "So, have things changed here much since you joined the FD?" and then I sit back and listen! They tell story after story of how it USED to be! *Of course* it's changed, but unfortunately in so many cases the fire department has not changed to meet the needs of those we allegedly claim to serve. In 2015, many very successful volunteer departments have evolved and changed to meet the needs of those who dial 911.

You are hardly the only area in North America having this problem. Some communities ignore it. Others do something about it as they remain focused on what they are there for: to serve on the public's terms and needs, not the members' terms and needs. Change may require in-station volunteer duty crews. It may require the hiring of career members. It may require changing the requirements of being a member. No matter what, as long as we are genuinely committed to serving the public, it will require change.

It's all about what's best for the people having the fire, and relying on neighboring fire departments to unfairly bail you out won't last forever. You know there is a problem, and as tough as it might be, remove the personal emotions and find some solutions. **FR**

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