

Stop pretending you have a fire department

While there may be fire engines and a firehouse, sometimes we are just fooling the public – and ourselves

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Photo/Marc Welde, Newport Daily News

I want to share with you a [recent fire in the City of Jeannette](#), located in western Pennsylvania.

Jeannette has a population of approximately 9,000 people. The median income for a household in Jeannette is about \$30,000. The per capita income for the city was \$15,961. About 11% of families and 15% of the population were below the poverty line, including 21% of those under age 18 and 13% of those aged 65 or over. It should be clear that they are not “rolling in dough.” It is a hard-working blue-collar community with its share of struggles.

On March 20, the Jeannette Fire Department (JFD) responded to the scene of a fire, and when it was all over, four children – Kyson, 7; Kinzleigh, 6; Keagan, 3; and Korbyn, 1 month – and their dad, 27-year-old Tyler King, were dead.

Their mother, Miranda John, and two of her children survived the fire, thanks to the efforts of the Jeannette Fire Department. The three survivors are now out of the hospital.

Let’s walk through what happened here.

Fire department response

The JFD was alerted, and the Westmoreland County dispatchers upgraded it to a working fire dispatch because they received multiple calls. The JFD response:

- Two on-duty in-quarters career firefighters (one full-time and one part-time) on an engine.
- The chief went to the firehouse and took the tower ladder.
- The alarm assignment recalled off-duty and part-time JFD members, two who went to the scene (they had PPE with them) and arrived instantly, and were able to affect some rescues with neighbors; and
- Eight other call or off-duty members arrived from outside the city.

The JFD also receives automatic aid for the working fire, which, in this case, consisted of two volunteer engines, one volunteer truck and a volunteer salvage truck, which arrived within 10-12 minutes *with* interior qualified firefighters. Interior-qualified firefighters are essential, but an unfortunate reality is that many volunteer firefighters are not interior-qualified. They do what they can to help when needed.

Will mutual aid show up?

I mention volunteers specifically, as their response is dependent upon who is around to make the run, respond to quarters, get the rigs out, etc.

While there are certainly reliable volunteer fire departments in North America, unfortunately, there are many that are *not* reliable. (And for the record, most of the reliable VFDs are ones that require a scheduled duty time to assure the public that a well-staffed piece of fire apparatus is on the way.) Regardless, the tones go off, and those in need await the response. And while there is technology these days to allow the dispatcher to immediately know who is responding, many don't use it. So the tones drop, the whistles blow and the time clock starts – as the fire spreads – to see who will respond. And that's true in their own communities as well as when they are called for mutual aid.

The guaranteed fire response

When I say *guaranteed*, I mean generally speaking, without other runs and activities, we should easily be able to predict what our response (staffing and arrival time) will be. And even with multiple runs, we must have systems in place to compensate for that.

In the City of Jeannette, the only *guaranteed* response is ONE on-duty full-time firefighter and ONE on-duty part-time firefighter. Everything else is dependent upon who is around, available, nearby, etc. And that usually works OK – until it doesn't, and the *doesn't* part is very predictable.

In other words, the JFD model works pretty well as long as there are no fires or emergencies requiring more than two firefighters. As long as a family isn't trapped in a dwelling fire, everything is probably fine, and when that fire does occur, that "model" predictably falls flat, crushing the people who need urgent help and the firefighters who are expected to make the problem go away. It's impossible for two firefighters to do the job of 17 firefighters. Absolutely impossible. And yet here we are.

Again, I want to note that in this fire, some occupants WERE saved by two off-duty members who were in the area and arrived quickly to the scene.

NFPA 1710 states ...

The initial full alarm assignment to a structure fire in a typical 2,000-square-foot, two-story, single-family dwelling without a basement and with no exposures must provide for a minimum of 16 members (17 if an aerial device is used).

- Firefighters establishing/providing water
- Firefighters on hose lines
- Firefighters searching
- Firefighters handling ventilation
- Firefighters rescuing
- Firefighters leading the scene

Do all that with two guaranteed firefighters. Nope. Not gonna happen.

Would you bet on a professional football team with fewer predictably needed players? I doubt it. But that's not the point. Here's where it matters: In football, if the minimum number of players don't show up, the game is canceled. In firefighting, we don't have that option. And what we do is NOT A GAME. It is staffing- and task-intensive if we have a chance in hell to make things better when someone has a fire.



In municipal garbage collection, if the staffing is reduced, the garbage sits. As good as they may be, sanitation workers are not going to be able to – or risk their lives to – collect more than they predictably can.

We are different. We go in willing to risk life and limb even though our risk – and the risk to civilians – is beyond human achievement. But we try anyway, no matter how many games the city hall-dwellers may have played.

So now what?

Harsh realities for the community

Despite the title of this piece, there is a Jeannette Fire Department; however, it is not what the community expects when they have their own fire.

Fighting the staffing issue isn't new for the JFD. Like many cities, there are politics and all kinds of games at play. But here's the deal: Until the JFD and any community like it can provide a response that predictably meets the needs and risks within the community, one the community can afford, they have to be upfront and forthright on who will and will not respond. The mayor, city council, city manager, fire chief and union local all have a responsibility to inform the public about what they can expect, and to share this information knowing that the public in any city or town typically just assumes that their fire department response will look like what it does in kids' school books or on TV shows – several fire trucks filled with loads of firefighters. Unfortunately, in many communities like Jeannette, it's just that, a storybook tale.

You may be wondering what you'll need to do once the public is informed about what their local fire department can and cannot realistically deliver.

Prepare the facts on what it will cost them (the taxpayers) if they want more staffing – and give them the option to decide. Present the numbers and facts so the public can then decide what they can afford as their priorities. Pay balances. Volunteer recruitment. (And if the public wants more firefighters and funding isn't an option, hand them some applications.)

Like your home or car insurance, it will cost more for better coverage. Or you can go as low as possible, which is great ... until you have a crash or worse, until someone is hurt or killed.

It's not personal, it's numbers

The reality is that fire department funding can often get mixed up with personal feelings and emotions instead of what's best for the public. Sometimes it's cops making more than the fire chief. Sometimes it's elected officials feeding pet projects. How do you prioritize beautiful parks vs. two people on a fire engine?

Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons (including sometimes of our own creation), fire and rescue services can end up on the back burner when the public isn't educated and genuinely doesn't understand who will (or will not) show up (and how quickly) when they have a fire. Having unbiased elected officials to work on behalf of the public to determine what is needed and what can be afforded is a big reason why local government exists in the first place. Seems simple enough, right?

Rest in peace, Kyson, Kinzleigh, Keagan, Korbyn and Tyler King.