



Escambia County Fire-Rescue

6575 North "W" Street
Pensacola, Florida 32505

Telephone (850) 475-5530
Fax (850) 475-5535



Kenneth W. Perkins
Fire Chief

October 25, 2006

Chief Steve McNair, President
Escambia County Volunteer Firefighters Association
6575 North "W" Street
Pensacola, Florida 32505

Chief McNair:

I am providing this final informational report to you in response to identified questionable actions by career personnel at a recent structure fire incident at 2155 Antillies Drive. I feel that each issue you identified in your letter dated October 10, 2006, has been thoroughly investigated.

Issue 1: Dispatch Errors

Questions regarding dispatch actions and procedures were forwarded to Ms. Janice Kilgore for comment. As you know, dispatch is a division of Public Safety and not the fire department. I have attached her comments.

Issue 2: On-Scene Mistakes

Lt. Anthony Smith was in charge of Engine 19 on the scene of the incident in question. After speaking with Lt. Smith at length, I determined that Engine 19 did not follow department guideline 3105.015 (Staging Levels). Upon arrival, Engine 19 should have reported on-scene to dispatch, staged approximately one block from the scene, and awaited orders from the Incident Commander.

After my interview with Lt. Smith on October 23, 2006, he was counseled regarding the importance of following guideline 3105.015, and all established departmental guidelines. He responded that he had already taken steps with his crew to ensure future compliance with this, and all guidelines in the future. Progressive disciplinary action will be taken for any future occurrences.

In addition, as stated in my response to you on October 11, 2006, I have ordered all career fire officers to review standing department guidelines that address incident management, company operations, and fireground safety with their assigned personnel. As Fire Chief, I expect all personnel, volunteer and career to follow all established departmental guidelines.

Also, I issued a memo to all personnel on October 13, 2006 that reinforced the fact that Escambia County utilizes both volunteer and career personnel to staff command teams at emergency incidents. The memo also states that all personnel, volunteer and career, are expected to operate within the incident management system at the level assigned. As Fire Chief, I expect all personnel, volunteer and career, to follow safe and legal orders of any incident management team; regardless if the team consists of volunteers, career personnel, or a combination thereof.

Battalion Chief Isakson never issued a "mayday" (firefighter trapped or down) order. Dispatch recordings and fire scene video/audio show that Ryan Maxwell, the Incident Commander, issued an order for, "All units back out, everybody back out on the front yard." In the video, it appears that all units did not hear the order. Chief Isakson, then reinforced the order, "All units, evacuate, evacuate, evacuate." While I would shy away from critiquing a fire to which I did not respond, a serious free-burning fire in a structure containing lightweight truss components and that had been burning for nearly 20 minutes, definitely warrants the Incident Commander to closely consider the overall structural stability and safety of the occupancy, and whether firefighters should continue to operate inside such a structure.

Chief Isakson briefly spoke with Assistant Chief Ryan Maxwell by Nextel on October 25, 2006 regarding their interaction at the Antillies Drive incident. Assistant Chief Maxwell told Battalion Chief Isakson that he felt their interaction at the scene had been appropriate and non-controversial. Assistant Chief Maxwell, who was the Incident Commander, reported that he did not oppose the order to evacuate the structure, and "that the entire incident had been blown totally out of proportion."

Lt. Smith advised me that the crew of Engine 19 did, in fact, speak with on-scene medical personnel assigned as rehab. All Engine 19 personnel took steps to ensure re-hydration was accomplished, and all were sufficiently rested to continue operations. Lt. Smith stated he felt his company had completely complied with the Incident Commander's order for all units to check in with rehab.

I spoke with Lt. Smith concerning the allegation that he and his crew had refused to help secure hoses used at the incident. In reviewing dispatch recordings, the Incident Commander clearly makes a request for all units to report to the front yard of the structure to secure hose, and he also makes a second request directly to Engine 19. Lt. Smith indicated that he did not hear the initial calls for

units to secure hose, and once it was realized, more than enough personnel were engaged in securing the hose on the front lawn. Again, Lt. Smith was counseled regarding the necessity for all units on emergency scenes to follow the orders of the Incident Commander and that the deliberate failure to follow orders would not be tolerated. Progressive disciplinary action will be taken for any future occurrences.

Issue 3: Violation of Written Policy

Chief Isakson has been accused of violating department guideline 1205.005 (Public Complaints). I have extensively interviewed Chief Isakson regarding what transpired between him and a group of bystanders at the scene. Chief Isakson reported to me that the owner of the involved structure had approached him earlier in the incident regarding the response of Pleasant Grove, but that he was still engaged in suppression activities and told the owner he would contact him later.

Chief Isakson was released by the Incident Commander and had made his way back to his vehicle. Chief Isakson removed his firefighting gear and proceeded to where the homeowner was standing. Chief Isakson offered his business card to the homeowner so that he could be contacted for any further assistance from the fire department. During this time, another community resident, Ms. Barbara Manning, made several inquiries to him about residents parking in the street (possibly impeding emergency vehicles), and why it took the Pleasant Grove Volunteer Fire Department so long to arrive at the scene.

Other than the homeowner, and though other residents were standing in close proximity, Chief Isakson only spoke directly with Ms. Manning. He did not address the group of residents as a whole. Chief Isakson discussed possible solutions to the parking problem, spoke briefly on the combination fire protection system in Escambia County, and explained how all fire stations are not staffed 24 hours a day. Chief Isakson adamantly denies that he initiated any conversation with any civilian in an attempt to slander or discredit volunteer personnel or their departments.

Ms. Manning had numerous questions and concerns regarding county fire protection as a whole. Chief Isakson advised her that issues concerning countywide fire protection and levels of service would be more appropriately directed to the County Fire Chief or their County Commissioner. Chief Isakson left his business card with her and advised that he could be contacted if she needed any further assistance.

I personally spoke with Ms. Manning on the evening of October 25, 2006 for approximately one hour. Ms. Manning relayed to me many of the same concerns she had spoke with Chief Isakson about the afternoon of the Antillies fire. She advised me that she initiated the conversation with Chief Isakson, and that he

was polite, informative, and responsive to her questions. When asked if Chief Isakson had made any inappropriate or negative remarks regarding volunteer fire personnel or departments, she replied "No." When asked if Chief Isakson seemed to be inciting homeowners to contact their County Commissioners in opposition to volunteer firefighters or volunteer departments, she answered, "No." However, she did state, "Chief Isakson was one of the nicest people she had ever met."

Chief Isakson simply answered questions from a concerned citizen regarding the operations of the County's fire service, and who they might contact to express further fire protection concerns. As a senior officer in the organization, and someone who was actually acting in the capacity of Fire Chief while I was out of town, I would expect him to be responsive to any questions from the public that he might have been able to answer that afternoon.

In my opinion, the department's Public Complaint Guideline is not applicable in this particular incident. Unfortunately, like so many other Escambia County residents, Ms. Manning was not aware of how the County's fire service operates and she posed many questions to Chief Isakson regarding that fact. As also stated to me, Ms. Manning never informed Chief Isakson that she wished to file a formal complaint against the fire department; therefore I feel your charge that written policy was violated is unsubstantiated.

Chief McNair, I am sure you share my feelings that senior fire department officers, volunteer and career, should have the authority to answer questions and address citizen concerns immediately when it is within their ability and knowledge to do so. However, if it is felt that the current guideline needs to be amended or more clearly defined, I will work with the volunteer leadership to do so.

Chief Isakson was also accused of violating department guideline 3105.020 (Media Relations at Emergency Incidents). After interviewing Chief Isakson the following information is known:

- The media did not respond to the incident scene
- After conclusion of the incident, the *Pensacola News Journal* contacted the dispatch center to obtain information regarding the Antillies Drive fire.
- Dispatch contacted Chief Isakson and advised the *Pensacola News Journal* was requesting information regarding the incident and asked if he would contact them.
- From his office at the West Pensacola Fire Station, Chief Isakson contacted the newspaper reporter and provided him/her with the basic information they were seeking.

After speaking with all career Battalion Chiefs, I found it to be common practice for the media to contact them to obtain information on recent incidents to which they responded, even if they had not been the Incident Commander. I can only speculate that this is done due to their 24-hour availability and the relative ease

in contacting them. In contrast, the Battalion Chiefs also indicated that Volunteer Fire Chiefs had been contacted by the media to obtain information when career personnel had actually been the Incident Commander.

Regardless of who communicates with the media after an incident, I feel the most important issue here is to insure they receive prompt and accurate information from the department. To the best of my recollection, this is the first time that the volunteer leadership has taken issue with information being released in this fashion.

The Objective Section of department guideline 3105.020 clearly states that it is intended, "To provide personnel with guidelines that define ways to provide for the safety of media officials at emergency incidents, and to define what types of information can be released by ranking officers at the emergency scene." Had any media representatives responded to the scene of the Antillies fire that afternoon, I am confident that all personnel, including Chief Isakson, would have directed them to the Incident Commander to obtain the most up-to-date and accurate information available.

Because the media did not respond to the incident scene that afternoon, I feel the department's Media Relations at Emergency Incidents Guideline is not applicable in this particular situation. Therefore, there was no violation of written policy by Chief Isakson. However, if the volunteer leadership feels the current guideline needs to be amended, or a new guideline addressing this issue needs to be implemented, I will work with the volunteer leadership to do so.

Issue 4: Conduct of Battalion Chief Isakson

Chief McNair, I would not dare say that Chief Isakson has never had a disagreement or argument with any volunteer personnel. But, I would contend that most chief officers in this County, volunteer and career, can recall instances where they were involved in some type of conflict. Truly, has Chief Isakson habitually displayed threatening and combative behavior to the point that he has undermined the morale among the County's volunteer firefighters and diminished you all in the eyes of the public as stated in your letter?

As I stated in my correspondence to you dated October 11, 2006, your statement that Chief Isakson creates a hostile work environment for volunteer firefighters is a serious charge. As you are aware, department guideline 1105.010 (Workplace Environment) provides procedural information regarding how to report and address hostile and/or violent behavior by department personnel. After reviewing my files, and conversing with Mr. Mike Weaver, the former County Deputy Fire Chief, I do not find documentation that supports your allegation that Chief Isakson exhibits a pattern of threatening, aggressive, and/or combative behavior.

However, I have reviewed the department's Workplace Environment Guideline with Chief Isakson and reinforced my position with him that hostile and aggressive behavior will not be tolerated. In addition, I have ordered all career personnel to review the same guideline and for career officers to remind their subordinates of the severe consequences for creating a hostile work environment.

But, I feel compelled to share my most personal feelings on this particular issue with you. More than any other career firefighter in the department, I believe Chief Isakson has had a positive influence and effect on our volunteer workforce. His many hours spent teaching Firefighter I courses, tactics, live burns, fire attack, vehicle extrication, and a myriad of other subjects to the County's novice and experienced volunteer firefighters has only served to help increase their effectiveness and keep them safe.

Having lost a close personal friend in the line-of-duty, Chief Isakson strives, and takes a personal interest in ensuring that all personnel, volunteer and career, go home safely to their loved ones at the conclusion of an incident. He has great passion for his job and I am most confident in his skills and abilities as a leader and incident manager. I do not support nor condone any behavior that constitutes the creation of a hostile work environment. But, if any fire officer must occasionally step on toes or bruise a few egos to ensure that our firefighters go home safely to their families, or to ensure the citizens of Escambia County are receiving the best service possible in the protection of their lives and property...then so be it.

Other Issues Identified

I feel that my investigation of the issues identified in your letter has uncovered several other serious issues that must be addressed. Some of these issues are wide-reaching in their impact. I, and my staff, welcome the opportunity to work with the volunteer leadership in addressing and resolving the following issues:

- It was 13 minutes before the first engine company arrived at the Antillies Drive fire. How can we ensure that this extended response time is not repeated?
- The video and audio recording of the incident reveals that a possible lack of strong incident management may have contributed to confusion experienced by crews working on the fireground that afternoon. How can we ensure that all Incident Commanders are properly trained and that strong incident management will be in place at all emergency incidents?
- The video and audio recording of the incident reveals that numerous volunteer chief officers responded to the incident. However, it does not appear that many actually contributed to the suppression or command activities on the fireground. How can we ensure that responding chief officers follow established guidelines that address incident management and are utilized as important members of the incident management team?

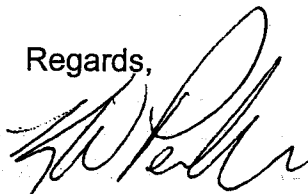
- The video recording of the incident reveals multiple volunteer personnel operating on the fireground without any personal protective equipment. How do we ensure that all personnel follow established guidelines that address mandatory use of personal protective equipment?
- In speaking with Ms. Manning, she stated to me that Chief Mary Weaver, Myrtle Grove Volunteer Fire Department, stated to her at the fire scene, "We have testosterone driven paid firemen." She also stated to me that the comment was not proper and she was somewhat shocked it was made. How will this be addressed?
- Unfortunately, Chief Randy Burleson, Innerarity Point Volunteer Fire Department, and Chief Isakson had a heated exchange in full view of the public at this incident. In fact, a Deputy had to step in and escort Chief Burleson away from Chief Isakson. I spoke with Deputy Steve Aldridge and he advised that Chief Burleson was definitely the aggressor that afternoon. In fact, he advised me that he had to threaten to put Chief Burleson in his cruiser if he did not settle down. This is a very serious issue, and I will be forwarding you additional information concerning this issue under separate cover.

Conclusion

It is most unfortunate that issues, so numerous and serious, were raised surrounding the Antillies Drive fire. As President of the Escambia County Volunteer Firefighters Association, I know you share my same desire for the department to provide the best internal and external customer service possible. In light of our limited resources and funding, we must often be creative to achieve our desired department goals. However, we absolutely have the ability and means to mold and define the accepted attitudes, behaviors, and actions of our personnel. We must recommit ourselves to work together to ensure the safety and well being of all Escambia County firefighters and the citizens we serve.

I look forward to working with you and the volunteer leadership in the future.

Regards,



Kenneth W. Perkins
Fire Chief

Cc: George Touart, County Administrator
Willie Taylor, Assistant County Administrator