



SOUTH WHATCOM

DISPATCH

Fall 2021
Volume 6, Issue 5

A Publication of South Whatcom Fire Authority

Serving the communities of Sudden Valley • Geneva • Yew Street Road • Lake Samish • Chuckanut

Seasonal Safety

- Turn off all light strings and decorations before leaving home or going to bed.
- Choose decorations that are flame resistant or flame retardant.
- More than one-third of home decoration fires are started by candles. Blow out lit candles when you leave the room or go to bed.

SOUTH WHATCOM FIRE AUTHORITY

Administrative Office:
7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Monday-Friday
2050 Lake Whatcom
Boulevard
360-676-8080
Website: swrfa.org

MISSION STATEMENT

Dedicated to
maintaining a state of
readiness to protect
our communities
through provisions of
effective and efficient
fire and emergency
life safety services.

Changes in policing laws affect fire authority

By Hilary Parker



In July, state legislators passed a slate of new laws affecting policing. Among those laws, House Bill 1310 places new constraints on how law enforcement agencies respond to certain calls, which is having unintended consequences for the fire service.

South Whatcom Fire Authority Fire Chief Rod Topel says it's early days for the new law and there are still many unknowns as to how this law will play out for the fire authority.

"We don't know the scope and the magnitude just yet," he said, "but its effects are already being felt."

The law states that law enforcement officers must assess each call for a "threat of imminent harm" and if there is none and no crime has been committed or about to be committed, law enforcement must "leave the area."

In Whatcom County when sheriff's deputies determine no threat of imminent harm, often via telephone and not on-site verification, that often leaves EMTs arriving first on scene, Topel said. EMTs, along with members of the Mobile Crisis Outreach Team (MCOT), must then further assess the situation on scene. MCOT is comprised of trained crisis responders and operated by Compass Health.

SWFA EMTs are neither trained to the same level as law enforcement officers in de-escalation techniques, nor do they have the same legal authority to restrain an individual if the situation were to devolve into a potentially violent incident. While the MCOT responders are the individuals who can remand patients into mandatory evaluation, they do not possess the ability to restrain and transport the individual, which was formerly done by law enforcement, Topel said.

The designated crisis responders (DCR) on the MCOT team are now being tasked with making contacts on their own when sheriff's deputies are unable to respond, said SWFA Assistant Chief of Operations Mitch Nolze. DCRs are used to having law enforcement making initial contact to assess the situation and having that level of protection when asked to respond. With the change in the law, they no longer have this protection.

"No one asked the crisis responders if they're comfortable with this new arrangement," Nolze said.

It appears they are not, said Undersheriff Douglas Chadwick from the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office, who said in his communications with MCOT that the team is understaffed and the role is "being perceived as a high-risk assignment."

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Working smoke alarms save lives! Test your smoke alarm batteries once a month and change the batteries at least once a year.

A Message from Fire Chief Rod Topel: Thank you, voters



Fire Chief Rod Topel

I have been a firefighter and EMT since February 1989. During that time, there have been many gratifying and humbling experiences that genuinely ground and contribute to my overall confidence that human kindness, generosity and positivity are far greater than what we often hear, see or read through our everyday media. Witnessing firsthand individuals who have suffered loss, yet still express gratitude for our presence, has been much of my adult life work experience.

This past August, another event took place that has also left me both humbled and gratified, and that event was the passing of our fire authority's tax levy. I am fully aware of the confidence our community has placed in our organization, and I am committed to see that this organization fulfills its mission to our citizens, that we live into the expectations and needs our communities require.

The resources that were committed are significant and impactful, and we will steward these to their most impactful uses: keeping stations staffed, improving response times and maintaining our facilities and equipment from degrading to a condition that has far greater future costs than what would be invested today.

We are going to work immediately to fulfill our commitments. We have hired four new full-time firefighters this November and two more full-time firefighters are budgeted to begin July 1, 2022. We also hired two positions prior to the levy passing on contingency basis pending passing of the levy. It should be noted that the long-term funding plan you, the voter, passed is responsible for all eight of these positions.

We have placed an aggressive timeline to their training, and we are confident they will be ready to make possible increasing our minimum staffed stations from a single station to two stations by May 1, 2022. We also believe that with these additional firefighters, and our continued commitment to bring in volunteers, we will be able to staff more stations than just the minimum.

We are continuing our evaluation of how best to accomplish our needed facility upgrades. Additionally, our 2022 budget has included a 14-hour per week part-time facilities maintenance position that should provide both better facility maintenance and repairs as well as an anticipated savings by no longer needing contracted services for routine maintenance and minor repairs.

Finally, we are beginning our planning on how to best retire the debt service passed in 2016. For 2022, these taxes will need to be collected, but providing that no future economic calamity strikes, I am hopeful these collected amounts of tax will be the last.

Everyone here at SWFA, the employees, our volunteers and our elected commissioners are genuinely excited for the security and future the passing of the levy has provided for our fire authority. We all look forward to a future where we are still capable of deserving our communities' respect and trust, and we understand that we must find innovative ways to continue our mission and provide value to our taxpayers. Thank you for your continued support of the South Whatcom Fire Authority, your fire department.



Administrative Staff

- Rod Topel
Fire Chief
- Mitch Nolze
Assistant Chief Operations
- Tony Mello
Division Chief of Training
- Geri Gilmore
Administrative Assistant
- Erika Barquist
Office Assistant
- Jenny Fields
Office Assistant

Fire Commissioners

- Brian Martin
Commissioner - 360-734-3134
Commissioner District 1
- James Willson
Lake Samish - 360-671-6254
Commissioner District 2
- Bob Eckdahl
New Street - 360-671-6254
Commissioner District 3
- Stefen Paige
Sudden Valley - 360-610-5285
Commissioner District 4
- Jim Peeples
Geneva - 360-676-4879
Commissioner District 5



Changes in policing laws affect fire authority *continued...*

Chadwick acknowledges the strain this puts on fire and mental health personnel if a situation escalates to a potentially dangerous encounter.

"That puts our first responders in a precarious position," he said. "We have concern for the safety of our first responders and social service providers."

Fire Chief Topel says other kinds of calls, such as 911 hang-ups and welfare checks that used to be covered by law enforcement are now sometimes assigned to the fire department due to law enforcement choosing to not respond.

"The police have taken on mental health calls over the last 30 years as part of their community care," Topel said. "They're imbedded into it now and given the civic-led discussion regarding their involvement, perhaps it's time to unwind them from those duties. However, foisting the care onto the fire service, whose members are not trained for these kinds of calls, doesn't solve the problem."

"I think it is irresponsible that a law can be passed without thinking about its implementation."

Changes result in new costs

In order to address the training gap, EMTs will be receiving education in mental health crisis care as well as scene awareness and situational awareness, plus de-escalation techniques – techniques law enforcement are already well-versed in.

"Current training hours will be supplanted by new trainings, pushing other necessary training down the road," Topel said.

Additionally, SWFA will be spending \$16,000 for ballistic vests to outfit EMTs to protect against handguns or knives. These vests have an expiration after five years, which means a new, ongoing expense for the fire authority.

"It is important for the crews to be protected and feel comfortable going out on these calls," Topel said.

These changes come with a price tag, but SWFA is left to figure out how to make room for them in the budget.

"All of this is happening without any consideration to the additional costs generated to our fire authority, which were not accounted for or planned," Topel said.

Topel worries about overstretching the fire authority's physical resources as well. Often in these incidents the fire authority is unable to make any impact as there is no medical treatment to be offered, and these calls can require significant time, displacing resources to respond to mitigatable emergencies. Concurrent alarms, when more than one call for assistance takes place at one time, are a concern. If fire crews have been called out on standby for a mental health call, they are then unable to respond to a medical emergency, fire or other call for service.

The changes also stretch SWFA's human resources. Topel says the impact to personnel takes the form of added stress along with a steep new learning curve.

Charting a course

What other changes may be on the horizon for the fire authority are unknown at this time, Topel said. The law is uncharted territory and legislators may revisit the law to better define its requirements, but in the meantime the fire authority must assume it will be operating under the current law for years to come.

Currently, SWFA is working on disseminating information to its crews about the law and its application, as well as providing basic understanding of situational awareness to personnel prior to formal training.

The fire authority is also proactively working with county dispatch to reclassify calls. In the field, a duty officer will go out on calls to help with the decision-making process and may, in some cases, go out on his or her own in uncertain circumstances.

The fire authority commission at its October public meeting passed a resolution defining which calls are within the SWFA's scope to respond to and will provide the ability to leave a call should a potentially violent incident be likely or if no medical intervention is determined necessary. Chief Topel says he realizes this will likely result in some citizens whose calls aren't handled in the manner expected, leaving them feeling frustrated or hopeless.

"We want to provide good customer service but we don't want to tie up our resources unnecessarily, or worse, have one of our personnel injured, and that's our biggest fear," he said.

Awards Banquet heads outdoors

This year's award banquet still required consideration to member safety due to the pandemic, which required foregoing the traditional inside formal dining event of past banquets. This year our accomplishments were recognized at an outdoor venue on Sept. 10, with a barbecue dinner. The evening recognizes the contributions of all the members of the organization, SWFA recognized achievements for years of service and retirements, training certification accomplishments, and department awards for Chief's Company, Rookie of the Year and Firefighter of the Year.

The Chief's Company is an award handed out by the fire chiefs to an officer, driver and two fire fighters – the make-up of an engine company. The Chiefs select individuals who demonstrated strong performance and the organizational core values when conducting their work. Those awarded the Chief's Company award were Amy Anderson, Forbes Wray, Adam Lent and James Jasperson (not pictured).



Chief's Company Award:
Amy Anderson



Chief's Company Award:
Forbes Wray



Chief's Company Award:
Adam Lent



Chief's Company Award:
James Jasperson

Josh Morrell retired this year with 25 years of service. The traditional firefighters axe he received is awarded to those retiring from the organization who have 20 or more years with the department.

Hank Skaggs received the honor of Rookie of the Year.



Jen Squire received the honor of Firefighter of the Year.



Joining the Team

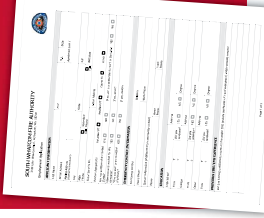
By Rod Topel, South Whatcom Fire Authority Fire Chief

SWFA recruits the best possible individuals to join our organization, and accepts applications for non-trained firefighters twice a year for our firefighter academy and EMT class.

Our recruitment periods begin in March and September for the respective following Fall and Winter firefighter training academies. To become a member, each recruit must pass a cognitive exam, a physical assessment test and an oral board interview.

Successful applicants then must go through drug screening, criminal and driving background checks, and an occupational medical exam. The entire recruiting process takes about 70-90 days to complete.

Applications for SWFA may be found on our website at SWRFA.org.



New hire Alex Tyska started July 1.





Gratifying turnout for June Pancake Feed

We were excited to once again host our Pancake Feed in June, with 456 guests stopping by between 7 a.m.-12 p.m. The pancake feed was set up to be pandemic friendly with bay doors open, tables spaced a minimum 6 feet from each other as well as providing some outdoor seating options. All guests were required to wear a mask while moving through the pancake line. It was wonderful to have our neighbors back at the fire station!



Special memo on impacts of governor's vaccine mandate

By Rod Topel

I want to assure the communities of the South Whatcom Fire Authority that the vaccination mandate as required by Gov. Jay Inslee did not affect our ability to respond. South Whatcom was highly proactive in voluntary vaccinations and had all responders and administrative staff vaccinated by the Oct. 18 deadline, except for one member. We were required to place one volunteer, a very highly regarded and appreciated member for 20 years, on administrative leave due to their choice not to be vaccinated. The EMS personnel's presence in our stations will be greatly missed.

I also want to take an opportunity to highlight our agency's members vast willingness to voluntarily take this vaccine prior to the mandate being announced. Vaccination for our agency meant better security for us to deliver our services. Prior to vaccination, our response capabilities were much more at risk. The probability of contracting the virus was much greater, and quarantine periods for our responders who were identified as being in close contact with someone with the virus could have greatly affected staffing. The vaccines are safe and effective and have allowed us to forego unnecessary sick and pandemic leave that would have been an expense to our taxpayers.

One of the main improvements we are making to our organization is hiring more personnel to quarantine staffing levels. Prior to vaccination, one of the largest fears I had as fire chief was for a member of our staff to be unknowingly exposed and thus expose many of our members, requiring enforced quarantine of multiple responders. This likely would have resulted in a devastating reduction of service and closure of stations. Our organization has improved its ability to serve because of voluntary vaccination by our members. Vaccinations worked to protect the health of our responders, and they worked to protect the integrity of our response.



Fourth of July in South Hills Neighborhood

The South Hills neighborhood is nestled in the hills near Lake Padden between Yew Street Road, Governor Road and Samish Way. SWFA was proud to have one of our engines in the neighborhood's annual Fourth of July parade.



PulsePoint is an app that can be downloaded onto your phone and will alert you when an individual needs CPR as well as the closest AED unit.

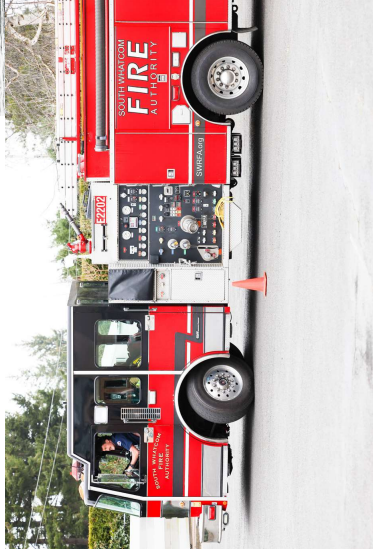
How it works:

Using your phone's GPS, it alerts those who sign up when a request for CPR is made to 911, the location of the closest AED, and the location of the patient. It is important to note that it only releases information for incidents that are located in a publicly accessible location or business. It does not provide information to private residences.

If you are trained in CPR, please consider downloading the PulsePoint app.

Visit www.pulsepoint.org/pulsepoint-aed to learn more.

Water Rescue Training classes took place at the Geneva station, then trainees took to the waters of Lake Whatcom to practice their skills.



Ever wonder how fire fighters learn to drive the engine? The SWFA crews learn at Whatcom County Fire District 4's Britton Loop fire training facility.



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- Impacts of governor's vaccine mandate

and more!



South Whatcom Fire Authority
2050 Lake Whatcom Blvd
Bellingham, WA 98229



Citizen CPR Class

Tuesday, December 7

6:30-9:30 p.m.

Geneva Station 21

Register online at swfra.org

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Trick-or-Treaters flock to Haunted Path

We were pleased to have been able to bring back the Haunted Path this Halloween at the Geneva Fire Station. About 300 community members took part in the fun, often waiting more than 30 minutes in line for their turn. Pictured is our "scare crew" prior to donning their costumes for the event.



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