

## Mesa fire chiefs overhauling department to save money

by [Jim Walsh](#) - Dec. 5, 2008 11:27 AM  
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Faced with the grim realities of a huge budget shortfall, Mesa fire chiefs and union representatives are crafting a leaner and meaner department to improve efficiency without damaging patient care.

The overhaul's goals include saving \$500,000 by restricting firetrucks and crews of four firefighters for life-threatening emergencies and sending two-man units to non-emergency calls that clog the system.

Dispatchers also could get separated for the first time to handle police and fire calls, with fire dispatchers receiving additional medical training to send the right unit to help patients.

"One of the things we're really focusing on is the difference between an emergency call and a non-emergency call," said Brian Jeffries, president of the Mesa United Firefighters Association. "We have a very antiquated alarm room."

In Mesa, firefighters respond to 70 percent of all medical calls. About 60 percent of all calls are considered non-emergencies.

Jeffries said the additional training for fire dispatchers would protect the public from too few firefighters or units getting sent to calls.

"If more investment is made there and those people are better trained, we'd save a fortune down the road," he said.

City Manager Chris Brady is reviewing a proposal for a reorganized Fire Department, and Fire Chief Harry Beck is scheduled to present it to the City Council on Thursday.

"We've come up with a plan we think is workable," said Deputy Chief Mike Dunn, a Fire Department spokesman.

Although few details are known, the plan appears to dovetail with Tucson's prioritized dispatch system, in which "Alpha" trucks staffed with two firefighters respond to non-emergency calls.

Tucson also served as the blueprint for Mesa's experiment last flu season with Transitional Response Vehicles, involving two-person crews that included a nurse practitioner or physician assistant.

Even though the TRV units may become a key component in the redesigned Fire Department, Mesa phased them out when it could not pay overtime.

"The alternative service concept is so new, it's not part of the core service," Assistant Tucson Fire Chief Dave Ridings said.

But he said all fire departments need to look to new ways to provide service as Baby Boomers age and the economic tailspin continues, since people are losing their health insurance and

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turning to firefighters for health care.

"Any fire department not looking at this right now is going to end up behind the curve," Ridings said. "I see it as the future of EMS (emergency medical services) that hasn't been conceived so far."

Ridings said fire unions have fought to keep four-man crews, and change comes hard in the tradition-laden fire service.

"It doesn't make sense to anyone. It's just madness to run these four-man units to every call," he said.

Jeffries said the union's offer of an unpaid day off per fiscal year is still a possibility, but Mayor Scott Smith is looking toward deeper systemic changes to shape the Fire Department long term.

"It's not a sustainable program for the future, it's a Band-Aid," he said.

In Tucson, the Alpha trucks do everything from telling patients to take an aspirin to giving advice on how to access social services.

The idea is take "frequent fliers," people who call the department maybe 50 times a month, out of the system, Ridings said.

The Alpha units, half-ton pickups, also take a burden off engines, allowing them to remain available for more important calls, improving response times.

"The more people get used to an alternative

service program, they will realize it's integral to the success of other units," Ridings said.

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