

The Maine Fire Protection Services Commission

***Final Report to
Examine and Develop a Statewide Strategy for the
Delivery of Fire and Emergency Medical Services Education
and Training through the
Maine Community College System***

January 2016

Introduction:

The Maine Fire Protection Services Commission (Fire Commission) was asked to host a facilitated round table discussion to examine the statewide strategy for the delivery of fire and emergency medical services (EMS) education and training. This summit took place on September 17, 2015 at the Southern Maine Community College (SMCC) Midcoast campus in Brunswick with a wide range of stakeholders, including leadership from the Community Colleges and Chairs of the EMS, Fire Science Technology (FST), and Maine Fire Service Institute (MFSI).

Purpose:

The purpose of the summit was to assure that the various community college programs are producing occupational ready students for all Maine communities, including their call company departments, per-diem responders and full time firefighter and paramedics.

Objectives:

Three objectives were proposed to facilitate the collaborative conversation:

1. Identify what is or is not effective with the current statewide strategy for delivering education and training to produce occupational ready students.
2. Recommend actions to take now and in the future to make sure these programs are producing occupational ready students.
3. Identify and make recommendations on the strengths and challenges in communication and coordination needed to make sure these programs are working collaboratively to produce occupational ready students.

Findings:

Objective #1 - Identify what is/is not effective with the current statewide strategy for delivering education and training to produce occupational ready students.

1. The following summarizes what is effective in the current strategy:
 - a. Between the MFSI, FST, and EMS programs we have the structure and expertise to meet the wide variety of training & educational needs.
 - b. MFSI's support of Pro Board end testing of Firefighter I & II students of the Center for Technical Education (CTE) students is producing a stream of recruitment opportunities for many departments.
 - c. The recent grant resources that MFSI released to bolster the regional local training sites is severely needed. Efforts to continue to support those initiatives should be continued as these sites are essential to train Maine's firefighters.

2. The following summarizes areas for improvement from the current strategy:
 - a. Silos exist in current programs limiting students from being occupational ready for departments that provide both fire and EMS services. Consider options for cross training between the current fire and EMS programs to allow firefighter certification and EMS licensing prior to graduation.
 - b. There is room for improvement in the use of technology within the community college system to reach students statewide.
 - c. Fire training in the State of Maine remains fractured. Efforts need to be made which unify management of current programs through a centralized academy model, coupled with strong regional local training sites to accommodate the size and diversity of Maine's fire service. Identifying funding opportunities to move forward with the recommendations determined in former studies is essential.

Objective #2 - Recommend actions to take now and in the future to make sure these programs are producing occupational ready students:

1. Adjust the current college program offerings to eliminate barriers and encourage cooperation and fire & EMS cross training between the various college programs.

2. Embrace, develop, and deploy distance learning and technology solutions to facilitate fire training & education statewide, similar to solutions implemented in other technical training programs.
3. Work with SMCC, EMCC and the Community College System to identify funding sources in order to make progress on a centralized training facility model augmented with solid regional sites.
4. Establish a short-term committee that includes representation from the Fire Commission, Community College leadership, and representatives from the various program advisory councils. Continue to build on the summit discussions and facilitate a process to move forward with these recommended communication and collaborative efforts.

Objective #3 - Identify and make recommendations on the strengths/challenges in communication and coordination needed to make sure these programs are working collaboratively to produce occupational ready students:

1. Recognize that the fire service in Maine is very diverse both in geography and training needs. The training and educational needs in one department can be vastly different from another department. Consider the recent examples of a major hazardous response to a rail incident, or the technical and marine rescues that other departments are faced with on a regular basis.
2. Various SMCC programs are positioned to meet those different geographical and training needs in different ways, but must also work collaboratively and effectively to address the varying needs of diverse students. While some students need basic, locally delivered MFSI foundational training to maintain occupational readiness- other students need a much more intensive program, including firefighting and other Pro Board certifications and advanced technical rescue and EMS licensure, to adequately compete for full-time and per-diem employment opportunities.
3. SMCC and EMCC have developed and refined solid emergency services programs including a very successful student live-in intern program. It is essential that we continue to support those efforts while acknowledging many of them could be replicated by other campuses throughout the community college system to build on those successful models to better meet the needs of fire departments statewide.

Summary & Recommendations:

The current model for providing training and education to Maine's firefighters provides a solid foundation to build on. There is no one-size fits all solution to these issues. Maine is a large state with a wide diversity of needs among the various stakeholders. Challenges throughout Maine's fire departments require more than one educational and training delivery model in order to meet these diverse needs.

It is our belief that MFSI provides a solid platform to deliver basic fire training to rural and volunteer departments statewide and is an excellent centralized location for certification and record keeping. It is critical that MFSI remains both the primary source for, and/or directly supports locally delivered regional field training programs. Programs focusing on basic skills should be held in conveniently scheduled offerings that meet the needs of all departments statewide. It is also imperative that MFSI remain the certification authority for not only their own programs, but also in support of the CTE and other programs to assure consistency since those programs benefit the fire service's recruitment and retention efforts.

The definition of an "occupational ready" student, as identified and discussed as part of this process, may vary significantly based on the department and their mission. The needs in one department and the best way to provide emergency services vary greatly from others based on a variety of factors. For example, a small rural department that does not provide EMS services may only need to focus on firefighting skills. Conversely since the majority of EMS services in the state are fire-based and a large volume of their calls for service are EMS related, it follows that the definition of occupational ready for those departments should include both firefighter certification and EMS licensure.

Currently the community colleges have developed professional curriculum for degree based education in both EMS and Fire Science. It is imperative that all of these training programs are flexible and able to accept students who have a variety of educational needs to fulfill each of their department's needs. In particular the SMCC FST and EMS departments have strong stand alone programs that are individually producing graduates that may not have the professional credentials to be hired by some departments. We believe a reorganization of the course of studies, and the elimination of the silos that currently exist in those programs to allow a public safety degree path that includes both firefighting certification and EMS licensure, is crucial.

Finally, there remains a need to move forward on the previous studies regarding a centralized training facility supported by local satellite facilities across the state. This has been identified as a long-term need and is one of the reasons the Fire Commission was originally formed. The Community College System should work in concert with the Fire Commission and our legislative delegations, both nationally and locally, to identify the funding necessary to modernize our firefighter training and education programs for the 21st century.