

FOCUS ON FALMOUTH FIRE-EMS



The results of a Falmouth Fire-EMS staffing study will be submitted to the Falmouth Town Council in early 2020. In advance of that report, this special series will explore Falmouth Fire-EMS by looking at its history, the role of volunteerism in the provision of fire services, and the evolving function of the department and the service it provides to our community today.

A History of Service

Falmouth's first fire company, the Foreside Fire Company, responded to its first fire call in 1913. Soon, three other all-volunteer fire companies formed throughout the community: the Central Fire Company in 1922 at Falmouth Corners, the Pleasant Hill Fire Company in 1923, and the West Falmouth Fire Company in 1925. The founding of each station coincided with the extension of water mains from Portland into Falmouth. These volunteer-run companies worked independently of each other and funding came from donations and payouts from fire insurance companies. However, by the 1920s, the Town of Falmouth increasingly allocated financial support to these entities through monetary appropriations and the purchase of fire apparatus.

The first motorized fire apparatus, purchased in 1922 for \$602, was a Model T Ford Chemical Truck. In 1951, Falmouth's four fire companies were united under the Town of Falmouth Fire Department. The addition of a dispatch center at Town Hall around 1957, further professionalized and vastly improved fire service in Falmouth.

During the 1950s, Falmouth also began responding to

medical emergencies. A Portland funeral home provided ambulance service to Falmouth until 1958, when the purchase of Falmouth's first police car, a station wagon, provided the ability to transport patients to the hospital. In 1970, the Town purchased a van for the sole purpose of transporting patients. The Falmouth Emergency Medical Team formed in 1975 under the direction of the Police Department. EMS later served as an independent department until 1997, when it was placed in the Fire Department.

Generations of Service

Falmouth Fire-EMS members have provided continuous service to the Town of Falmouth for over 100 years, primarily due to efforts of unpaid volunteers. The first American fire companies, including those formed in Falmouth, were comprised of volunteers. The earliest rolls of Falmouth's fire department include names from many of the town's founding families. Fire service was often considered a civic duty and fire companies also acted as a social club for members. For many Falmouth residents, joining the fire department became a life-long commitment. Ted Vail, who wrote a history of the department, joined the West Falmouth Fire Station at age sixteen and served for fifty-five years. Bill Lunt also

joined as soon as the Central Company would let him and served fifty years. Bill Taplin was another member who served fifty years. Many volunteer members were employees of the Public Works department and could leave their posts to answer fire calls during the day. Other local





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businesses simply closed when a fire call came in so their owners and/or employees—also volunteer firefighters—could answer the call.

The social aspect of volunteering was part of its allure. Social activities, galas, and bi-monthly supper meetings helped to build comradery among members, all of whom lived in Falmouth. Generations of families volunteered. Fathers often served with sons. Ladies Auxiliary units supported their efforts and hosted fundraisers, such as card parties, dances, and suppers, well into the 1990s. Even today, there are several families who serve together, including four father-daughter pairs.

In 1987, rapid growth and increased calls led Falmouth to hire its first full-time paid fire chief. Although the Town appropriated stipends to each fire station, that funding was not used to pay individuals. In Vail's history of the department, written in 2000, the lack of volunteers was noted as a growing problem for rural and suburban fire departments, including Falmouth. In 1970 there were more than 120 active volunteer firefighters in Falmouth. In 2019, the number of active members has dwindled to fifty. This steady drop in volunteerism, coupled with an

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increase in call volume, led Falmouth to begin paying part-time rates to on-call firefighters and EMS providers in the late 1990s. Yet paying for call service has not solved the shortage of providers.

“We have no problem recruiting people,” said Fire Chief Howard Rice. “We get really good, dedicated people. Many are paramedic and EMT students who work long hours for us for a few years.” However, noted Rice, they go on to find full-time employment elsewhere. In the past fifteen years, over twenty-five call firefighters have obtained full-time firefighting jobs in other communities. Also, as many as ten former EMS providers from Falmouth Fire-EMS have become medical doctors or physician assistants. Recently, members have left the department after moving out-of-state to places including Michigan, Colorado,



Indiana, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York. Additionally, the average age of volunteers keeps getting older. Many high schoolers who serve the department do not return to Falmouth upon graduating from college. Fewer younger members leads to gaps in institutional knowledge and experience as older members age out of service. In June 2013, there were twenty members of Falmouth Fire-EMS with over twenty years of service. Thirteen have since retired. As a result, the Fire Department now recruits on-call firefighters and EMS professionals from other communities. Today over thirty of Falmouth's members live outside of Falmouth.

The reasons for the decline in those able to serve are many, but include the extensive requirements, time commitments, and expectations placed upon members as a major contributing factor. State law requires technical training and this training, along with weekly drills, requires a greater time commitment than just responding to calls. Best practices in medicine have also shifted, placing a greater responsibility on first responders. Protocol changes, such as administering pain medications or diagnosing heart problems with cardiac monitors on site or performing CPR prior to transport rather than during, result in better patient outcomes. For Falmouth, as call frequencies continue to increase, these changes require highly trained staff and longer call times for an already stretched department.



Expanding Service

When people think of Falmouth Fire-EMS, they often think of fire trucks responding to fire calls in their neighborhood or the ambulances they see driving by to an emergency. Medical calls do, in fact, make up about 70% of all Falmouth's emergency calls. The other 30% of calls, however, vary greatly. In past decades, most non-medical calls were for building fires or car crashes. Today, calls are more unique. Here is a review of some of the more interesting calls Falmouth Fire-EMS responded to in 2019.

- Rescued a hiker with a broken ankle on the trail system off Winn Road. The department's off-road UTV was not able to make it to the injured hiker so crews used a stokes basket (a type of stretcher) with a large wheel attached to help move the patient out of the woods to a waiting ambulance.
- Called to an injured boater off the coast of the Goslings Islands. Falmouth Fire-EMS paramedics treated the seriously injured patient and when it was not possible for Life Flight to come to the scene, our crews assisted



transporting him by boat to a waiting ambulance on the mainland in Freeport.

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- Came upon an injured youth biker over one-half mile into the woods. An off-duty Falmouth paramedic, riding his mountain bike on the trails off Blackstrap Road, found the biker. Falmouth Fire-EMS used its off-road UTV to make its way to the injured biker, treat him, and then safely remove him from the woods just as darkness set in.
- Rescued a cat off the roof of a large home in West Falmouth. The home was

under renovation and an inside cat escaped through a window left opened for ventilation. Once on the roof, the cat could not get down. The homeowner tried unsuccessfully to climb onto the roof to retrieve the cat. Falmouth Fire-EMS used the 95-foot tower truck to remove the cat from the roof safely without injury.

- Located a woman lost in the woods off Oxford Woods Road. Crews used the off-road UTV to get part-way to the woman and her dog, but then hiked for over a mile to reach her just as darkness fell. The commanding officer used the department's response software to track the members in the woods using the GPS feature and the coordinates off the woman's cell phone. Once the woman was found, crews walked her out to a waiting ride on Tanya Lane off Blackstrap Road using their flashlights to lead their way.
- Rescued a dog from a storm drain approximately 6-feet below ground. To do so the department used specialized confined space rescue tools. In 2015, the Wastewater Department requested Fire-EMS members receive training for confined space rescues rather than retain outside on-call contractors for emergencies. The rescuer was lowered into the drain to retrieve the dog unharmed.

When not responding to calls, staff at Falmouth Fire-EMS is busy with community outreach efforts. Falmouth Fire-EMS staff visits schools, daycare centers, senior housing, and other places to promote fire and injury prevention, to teach the use of fire extinguishers to staff, and to perform emergency evacuation drills. Our



crews also visit businesses and private homes to test the property's Knox Box lock systems. These systems allow first responders immediate access to a secure building which saves time, reduces injuries to responders, and minimizes property damage. Additionally, Falmouth Fire-EMS will test alarms for businesses and private homes. While on site, staff also conducts a pre-plan of the property in case of a potential fire or other type of emergency on site.

Falmouth Fire-EMS also offers training to the community. Several staff members are certified American Heart Association Instructors. CPR and First Aid classes are offered at the Fire Station and at various off-site locations, including daycare centers, Falmouth High School, and private businesses.

Challenges of Service

Though still in use today, the title of "volunteer firefighter" is a misnomer. For many years, the Town of Falmouth has been paying individuals for answering fire and emergency medical service (EMS) calls. In the 1980s the payment was \$5 per call. That payment increased from \$7 to \$10, until it was changed in the early 2000s to an hourly rate based on longevity and certifications.

Yet payment for call services is not always an incentive for recruiting and retaining new members. Fire departments across Maine note the societal changes contributing to a

decline in those interested in call or per diem firefighting. The growth in two-income households, with both partners working outside the home, increased family commitments, and children's extra-curricular activities often deter individuals from joining their local fire department. Additionally, individuals are also more likely to work outside their hometown. This lack of proximity means they cannot respond to calls during their work hours. Even for those who work locally, leaving their workplace to answer multiple calls each day is simply not feasible. Maine's aging population is also a factor in recruitment and retention. Maine is the oldest state in the country with a median age of 44.6. Aside from the disinterest from many younger citizens, there are not as many of them as the current baby boomer generation, which makes up around 28% of Maine's population.

In the early 2000s, with a shrinking body of service members, Falmouth Fire-EMS began looking for ways to improve efficiencies. By 2009, Station 3 (Pleasant Hill) was closed and the monies saved helped pay for an overnight part-time per diem firefighter/paramedic to staff Central Station. This was the first paid overnight EMS provider in Falmouth. The town also reduced its fleet by one fire engine, saving approximately \$500,000 in capital costs. In 2012 the department eliminated its heavy rescue truck, saving the town another \$500,000 in future replacement costs.

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Developments in new fire apparatus brought additional savings. Newer fire apparatus is larger with additional compartment space. While the new trucks carry the same number of firefighters (6), they can carry much more equipment. As a result, the department was able to reduce its fleet by two large fire apparatus. The loss of twelve seats in these two vehicles corresponded with the department's decline in responding firefighters.

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In 2014, the Falmouth Town Council passed an 8.5% budget increase for public safety which included salaries for part-time emergency medical technicians (EMTs), a first for the department. This budget increase ensured round-the-clock staffing by two EMS providers (one a certified paramedic) at Central Station. In another creative attempt to find more members to respond to calls, the department started a live-in college program which allowed students to live at the station in return for volunteer coverage time. Falmouth also started accepting EMS members who live outside of Falmouth. These members are required to provide a minimum of twenty-four hours of coverage at Central Station each month. Currently, over thirty Fire-EMS members reside outside of Falmouth.

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Today in Falmouth, there are three tiers of Fire-EMS service personnel. Falmouth Fire-EMS employs six full-time staff: Fire Chief (Firefighter/Emergency Medical Technician-Basic), Assistant Chief (Firefighter/Emergency Medical Technician-Basic), EMS & Prevention Captain (Firefighter/Paramedic), EMA Captain (Firefighter/Advanced Emergency Medical Technician), Firefighter/EMT/Driver (Firefighter/Emergency Medical Technician-Basic), and an Office Administrator. Many residents are surprised to learn that no full-time firefighters sleep at the fire stations. Instead, the Town employs thirty part-time per diem firefighter/paramedics and firefighter/EMTs. These individuals, working in shifts comprised of one firefighter/paramedic and one firefighter/EMT, staff an ambulance at Central Fire Station seven days a week, twenty-four hours per day. This ambulance responds to all EMS and fire calls in town with an average response time of seven minutes. A second EMS call at the same time, or a call requiring a fire engine, is handled by a combination of call members and available full-time members (if during day) who respond from their homes or place of work. The average response time for a fire engine to arrive on scene ranges from ten to fourteen minutes,

depending on the location of the call. The department provides on-call emergency services from Falmouth’s three stations. The department currently has four live-in students at the Winn Road station during the school year. These students help supplement the call staff for emergency calls.

Medical calls make up about 70% of all Falmouth's emergency calls. Maine’s aging population has greatly expanded the need for health services, and changes in EMS protocols have increased the workload of Falmouth’s EMS providers. In addition to emergency response, crews provide stand-by coverage at numerous events, offer CPR and First Aid training, and provide emergency operations plans to area businesses and organizations.

Using a mixture of full-time, part-time, on-call, and per diem staffing, Falmouth Fire-EMS responds to over 2000 calls per year. This level of service is not sustainable going forward. As call volume continues to increase and as member levels decline, Falmouth Fire-EMS is at risk of not having enough crews to cover the emergency calls in town. In 2019, the Falmouth Town Council approved a staffing study to explore current and future staffing needs. At the January 27, 2020 Town Council meeting, Chief Howard Rice gave a presentation on Falmouth Fire-EMS Department’s current and past staffing structure and the pending staffing study. The staffing study will be completed in early 2020 at which time it will be presented to the Town Council.

