

NAPA COUNTY GRAND JURY

2022-2023



Photo - Nick Otto, Napa Valley Register

FINAL REPORT

April 26, 2023

NAPA COUNTY VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS

Lack Of Volunteers And Their Utilization

Are Burning Issues

Napa County Volunteer Firefighters Lack of Volunteers and their Utilization are Burning Issues

SUMMARY

Fire protective services in Napa County's unincorporated rural areas are the responsibility of the Napa County Fire Department (NCFD). Napa County contracts with Cal Fire to provide these services. Cal Fire is a state-operated fire protective agency. NCFD has four full-time, paid fire stations and nine volunteer fire stations. The NCFD is a combined and cooperative fire protection service in Napa County between Cal Fire, the NCFD, and the volunteers.

The volunteers are a support component of the NCFD and come under the direction of the NCFD. In 2001 there were more than 200 volunteer firefighters in Napa County. Today that number has shrunk to less than 100 volunteers that are able to respond to incidents according to the Napa County Fire Department, 2022 Volunteer Summary Report.

The 2022-2023 Napa County Grand Jury (Jury) undertook a comprehensive investigation of the volunteer firefighter program to determine the reasons for the loss of recruits over the last 20 years. The Jury found that a significant reason for the decline in volunteer recruits is due to the changing demographics of the population living in rural areas.

According to the volunteer fire chiefs, Napa's rural communities no longer retain the younger generation. Furthermore, some of the new homeowners in rural areas use their property as a second home and only occupy it for part of the year.

The Jury found several other factors impacting the loss of volunteers. These factors include the pay the volunteers receive and the amount of training a volunteer must have to respond to emergency calls. Another factor was morale problems caused by communication issues between the volunteers, the Napa County Fire Department paid staff, and the Napa County Board of Supervisors (BOS).

The Jury conducted more than 20 interviews with Cal Fire personnel, NCFD staff, and the volunteers. The Jury found that the loss of recruits has had an adverse effect on the ability of the volunteers to respond to emergencies at the majority of the volunteer stations.

The Jury examined prior Grand Jury reports dating back to 2001-2002 and found that many of the recommendations for improvement of the volunteer program were considered unwarranted and unnecessary. This Jury's main focus was on the operations of the volunteer program.

The Jury's findings reflect more than just the loss of recruits. The findings also reflect concerns about volunteer compensation, communication between the NCFD and the volunteers and morale issues among the volunteers. The Jury's recommendations are directed at the NCFD and the BOS to re-evaluate the volunteer program in Napa County.

One of the recommendations from this investigation focuses on the Soda Canyon Volunteer Fire Station on Soda Canyon Road. The Jury found this volunteer fire station to be underutilized based on low membership and poor response rates. The Jury recommends that the BOS relocate

the resources and consolidate the volunteer membership of this station with the existing Napa County Fire Department's paid Station #25 on Monticello Road.

The Jury also recommends a change in how NCFD utilizes volunteers. This recommendation calls for the BOS and the NCFD to examine if the volunteer firefighters should move away from its operational model as backup support for the NCFD for all emergencies, of which 80% are for medical assistance. Their new operational model would classify them as an all-volunteer reserve firefighter unit whose primary mission would be to respond in a surge capacity to suppress large wildland fires that extend over a period of time.

ACRONYMS

BOS – Napa County Board of Supervisor

Cal Fire – California Department of Forestry

FLSA – Fair Labor Standards Act

FSAC – Fire Services Advisory Committee`

IAR - IAmResponding

LRA – Local Responsibility Area

NCDFC – Napa County Deputy Fire Chief

NCFC – Napa County Fire Chief

NCFD – Napa County Fire Department

NCFF – Napa Community Firewise Foundation

PPC – Paid Per Call

RPE – Respiratory Protective Equipment

SRA – State Responsibility Areas

VMQ – Volunteer Medical Questionnaire

BACKGROUND

Napa County Wildfires - Past and Present and Future

Napa County has a long history of wildfires dating back to the Great Fire in 1870, when two fires in St. Helena and one fire in Calistoga merged and swept over the Mayacamas Mountains and into Sonoma County.¹

Over time, numerous other wildfires have burned thousands of acres of wildland and destroyed thousands of structures in Napa County. The most notable of these fires include: the 1964 Hanly

¹ Eberling, Barry. 2022, June 5. *Napa County has a History of Fire*, *The Napa Valley Register*.

Fire that burned from Calistoga to Santa Rosa; the 1981 Atlas Peak Fire that burned 34,000 acres and destroyed 56 homes east of the City of Napa; and the more recent 2020 Glass Fire that destroyed 1022 structures, including homes, wineries, and resorts.

These destructive wildfires are a harsh reminder to all of the residents in Napa County that it's critical for the County to have a strong and responsive fire protection service in place well before the next major fire hits Napa County. This fire protection service includes both fire mitigation programs and fire suppression procedures.

The Napa County Fire Department (NCFD), which includes the volunteer firefighters, provides the fire protection service for Napa County. The Jury found that the NCFD is a well organized and professional fire protection service, and is well prepared for the next major wildland fire in Napa County.

Volunteer firefighters have a long and dedicated history of providing wildland fire protection and emergency services in Napa County.² Their local knowledge and experience are a valuable asset in fire protection in rural areas. Volunteer firefighters traditionally draw recruits from the community they serve.

The available pool of people to serve as volunteer firefighters in past years was stable, as the rural neighborhoods rallied around a need to serve their community. Volunteers were then, and are now, considered a valuable component of the Napa County Fire Department (NCFD) in a supporting role of fire protection. But according to the volunteer fire chiefs who live in these communities, the available pool of residents today who are interested in becoming volunteer firefighters is on the decline.

In recent years the volunteer firefighter program in Napa County has seen a significant decrease in the number of recruits. The decrease in recruits is partly due to the changing demographics in rural areas of Napa County.³ Communities no longer have the available pool of people who are connected to the neighborhoods that encouraged residents to become a volunteer firefighter.

The 2007-2008 Napa County Grand Jury's Final Report stated that there were more than 200 volunteer firefighters in Napa County in 2002.⁴ Today, that number has shrunk to approximately 165, but only 98 who demonstrate any active participation.⁵ An active volunteer firefighter is defined as someone who is fully certified with their Respiratory Protective Equipment (RPE) fit testing and up to date with their annual Volunteer Medical Questionnaire (VMQ).

The responsibility for fire protection in Napa County prior to the formation of the NCFD in 1973 largely fell in the hands of 16 independent volunteer firefighter departments. After the NCFD formed, the 16 volunteer firefighter companies consolidated into the nine volunteer companies that exist today.⁶

Napa County entered into a contract for fire service with Cal Fire in 1973. Cal Fire is a state-operated fire protective service. Under this contract, the fire service provider in Napa

² Napa County Historical Society. The History of the Napa County Fire Department, circa 1918.

³ Napa County Fire Department, Volunteer Summary. December 2022.

⁴ 2007-2008 Napa County Grand Jury Final Report, Napa County Fire Department, June 2008.

⁵ Napa County Fire Department, Volunteer Summary. December 2022.

⁶ Napa County Historical Society. The History of the Napa County Fire Department.

County is designated as the NCFD. Cal Fire provides the administrative support and coordination for four full-time paid fire stations in Napa County. Cal Fire also provides administrative support and coordination to all of the nine volunteer firefighters companies.

The 2022-2023 Jury opened an investigation to examine some of the factors that may have contributed to a loss of volunteers over the past 20 years. The Jury wishes to determine the overall impact on the current volunteer program due to the loss of recruits.

The Jury further examined if an updated volunteer firefighter operational model is needed. The updated model would focus less on the day-to-day emergency calls and more on serving as a highly-trained reserve firefighting force. Its primary mission would be working in support of the NCFD in a surge capacity when faced with wildland fires that may take weeks to contain.

METHODOLOGY

Tours Conducted

- Emergency Command Center in St. Helena
- Cal Fire headquarters in St. Helena
- All nine Volunteer Firefighter Company stations

Interviews Conducted

- Cal Fire administrative staff
- Cal Fire Training staff
- Napa County Fire Department staff
- Napa County Firefighters - paid staff
- Volunteer Firefighters - rank and file
- Napa County Volunteer Fire Chiefs
- Fire Services Advisory Committee members
- Cal Fire Staff Services - Sonoma Lake Napa Unit
- Some Napa County Board of Supervisors
- Napa County Auditor-Controller staff

Documents Reviewed

- Cal Fire/NCFD 2022 Fiscal year budget
- Napa County Volunteer Firefighters 2022 Fiscal year budget
- Grand Jury Reports - 2001-2002; 2007-2008; 2011-2012
- Napa County Fire Department Policy Manual
- Napa County Fire Department Volunteer Summary Report, 2022

- Napa County Fire Stations Directory
- Cal Fire Assistance by Hire Policy Manual
- Volunteer Station's Incident reports
- Napa County Historical Society, Napa County Fire Department Records

Websites Reviewed

- Napa County Superior Court - www.napacourts.ca.gov
- Napa County Administrative Office - www.countyofnapa.org
- Napa County Firewise Foundation - www.napafirewise.org
- Department of Forestry (Cal Fire) Administrative Guide - www.fire.ca.gov
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration - www.osha.gov

Meetings Attended

- Fire Services Advisory Committee, February 8, 2023

DISCUSSION

Fire Protective Services in Napa County

The County of Napa does not have its own fire department. Rather, the County contracts its fire protective services with Cal Fire, a state-operated fire service agency. Under the conditions of the contract with Cal Fire, the fire service provider in Napa County is designated as the Napa County

Fire Department. Cal Fire is part of the California Division of Forestry. Cal Fire operates in 36 of the 58 counties in California.

The NCFD is a combined and cooperative fire department with four fully-staffed, year round paid fire stations, three seasonal staffed paid fire stations, and nine unstaffed volunteer firefighter companies. The Napa County Fire Chief is a Cal Fire employee, who delegates oversight of the full-time paid fire stations and all of the volunteer firefighter stations to the Napa County Deputy Fire Chief. A map of the paid fire stations and the volunteer fire stations in Napa County is located in the Appendix.

Volunteer Firefighter Companies

The nine volunteer firefighter companies in Napa County are part of the NCFD, but they operate independently from each other. Each volunteer firefighter company is administered by an independent fire chief who is selected by the members assigned to that particular volunteer firefighter company.

The criteria for becoming a volunteer fire chief does not always follow industry standards. The industry standards are state-mandated and regulated by OSHA guidelines. The standards include certification in specialized training programs and demonstrated leadership experience in

command roles.⁷ The Jury found that the inconsistency in compliance with the industry standards has led to conflicts between some of the volunteer fire chiefs and the NCFD administrative staff.

The volunteer firefighter companies are governed by their own bylaws. They also conduct their own recruitment programs and multi-station training sessions in cooperation with a training officer from Cal Fire. The volunteer fire chiefs are responsible for keeping the training records of all volunteers assigned to their volunteer fire station, including up-to-date safety certifications and medical clearance.⁸

A delay in the processing of training records may result in the NCFD placing the volunteer on a non-compliance status. Volunteers who are classified as being non-compliant are considered part of the support staff and not permitted to respond to emergency calls.

Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment

The loss of new recruits from the volunteer program is a common problem among all of the volunteer firefighter companies. Every volunteer fire chief interviewed by the Jury expressed their concerns about the ability to maintain a strong, active volunteer firefighter program in the future.

The volunteer chiefs all agreed that more effective ways should be developed to attract new recruits. This problem is not restricted to Napa County alone, as volunteer and paid fire departments around the country are struggling to recruit and retain new firefighters.⁹ Napa County does not have a centralized, dedicated web page for attracting new volunteer firefighters that fits the needs of the different volunteer stations.

Applications from new recruits are submitted to the County for initial screening. The County will disperse the applications to the individual volunteer stations. Overall, each volunteer firefighter company is responsible for attracting the majority of their volunteers.

A variety of recruitment strategies are currently in place among all of the volunteer firefighter companies. Word of mouth through family, friends or local community members is the most common method to attract volunteers. Other recruitment methods include advertising for volunteer positions through social media or through special community events like an open house at the fire station.

Many of the volunteers the Jury interviewed expressed a need for the County to expand the Junior Firefighter Explorer program to attract new recruits. The Junior Firefighter Explorer program is a branch of the Boy Scouts of America made up of boys and girls who are interested in the fire service. They work in partnership with the Napa City Firefighters Association. The program's goal is to encourage young boys and girls to choose a path to becoming a volunteer firefighter or a full-time, paid firefighter.

⁷ Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Training Requirements in OSHA Standards, 2022.

⁸ Napa County Fire Department, Policy Manual. Volunteer Stipend program, 2022.

⁹ Santana, Rebecca. 2023, January 15. Fires are getting deadlier as firefighter recruitment wanes. Napa Valley Register.

The 2022-2023 Napa County Fire Service budget authorizes a total of 250 volunteers, but the current roster of all Napa County volunteers lists approximately 165 members. Furthermore, only 98 volunteers of the current membership are considered active volunteers.¹⁰

The ability of the volunteer fire stations to maintain a reasonable number of volunteers to respond to calls depends partly on the availability of the volunteers at the time of the incident. It also depends on the volunteer's compliance status with State-mandated health and safety regulations.

If a volunteer is not up to date with their yearly Volunteer Medical Questionnaire (VMQ) or has not completed their Respiratory Protective Equipment (RPE) training, they are considered out of compliance. Once the volunteer has cleared his compliance status, they are able to participate in hands-on training sessions and respond to emergency calls.

The Jury found that the percentage of volunteers out of compliance varied from station to station at any given time. The volunteer fire chiefs told the Jury they monitor the compliance status of their volunteers on a regular basis, but admitted that their station's ability to respond to all emergency calls is compromised when too many volunteers are out of compliance.

Response Rate Among Active Volunteers for Emergencies

The response rate of the active 98 volunteers to all emergencies varies from station to station. The Jury discovered by examining the volunteer station's incident reports that some of the volunteer stations report little response to emergencies, while other stations report a higher response rate.

In areas such as Angwin and Deer Park, the overall volunteer response rate is high due to a higher population density of staff and students from the college located in Angwin. The volunteer response rate in the Carneros region is generally high due to an effective community outreach program.

One volunteer firefighter told the Jury that a possible solution to delayed response times from volunteers, especially on high fire risk days (Red Flag Days), is to provide temporary housing for the volunteers at one of the paid stations or utilize some of the empty dormitory rooms at the Pacific College in Angwin. Such housing would allow a larger pool of firefighters to respond quicker.

Soda Canyon Volunteer Fire Station 13

The volunteer fire station in the Soda Canyon area of Napa County has a low response rate. According to data from the NCFD, in 2020, the Soda Canyon volunteer fire company received 818 calls, but only responded to 109 of those calls.¹¹

The Jury discovered that the Soda Canyon Volunteer Fire Station has two pieces of fire apparatus equipment to respond to emergency calls. They have a Type 3 fire engine for use in rural areas for structure fires. They also have a combination rescue/water tender piece of fire apparatus for medical calls and extra water supply.

The Type 3 fire engine is located at the Napa County Fire Department's paid Station 25 on Monticello Road, approximately five miles from the volunteer station. The Jury learned that the

¹⁰ Napa County Fire Department, Volunteer Summary Report, December, 2022.

¹¹ Napa County Fire Department, Voluntary Summary Report, December, 2022.

Type 3 engine could not be housed at the volunteer station because it is too large for the older volunteer building. The rescue/water tender piece of equipment, however, is located at the Soda Canyon Volunteer Fire Station.

Under this configuration, volunteers have to go to one of two different fire stations when responding to an emergency. The Jury recommends that the Soda Canyon Volunteer Fire Station retain its volunteer membership but keep both pieces of its fire apparatus equipment, along with the volunteer's personal protective equipment (PPE), at the paid Station 25. With this relocation of equipment, the volunteers could also train and certify with the paid staff.

Recent Modernization of Volunteer Availability Status

Unlike the full-time, paid firefighters in the NCFD, the volunteer firefighter companies are not staffed 24/7. Therefore, they are subject to limitations when responding to an emergency call. Some of the volunteers have full-time jobs outside of Napa County.

The NCFD reported that the overall response rate of the active volunteers in all of the nine volunteer firefighter companies is approximately 50% when responding to routine emergency calls. When asked by the Jury, the volunteer fire chiefs could not fully explain the low response rate. However, they listed some possible reasons other than availability. These reasons included the volunteer's availability and location at the time of the incident and the training compliance status of the volunteers.

The volunteer fire chiefs said that a better system throughout all of the volunteer firefighter companies is needed to track the availability of resources to all emergency calls. The resources include personnel and equipment. The current system for tracking the availability of volunteers is not centralized. Each volunteer fire station tracks its own resources, which limits the use of agreements between stations to cover for each other.

The Carneros Volunteer Firefighter Company Fire Chief and the NCFD have worked cooperatively to secure a "real-time" volunteer availability system that is expected to be fully operational prior to the 2023 wildland fire season. The new system will provide detailed "station level" information including who is available to respond, who is responding, the incident information, and what apparatus is in or out of service.

The new system is called IAmResponding (IAR) and is used in many other California volunteer firefighter programs.¹² The system was funded by a donation from the Napa Valley Vintners Association. Until the deployment of IAR, each volunteer company has limited knowledge of which resources are available and responding to incidents.

The overall goal of the IAR system is to increase the ability for volunteer companies to respond to the closest station/resource as well as reduce gaps in forecasted staffing of vital apparatus such as water tenders.

Morale Issues with Volunteer Firefighters

The Jury found that morale among the volunteer firefighters is generally good. However, many of them feel morale could be better with more public recognition and appreciation of the volunteers

¹² www.iamresponding.com

from the BOS and the NCFD. Some of the volunteers mentioned the lack of inclusion of the volunteers during the official opening of the new Carneros Volunteer Fire Station in January 2023 as an example of poor recognition.

The Jury did not find a morale issue among the majority of the volunteer fire chiefs, as they are dedicated and committed to their mission. The volunteer chiefs, however, expressed frustration with the lack of clear, ongoing communication between the NCFD and the volunteers. Many of the volunteer fire chiefs admitted that they treasure their independence, which conflicts with the model of the NCFD as being a combined and cooperative fire department.

The Jury found that most of the volunteers respect the role of the NCFD. The volunteers however wish that the NCFD would give them more recognition for the role they play in fire protection.

The volunteer fire chiefs told the Jury that an increase in the monthly stipend rate may improve the overall morale issue. The chiefs felt that a higher compensation rate may attract more recruits and retain the current membership for a longer period of time. The volunteers also suggested that the yearly Firefighter Appreciation Day be reinstated. The volunteers felt that this event highlighted the efforts of the volunteers and provided a chance to socialize with the career firefighters. The volunteer chiefs suggested this event should be promoted by the County, featuring a dinner and recognition awards.

Volunteer Firefighter Compensation in Napa County

Volunteer firefighters do not have employment contracts with Napa County because under California law they are considered “volunteers” and not “employees.” As a result, volunteer firefighters do not have the same rights as public employees, such as hourly or salaried compensation.¹³

This limitation falls short of establishing a complete ban on payments, however, as the County can pay the volunteer firefighters a monthly stipend or on a paid per call basis (PPC). Volunteers are not eligible for medical or pension benefits. The County does pay their Workers’ Compensation insurance.

Monthly Stipend System

Napa County volunteer firefighters are paid a monthly stipend based on a three-tiered compensation package: their rank structure, their attendance at two training sessions per month, and their compliance with safety standards. The rank structure ranges from a volunteer fire chief to a basic firefighter recruit. The training component verifies their participation in the monthly training sessions. The compliance requirement ensures that all volunteers are up-to-date with their safety standards certifications. The stipend model of payment has been in place for more than 20 years.

The County of Napa dictates the volunteer compensation structure and the County has maintained the current stipend rate since 2018. The monthly stipend system is intended as a reimbursement of expenses to cover the cost of travel and meals on the days of training.

The Jury found that the reporting process for recording a volunteer’s training and certification status is inconsistent among the nine volunteer fire companies. Some of the volunteer companies

¹³ www.masc.sc/Pages/newsroom/uptown/February-2019/Know-the-Compensation-Rules-Volunteers

keep up-to-date records, while others struggle to keep their minimum. Incomplete records and delayed reporting often lead to some volunteers having to wait up to a year for payment. Volunteer stipends are charged to the Napa County fire service budget. Payments are made quarterly by the Napa County Auditor-Controller office.

All volunteer firefighters in Napa County must be in full compliance with their annual Volunteer Medical Questionnaire (VMQ) and the Respiratory Protection Equipment (RPE). Volunteers cannot participate in hands-on drills or respond to an emergency call without full VMQ and RPE compliance.

The volunteers who are fully certified and up to date with their training requirements are paid \$125 per month. These volunteers are paid the monthly stipend whether they respond to any emergency calls at all, as long as they attend two training sessions each month. Entry level recruit volunteers earn \$75 per month. Volunteer fire chiefs who are up to date with certifications and training can earn up to \$250 per month.

Paid Per Call (PPC) System

The paid per call system has been debated among the volunteers and the County for more than twenty years without any resolution.¹⁴ It's a system designed to establish more equity in rewarding volunteers who respond to emergencies on a regular basis. According to the volunteer fire chiefs, if volunteers were paid on a PPC system, it could serve as a strong incentive for recruitment and would improve the retention rate of the volunteers.

One of the drawbacks to a paid per call payment system is that it conflicts with the issue of whether a volunteer is considered an "employee" under current Napa County policy. Several of the volunteer chiefs told the Jury that if the volunteer firefighters were called reserve firefighters, it could possibly make a difference in how the County classified volunteers under their current employee status policy. Reserve firefighters are found throughout California, embedded within both municipal and County fire departments.¹⁵

The City of Napa has a part-time Fire Reserve Program as part of the full-time Napa Fire Department. Reserve firefighters are hired to assist with emergency responses. The reserve firefighters for the City of Napa are at-will employees and are not covered by the City's Civil Service System.¹⁶ The Jury recommends that the BOS modify the County's employee status policy to reflect a name change from volunteer firefighter to reserve firefighter.

PPC would require another layer of accountability from the volunteer fire chiefs. The exact number of calls each volunteer firefighter responds to in a given time frame would have to be accurately documented and recorded. Furthermore, this information would have to be sent to the NCFD accounting office for processing and later sent to the Napa County Auditor-Controller's department for payment.

¹⁴ 2001-2002 Napa County Grand Jury Report, June, 2002. Napa County Fire Department.

¹⁵ ci.benicia.ca.us

¹⁶ www.governmentjobs.com

Annual and Ongoing Training Required for Volunteer Firefighters

Today's volunteer firefighters are expected to respond to more diverse emergencies than just wildfires. Volunteer firefighters may also respond to medical emergencies, rescue operations, and hazardous materials spills in support of the NCFD.

All of the training necessary to meet the minimum requirements is available to the volunteers. Some of the volunteers find it difficult to attend all of the training sessions because of personal obligations and scheduling conflicts.

The types of training a volunteer receives is similar to the training a full-time, paid firefighter receives. However, the difference is that paid firefighters train continuously during the non-emergency hours they are on duty. Volunteers do not have that option, as most of them have full time jobs and are subject to the limitations on when and where the training is available.

According to several volunteer fire chiefs, the amount of training to satisfy the State-mandated Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) requirements is putting an extra strain on the time commitment of today's volunteer firefighters.¹⁷ Some Napa County volunteers are not fully trained or are in the process of getting fully trained, which limits the resources available to respond to an emergency call. Most of the volunteer chiefs agreed however, that the training requirements should not be compromised and they pledged to encourage high training standards.

Firefighter Academy

New volunteer recruits are required to attend a Volunteer Fire Academy before being assigned to a volunteer firefighter company. The Academy training is provided by Cal Fire personnel and lasts over a period of four months from January to May annually. Classes are held on Wednesday evenings and all day on Sunday of each week. Some of the coursework includes Wildland Training tactics, vehicle extrication methods, hazardous materials removal and public service first aid training (PSFA).¹⁸

Some of the volunteer fire chiefs expressed the need for more open communication between the Cal Fire training officers and the rank and file volunteers regarding the training standards. The Jury concluded that there are inconsistencies in the various ways a volunteer could receive the necessary training to become fully certified. Some volunteers reported to the Jury that certain college level classes covering fire protection service may or may not be accepted by Cal Fire standards. According to the volunteers, these inconsistencies lead to further misunderstandings between the volunteers and the NCFD.

The monthly training sessions are normally held at the volunteer's fire station. Sometimes they are held at a neutral site with multi-station participation. The sessions can be supervised either by the Cal Fire training staff or by one of the volunteer's training officers. The responsibility for recording and submitting the verification of participation in the training sessions comes from the volunteer fire chief, not from a Cal Fire training officer. Many of the volunteers felt that the training scheduling could be better coordinated to meet their individual needs.

¹⁷ www.firehouse.com/home/news/10529800/california-requires-volunteers-to-meet-standards

¹⁸ Cal Fire Training Manual, December, 2023

The Jury discovered that one of the most difficult positions to fill among active volunteer firefighters is someone to drive the fire engines. The training and certification for engine drivers is time consuming and most of the volunteer stations struggle to maintain this level of operational efficiency.

Volunteer Stations Underperforming and Underutilized

During its investigation, the Jury visited all nine volunteer fire stations and met with all of the volunteer fire chiefs. The Jury examined incident reports, reviewed training records, recorded the membership numbers and discussed the number of emergency calls each fire station had responded to in the last year.

The Jury found that there are two volunteer fire companies - Soda Canyon and Dry Creek/Lokoya - that currently have low membership numbers and are struggling to attract volunteer recruits. The Soda Canyon fire station has ten volunteers and the Dry Creek/Lokoya fire station has 13 volunteers.

Furthermore, the Jury noted that a high percentage of the members from these fire stations are out of compliance with either the annual Volunteer Medical Questionnaire (VMQ) or the State mandated RPE/Fit Test certification. Volunteers who are out of compliance with either of these regulations cannot participate in any hands-on training sessions or respond to emergency calls.

Prior Grand Jury Reports

The Jury examined three prior Grand Jury Final Reports (2001-2002, 2007-2008, and 2011-2012) as part of this investigation. Each of these prior grand jury reports included investigations of the Napa County Volunteer Firefighters. Many of the recommendations in these reports addressed the issues of compensation, training, recruitment and communication between the volunteer fire chiefs and the NCFD.

The Jury found that many of these recommendations were not implemented by the NCFD and BOS because they were found to be unwarranted. Some of the volunteers interviewed viewed the lack of action regarding these recommendations as not being appreciated or recognized for their service to the community. The volunteers felt that the recommendations were warranted and should have been given more attention.

The 2007-2008 Napa County Grand Jury recommended that the BOS hire a dedicated Napa County employee whose primary responsibility would be the coordination and support of the County Volunteer Firefighters.¹⁹ The BOS did not implement that recommendation and instead hired a Cal Fire Division Chief in 2014 to act as the Napa County Fire Chief.

In 2014, a NCFD Chief Officer was appointed as a liaison between the volunteer fire chiefs and the NCFD. The purpose of the liaison position was to improve communication and build a two-way bridge between the volunteers and the County. The volunteers asked for that position to be independent from Cal Fire. They expressed a desire to be represented by someone with strong ties to Napa County. However, that request was denied, which made it harder for the volunteers to accept the line of command from Cal Fire.

¹⁹ 2007-2008 Napa County Grand Jury Report, Napa County Fire Department.

The liaison position was vacated in 2017 according to the NCFD. The NCFD said it was underutilized and ineffective due to a lack of ongoing dialog between the volunteer fire chiefs themselves. Interviews with some of the volunteer fire chiefs also expressed that the position was underutilized. A majority of the volunteer fire chiefs now feel that the position should be reinstated with someone independent from Cal Fire. Several volunteers suggested that the liaison position should be a retired firefighter.

The relationship between the volunteers and the County grew further apart following the loss of this liaison position, leading to more frustration among the volunteer fire chiefs that their voices were not being heard. Further misunderstandings between the County and the volunteers pushed the volunteer firefighter companies to operate more independently from each other and created morale problems among the volunteer firefighters.

The nine volunteer fire chiefs have a diversity of experience and leadership styles. Their level of commitment to their mission as volunteer firefighters is clearly reflected in the way they operate their fire station. It is clear to the Jury that they are dedicated to the volunteer program. What the Jury found missing, however, was a genuine sense of cohesiveness between the volunteers and the paid staff that defines what a combined and cooperative fire protective service is all about.

All of the volunteer fire chiefs expressed the need for more communication between the paid firefighters and the volunteers. The Jury concluded that more communication is needed on a regular basis, especially among the volunteer chiefs themselves. The Jury recommends that the volunteer fire chiefs establish a bi-monthly meeting with the current member of the BOS who sits on the Fire Services Advisory Committee (FSAC). This meeting should be facilitated by the Napa County Fire Chief.

Fire Services Advisory Committee (FSAC)

FSAC was formed in 2013 by the BOS to focus on concerns within the Napa County Fire Department.²⁰ FSAC is composed of 11 members. The committee membership includes the Napa County Fire Chief, the Napa County Deputy Fire Chief, three volunteer firefighters, one member of the BOS, one member from the County's Risk Management Department, one member from the community, and three members from Cal Fire. FSAC meets every other month.

The purpose of FSAC is to advise the Napa County Fire Chief and the BOS on issues pertaining to the Napa County Fire Department, including the volunteer program. FSAC reviews training plans, operational budgets, and long-term department goals and objectives. It also serves as a conduit for the volunteer firefighters to express their views and opinions regarding operational and personnel matters.

FSAC has a large representative base (11 members) that requires attendance from all members to be effective. When key members of the group not affiliated with either the NCFD or the volunteers are not in attendance, it forces the volunteer fire chiefs to act on their behalf as the check and balance of the system.

²⁰ www.countyofnapa.org, Napa County Fire Department, Fire Services Advisory Committee

A key member of the FSAC is the BOS representative. The Jury found that this position has been filled by the same BOS member for the last four years. The Jury recommends that this position be rotated among the current sitting members of the Board of Supervisors on a yearly basis.

The Jury also found that the communication among the nine volunteer firefighter companies is almost non-existent. The volunteer fire chiefs do not meet on a regular basis with the Napa County Fire Chief, nor do they share any information with the BOS. Most of the volunteer chiefs agreed that more communication with the Napa County Fire Chief and the BOS would be helpful to boost morale.

Utilization Issues for Today's Volunteer Firefighters

Historical Overview

Fifty years ago volunteer firefighters in rural Napa County were part of a decentralized fire protection service that drew most of its members from the communities in which they lived and worked. The population in these communities was stable and it was common for volunteer firefighters to follow generational trends of family members. The Jury found that these generational trends still exist today in some of the volunteer companies, but far fewer than in the past.

During this time period, Napa County did not have a paid fire department. The volunteers served the community in this capacity, and they were effective even with the limited training and fire apparatus equipment they had acquired through their community fundraising efforts. As long as their memberships remained stable, the volunteer fire departments provided their communities with reliable fire protection services.

Over the past fifty years however, the County's rural neighborhoods have undergone major changes. New homes, wineries, and businesses have flourished, creating a greater need for a more responsive and expanded fire protection and emergency service. The new development also brought with it a growth in the population with more vehicles on the roads, all of which gave rise to the formation of a full-time, paid Napa County Fire Department in 1973.

The demographics in these rural neighborhoods have also changed. The pool of available residents who wish to serve as volunteer firefighters has declined. According to the volunteer fire chiefs the Jury interviewed, today many of these neighborhoods are struggling to maintain a bare minimum of residents to serve as volunteer firefighters.

Fire Protection Service in Rural Areas

When the NCFD formed in 1973 under contract with Cal Fire, the dynamics of how the volunteers were utilized for fire protection and emergency services also began to change. The County built new fire stations in the rural areas and began staffing them with full-time, paid firefighters.

The volunteer stations remained and continued to provide emergency services in a support role, as the paid fire stations assumed the role as the primary fire protection and emergency services provider for Napa County.

The Jury learned from visiting the volunteer fire stations that the term “volunteer firefighter” can be misleading when describing the work performed by the volunteers. Volunteer firefighters, like all firefighters, are trained to respond to all kinds of emergencies.

In Napa County, volunteers respond mostly to medical calls because, according to Cal Fire officials, approximately 80% of all dispatched calls are for medical assistance. These types of calls are considered routine emergency calls and can range from vehicle accidents to cardiac arrests. The volunteers also respond when there is a vegetation or structure fire in the local area.

The Jury was told by the volunteer fire chiefs that the use of volunteers for routine emergency calls is not as critical as it was in the past years. The reason for this reduced need is because there are more full-time, paid fire stations in the rural areas today that can respond, in most cases, much faster to the incident than the volunteers. However, the Jury found that the volunteers still play an important role in responding to emergencies in rural neighborhoods, but their role has become more as backup support for the NCFD.

Volunteer Utilization Begins to Change

As the role of the volunteers began to change over the years, so did the membership in most of the nine volunteer firefighter companies. With fewer volunteers to respond to emergency calls, the overall response rate to each incident in some of the volunteer companies also declined. Further, the Jury discovered from examining the incident reports at each of the volunteer fire stations, that the volunteers who were showing up to the emergency calls were the same individuals just about every time. The Jury found that today the response rate for the combined nine volunteer fire companies is less than 50% of the volunteers who are available to respond.

911 emergency calls are dispatched to both the full-time, NCFD paid stations and to the volunteers, who carry pager phones with them at all times. The closest NCFD paid station to the incident will always respond to the dispatched call. Volunteers from the closest volunteer fire station will also respond to the dispatched call provided they are available, but usually are not the first unit at the scene of the incident.

The reason for this delay is that the volunteer's response time has to take into account the time the volunteer gets notified to the time they pick up a piece of fire apparatus at the volunteer fire station to the time they get to the scene of the incident. The Jury was told that under these circumstances, the volunteers most of the time assume the role as backup to the paid stations.

New Operational Model for Volunteer Firefighters

The Jury learned from interviews with the NCFD administrative staff, that a potential new operational model for the utilization of volunteers within the framework of the NCFD is long overdue. The Jury found that the NCFD paid staff supports the volunteer program and appreciates the work they do as emergency responders, but think the time has come to make some operational changes in how the volunteers are used in fire protection for Napa County.

The Jury was told that a new operational model for the utilization of volunteers would not eliminate the volunteers, rather use them more effectively when there is a surge in fire activity from a large wildland fire where more “boots on the ground” are needed. Under the new operational model, the volunteers could be designated as reserve firefighters and be organized under a single command when deployed to fight a large fire.

The existing volunteer stations would not disappear under the new operational model, and the volunteers could still provide emergency services if needed, but their primary role would shift from responding to routine emergency calls to that of a reserve firefighter.



Napa County Fire Department, Erick Hernandez, 2020

FINDINGS

The 2022-2023 Napa County Grand Jury finds that:

F1. The current structure of the volunteer monthly stipend does not reward the volunteers who respond to multiple calls.

F2. The operational model for how volunteers are used in support of the Napa County Fire Department is ineffective because it does not hold volunteers accountable for not responding to emergency calls.

F3. The low response rate from the Soda Canyon Volunteer Fire Station compromises its effectiveness to provide reliable fire protective service.

F4. Napa County does not have a dedicated web page or program for the purpose of recruiting new volunteers from a broader group of potential applicants.

F5. The Board of Supervisors representative for the Fire Service Advisory Committee has not changed in four years, creating a lack of representation from all five Supervisory Districts.

F6. The selection process and criteria for the position of Volunteer Fire Chief is not standardized under state-mandated industrial guidelines.

F7. The volunteers do not have a liaison officer to act as a spokesperson between them and the Napa County Fire Department, resulting in miscommunication and misunderstandings between both groups.

F8. The volunteer firefighters have morale problems resulting from a perceived lack of appreciation by the Board of Supervisors and the Napa County Fire Department.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2022-2023 Napa County Grand Jury recommends that:

R1. By December 1, 2023, the Board of Supervisors develop a plan that calls for the volunteer's monthly stipend to be replaced with a Paid Per Call system.

R2.. By December 1, 2023 the Board of Supervisors establish a committee of volunteer firefighters, paid staff from the Napa County Fire Department, and members of the community to develop a new operational model that places more emphasis in responding to larger fires in a surge capacity. The new model would classify the volunteers as reserve firefighters.

R3.. By December 1, 2023 the Board of Supervisors authorize the Napa County Fire Department to relocate and consolidate the volunteers assigned to the Soda Canyon Volunteer Fire Station to the Napa County Fire Department's paid fire station #25 on Monticello Road. The relocation and consolidation includes moving the remaining fire apparatus equipment from the Soda Canyon Volunteer Fire Station to the paid station #25.

R4. By December 1, 2023, the Napa County Deputy Fire Chief, in conjunction with the Volunteer Fire Chiefs, establish a County-wide dedicated web page for the purpose of providing information to the public about the volunteer firefighter program in Napa County. The information must include a mission statement, the minimum requirements to become a volunteer firefighter, and the level of training necessary to meet state-mandated fire and safety regulations.

R5. By September 30, 2023 the Board of Supervisors representative to the Fire Services Advisory Committee will be appointed on a yearly cycle with each supervisor serving on a rotating basis.

R6. By December 1, 2023 the Napa County Deputy Fire Chief adopt and enforce the selection criteria for the position of Volunteer Fire Chief that follows state-mandated guidelines.

R7. By December 1, 2023 the Board of Supervisors reinstate the volunteer liaison position with a retired firefighter.

R8. By December 1, 2023 the Board of Supervisors and the Napa County Deputy Fire Chief coordinate with the local media to publish a feature article for the general public highlighting the successes of the volunteer program.

COMMENDATIONS

1. The Grand Jury commends the Angwin Volunteer Firefighter Company for their morale building strategies by providing an exercise and weight room at the fire station for use by the volunteers during their leisure time.

2. The Grand Jury commends the Carneros Volunteer Fire Chief and the Napa County Fire Deputy Fire Chief for their efforts in securing funding from the Napa Valley Vintners Association to purchase for each volunteer firefighter company the software and hardware for a “real-time volunteer online staffing availability system.”

3. The Grand Jury commends the Cal Fire management team for their vision and professionalism in dealing with recent administrative changes in the Napa County Fire Department.

4. The Grand Jury commends the Napa County Fire Department and the County of Napa for the planning and development of a new, two-bay, volunteer satellite fire station in the Carneros region of Napa County.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the grand jury requests responses as follows: From the following county officials within 90 days:

- Napa County Board of Supervisors (F1, R1), (F2, R2) (F3, R3), (F5, R5), (F7, R7), (F8, R8).

Pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the grand jury requests responses as follows: From the following county officials within 60 days:

- Napa County Fire Chief - LNU Unit Chief (F2, R2), (F4, R4), (F6, R6), (F8, R8).
- Napa County Deputy Fire Chief (F2, R2), (F4, R4), (F6, R6), (F8, R8).

INVITED RESPONSES

- Napa County Assistant Deputy Fire Chief (F2, R2), (F4, R4), (F6, R6), (F8, R8).
- Volunteer Fire Chief - Carneros Station 10 (F1-F8), (R1-R8).
- Volunteer Fire Chief - Soda Canyon Fire Station 13 (F1-F8), (R1-R8).
- Volunteer Fire Chief - Capell Valley Fire Station 14 (F1-F8), (R1-R8).
- Volunteer Fire Chief - Rutherford Fire Station 15 (F1-F8), (R1-R8).
- Volunteer Fire Chief - Dry Creek/Lokoya Fire Station 16 (F1-F8), (R1-R8).
- Volunteer Fire Chief - Angwin Fire Station 18 (F1-F8), (R1-R8).
- Volunteer Fire Chief - Pope Valley Fire Station 20 (F1-F8), (R1-R8).
- Volunteer Fire Chief - Deer Park Fire Station 21 (F1-F8), (R1-R8).
- Volunteer Fire Chief - Gordon Valley Station 22 (F1-F8), (R1-R8).

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

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Napa County Volunteer Firefighter Stations - March, 2023

Station 10 - Carneros - Milton Road, Napa

Station 210 - Carneros satellite station - Old Sonoma Road, Napa

Station 13 - Soda Canyon - Soda Canyon Road, Napa

Station 14 - Capell Valley - Capell Valley Road, Napa

Station 15 - Rutherford - Highway 29, Napa

Station 215 - Rutherford satellite station - Silverado Road, Napa

Station 16 - Dry Creek/Lokoya - Dry Creek Road, Napa

Station 18 - Angwin - College Ave, Angwin

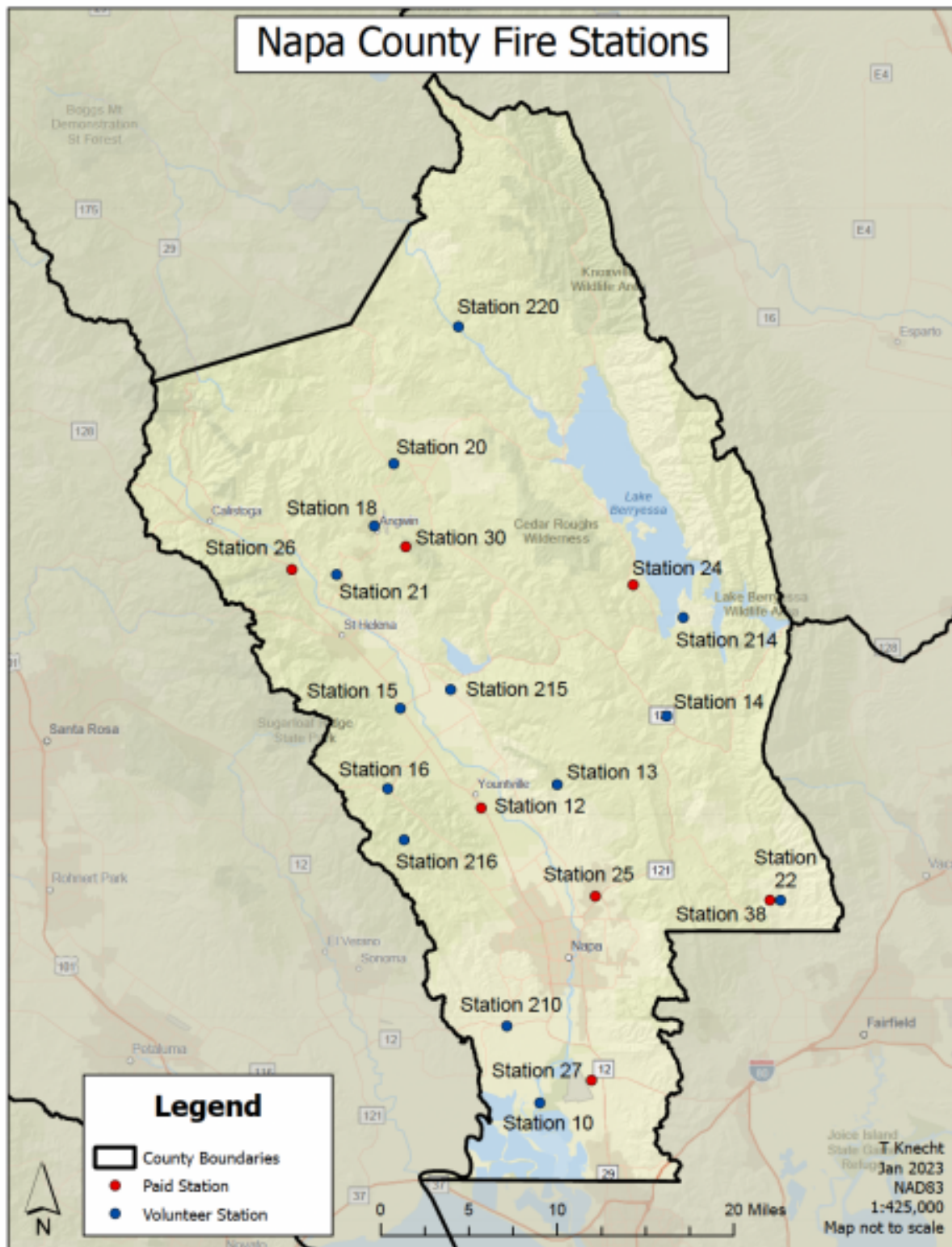
Station 20 - Pope Valley - Pope Valley Road, Napa

Station 220 - Pope Valley satellite station, Stagecoach Canyon Road, Napa

Station 21 - Deer Park- Sanitarium Road, Deer Park

Station 22 - Gordon Valley - Gordon Valley Road, Napa

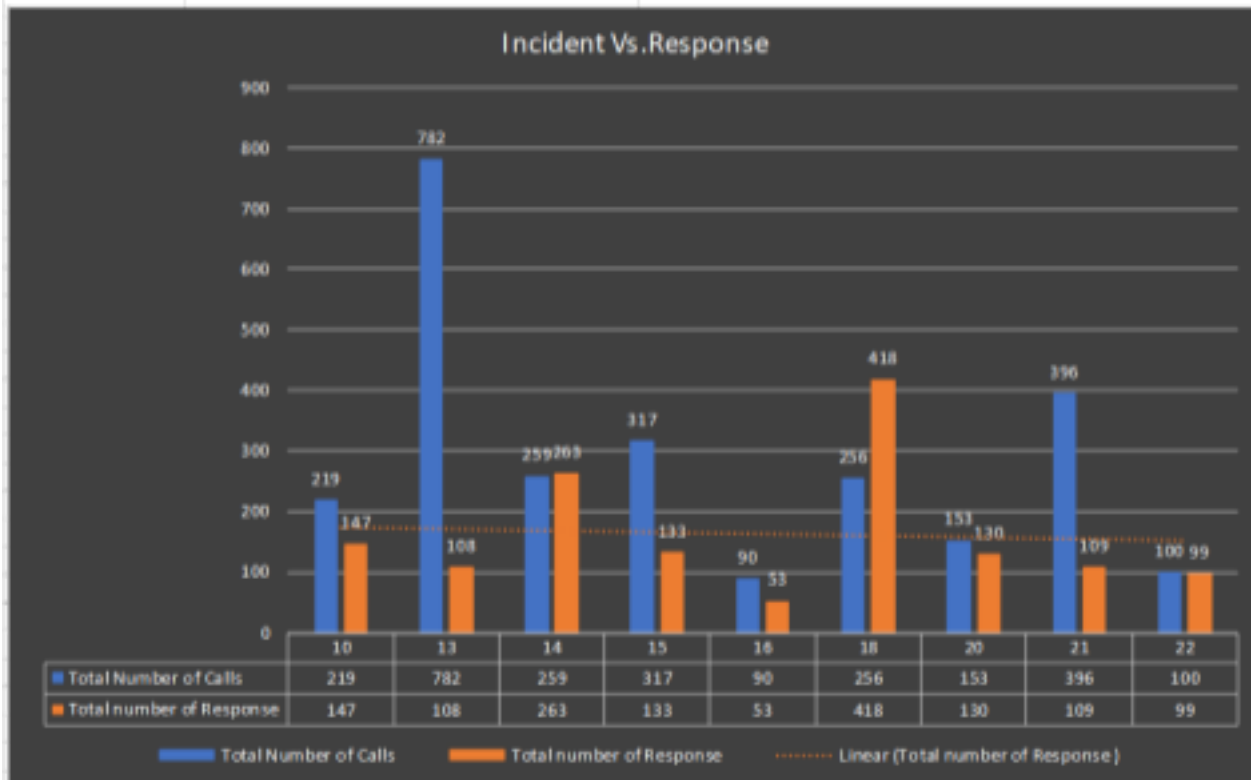
APPENDIX



Napa County Fire Department Volunteer Summary Report

Incident Vs. Response - Total Number of Calls for 2020

Station	Total Number of Calls	Total number of Response
10	219	147
13	782	108
14	259	263
15	317	133
16	90	53
18	256	418
20	153	130
21	396	109
22	100	99
	2572	1460



The total numbers of responses may be more than the total number of incidents due to multipool units responding from the same station. The total percent of response for 2020 was 57%.