



Getting the message out

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Have you ever been at a fire or motor vehicle accident scene and the citizens have been mentally traumatized, confused and just don't know what to do? When conducting an inspection, has someone taken the opportunity to ask you how to become a fire fighter, or have they asked how to make a charitable donation for all the great work your fire fighters do in the community?

The Customer Service Backpack contains the necessary resources to answer a number of questions asked by citizens and visitors. It offers concise direction in times of need and provides consistency for fire department members who interact with their customers. Originally designed at the innovative Phoenix (Ariz.) Fire Department in 2001, the backpack has proven to be to be a valued tool for that community, but each community and nation is different. This article will explain how the backpack has become a constructive intervention for the fire service in Surrey, B.C.

Consistency, reliability

The Surrey Fire Service has an empowered workforce that encourages and formally recognizes the tradition of service. The challenge today is to provide consistent, reliable information and to co-ordinate available resources for success on the job.

The term "customer service" identifies the many opportunities for service that may arise at an emergency, through day-to-day activities or through the Surrey fire fighters' charitable society championed by Local 1271 IAFF. Supplying healthy snacks for hungry school children, fire fighters reading to children in classrooms, and our personal disaster assistance program for the uninsured homeless, are just a few examples of customer service programs.

Working together

One of the newest programs required the innovation of our administration, Local 1271, and our customer service committee to modify the backpack concept to meet the needs of our community.

Before the introduction of the backpack program, it was not at all clear whether fire fighters were providing citizens with the same message. Because of uncertainty, opportunities to assist the public may have been missed. Now, we have simply combined all of our resource materials, organized them in a community resource binder, and put them in backpacks that are accessible on all frontline Surrey fire



PHOTO BY BRIAN WOZNIKOSKI

The backpack is carried on all frontline apparatus in Surrey so that any fire fighter may use it to help citizens with a variety of questions. It also contains handouts and giveaways. This one is hung in the cab of Quint 17.

apparatus. Backpacks are also available to prevention officers, dispatchers and training officers because the public will seek any uniformed personnel in times of need. The information is also stored on apparatus computers for easy access. This is where the empowerment fits in.

Each fire station individually determines the location of their backpack, with most placing them behind the driver's seat or on a rear seat, and each person is empowered to identify appropriate opportunities for using the backpack's resources.

Backpack resources

If you think the backpack will work for your department, keep each section in the community resource binder as generic as possible. The use of specific names and phone numbers should be avoided.

Personnel assignments and responsibilities change and updating the binder can be a challenge, particularly in large fire departments. Surrey currently has 32 backpacks in service and we begin identifying files to be updated every November so that

the changes are in place at the start of the year. Budget annually or actively seek sponsors for the amount of giveaways because fire fighters love to give away fun stuff. In fact, the most popular part of the backpack program is the giveaways. These pencils, erasers, junior fire fighter stickers, fire chief helmets and temporary tattoos contain fire safety messages and provide an opportunity for fire fighter and community interaction.

Start slowly

Our customer service committee meets quarterly with representatives from labour and management. Leading by example, our committee members identify any issues arising, establish direction and provide feedback on the program's efforts. Most importantly, if you're going to make customer service a part of your daily routine, start slowly. Change in the fire service can be a challenge. If the backpack program is too big of a leap initially, simply identifying available community resource brochures and some of the fire safety giveaway items in a sample backpack is a great start. This provides a practical way of explaining and demonstrating the resource to others. Often I have seen some of our fire fighters take a junior fire fighter sticker from their pocket following an incident and make a child's day, or hand a one-page handout to an inspired candidate who is seeking a career in the fire service. In both examples, a positive, appropriate and consistent message is given.

Develop an SOG

Although fire fighters may be empowered and encouraged to recognize opportunities for customer service, it is important to develop an operational guideline that establishes some boundaries. For example, if, upon conclusion of an incident, the company officer and fire fighters identify a need it is critical to determine that the provision of the service will not in anyway impair the fire company's ability to respond should another call be received. Therefore, it should be a standard practice to advise the customer that you may have to leave in the event of another call.

Solving problems

Sometimes customer service takes a very unique form. In one situation, a fire company recognized a pattern. One of our crews regularly attended a call in which they would have to assist a patient who routinely fell from her chair when getting up. By coincidence, one of our captains had brought a lift chair into the station following his mother's unfortunate passing. When the crew returned from the call one of the fire fighters immediately contacted the captain at home asking if they could donate the chair to the patient in need. With the green light to proceed the crew made arrangements to deliver the chair and remove the old one. The problem was not only solved, but everyone involved felt good about what had taken place. It was an excellent example of customer service done out of the kindness of their hearts; there was no bragging, and no fuss. In fact, the only reason I heard the story was because I had asked where the chair had gone.

When I discussed how the backpack program works with Capt. Wendy Ballas of the Phoenix Fire Department, she explained: "It's all about doing the right thing! Keeping the promise you made when you were hired."

An informative tool

A positive attitude towards helping citizens is important. The unique part of the backpack program is there is no requirement to use this new tool in our department. For example, not everyone uses a pike pole to pull down drywall; some use an axe, or a drywall puller. This community backpack tool can be used in the same way. Use it when appropriate and when needed, a perfect match to help someone have a safe existence in your community. It's all about choice! Like a pike pole, if it does not fit into your repertoire don't use it. If you feel this is a tool you're comfortable with, have fun with it and use it at every opportunity!

The community resources binder should be unique for the department in which you serve. If you have a problem with accidental drownings or snake bites, awareness in these areas can be provided. We initially started with nine sections then added to the binder, which now contains eleven sections (see sidebar on page 26).

Recognizing opportunities

The backpack is about having an attitude and recognizing opportunities to provide customer service. "Attitude" is likely the best term to describe "service" because it is more of a belief or value. All that is known is that if actions taken by fire personnel are legal, ethical, safe, nice and compatible with policy, then just do it! Fire fighters are in a unique position to deliver service. The backpack is portable and will address customer needs at the front line. It is adaptable to your community's needs. If you want to give a

consistent message and capitalize on opportunities for customer service, give the backpack program a try.

For more information, visit the City of Surrey's website www.city.surrey.bc.ca/default.htm. Under the heading general information you will find the information on all of the sections that serve our customers. You can also contact Brian Woznikoski by e-mail at bwoznikoski@city.surrey.bc.ca

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An overview of Surrey's binder contents

Section 1, City of Surrey: Gives an overview of the city, its services and contact numbers. A visitors' guide and map are also available to hand out.

Section 2, Surrey Fire Service: Describes our department and services, with contact numbers to schedule a station tour or community event. As a handout, department information statistic cards are available.

Section 3, Community Resources: Services and community phone numbers are listed and capture a wide variety of information ranging from abandoned house reporting, to the disposal of used paint.

Section 4, After the Fire: "A Recovery Awareness Guide" provides concise checklists and guidance to citizens recovering from a fire. This handout reaches beyond the need for insurance and provides consistent and thorough direction for recovery from a fire.

Section 5, After the MVA: A motor vehicle accident can be very confusing for individuals. When do police or ambulance attend? When is victim services appropriate? How are tow trucks contacted? How does the Insurance Corporation of B.C. wish to be contacted? To maintain consistency, we provide brochures and other materials.

Section 6, Community Programs: This section provides brochures and the information required to register or contact the fire fighters' CPR and First Aid programs, emergency preparedness programs, RCMP Victim Services, Surrey Hospice Society and the Lifeline program.

Section 7, Charitable Society: The Surrey Firefighters Charitable Society brochure outlines our history in the community, accomplishments, the many programs we support and also provides citizens with the appropriate details should they wish to donate.

Section 8, Fire Safety and Prevention: Safety programs, station tours, a youth firesetter program and our fire safety band are offered to all Surrey citizens with a simple phone call. The fire prevention branch delivers these services. Materials assist prevention officers with the enforcement of the B.C. Fire Code and city bylaws. Home fire escape plans, carbon monoxide safety, and information on portable fire extinguishers and smoke alarms are included.

Section 9, How to Become a Fire Fighter: Our most popular question is, "How do I become a fire fighter in Surrey?" A one-page handout describes the required

qualifications and how to apply for a career and volunteer positions.

Section 10, Recognition: This section allows the opportunity to forward a recommendation to recognize individuals for exceptional service. Catching Surrey Fire Service members doing things right and recognizing them is important to establish and maintain a culture rich in customer service.

Section 11, Inventory: This one-page list contains all of the items and quantities that are part of the backpack program and establishes a standard for consistency. To restock the backpack, a community resources container is located in each fire station and used to restock backpacks as needed. This allows for a self-sustaining program with little intervention required by the customer service committee.