Recruit training academy Las Vegas Fire and Rescue

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ................................................................................................................. 1
BACKGROUND .................................................................................................................................. 5
DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY .............................................................................................. 7
RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS ................................................................................................. 8
COMPARATIVE RESEARCH .......................................................................................................... 16
RECOMMENDATIONS .................................................................................................................. 22
CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................................... 27
BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................................................ 28

APPENDIX 1: ROOKIE SURVEY AND RESULTS (EXCLUDES LONG FORM ANSWERS)

APPENDIX 2: CAPTAIN SURVEY AND RESULTS (EXCLUDES LONG FORM ANSWERS)

APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW NOTES FOR PHOENIX AND CLARK COUNTY

APPENDIX 4: ROOKIE SURVEY STATISTICAL ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After the retirement of Fire Chief Washington, the Las Vegas City Manager, Doug Selby and the Deputy City Manager, Betsy Fretwell sought input from Fire Department personnel on what qualities they would like to see in a new fire chief. Selby and Fretwell visited all fire department personnel, whether located in a fire station (called “the floor”) or in administration. While Selby and Fretwell did learn about the leadership qualities the fire fighting personnel expected in a new chief, they also heard serious concerns expressed about the Recruit Training Academy (the Academy) and the quality of the rookies it was producing. Then Assistant Fire Chief over training, Bertral Washington and his subsequent replacement, Assistant Chief Tom Miramontes asked the UNLV Public Administration Department to assess the Fire Training Academy and recommend improvements to the program.

The Program Evaluation Team (PET) conducted two surveys. The first survey was given to recruits from the last two training academies of 2006 and the first training academy of 2007. A total of 39 recruits from the three academies were sent the survey, and 30 completed the survey (77% response rate). The second survey was given to 93 Fire Captains with 34 valid responses for a 37% response rate.

While many of the concerns expressed by both the Rookies and the Fire Captains confirmed there were problems in the skills being taught, the overarching concern of both groups was the structure of the Academy and the Field Training Officer’s (FTO’s) who conducted the
trainings. Nearly 43% of the Rookies expressed concerns related to the FTO’s when asked to identify areas of the Academy that need improvement and when asked for suggestions for improving the academy, 55% recommended changes, improvements or replacement of the Trainers. Fifty-five percent (55%) of Fire Captains surveyed believed FTO’s were unprofessional when dealing with recruits and 78% do not believe FTO’s understand the needs of the fire stations. More than 87% of the Fire Captain’s also felt there is a lack of communication/feedback between fire stations and the Academy with regard to the performance of Academy graduates. Both Fire Captains and Rookies agreed that including firefighters from the floor as trainers would improve the Academy.

The PET recommends that LVFR develop a variety of policies and/or programs to ensure good communication between the floor and the Academy.

1. Develop an orientation for Fire Captains about the Recruit Training Academy so they know what the expectations are for recruits at the Academy and are made aware of any changes to the training.
2. If moving floor personnel into Academy training is not currently financially feasible, LVFR should have the FTOs work on coordinating the manipulative skills training so that consistency is maintained.
3. The PET believes it would be beneficial to have firefighters highly skilled in specific areas provide training at the Academy.
4. Provide on-the-job training for recruits while still in the Academy.
5. Assign recruits to their probationary Fire Captain early in the Academy.
6. LVFR could create a pre-Academy class to be held a few weeks prior to the start of the Academy.
7. Upon assignment to their station, LVFR could assign a floor firefighter as a mentor for the rookie.
8. Establish and use benchmarks based on the two surveys already conducted to determine if changes made in the Academy are effective.
INTRODUCTION

On August 1, 2007 the City of Las Vegas Fire and Rescue Department (LVFR) celebrated 65 years of service. However, the fire department history actually started even earlier. It began in 1906 when the first station for the Las Vegas Volunteer Fire Department was on Fremont Street where the Horseshoe parking structure is now located. This was only one year after the city of Las Vegas was founded. One of the original pieces of equipment, a Model T Ford fire engine that was used by the Volunteer Firefighters, is now on display in front of Fire Station Five located on Hinson Road north of West Charleston Boulevard (City of Las Vegas Net News, 2007).

The full time fire department was not created until 1942 when the members of the Las Vegas Volunteer Fire Department petitioned the City to create a full time department. This was needed due to the growth that was occurring in the valley. Since the mid 1920’s Hoover Dam was under construction, there was a new army base (Nellis Air Force Base) in the area, and 25,000 people started visiting Las Vegas each weekend. The volunteer members had to leave their jobs as many as nineteen times a week to answer fire and emergency calls. This became a financial hardship for some and all were concerned for their safety. The Las Vegas City Commissioners agreed and approved the formation of the full time fire department. The first sixteen members began to be hired on August 1, 1942 using an emergency loan from the State Board of Finance. Harold Case, who was elected to be fire chief in the 1920’s, was hired on permanently along with one other member. The rest of the firefighters joined them in November, when the remainder of the funds became available. Volunteer firefighters assisted the paid firefighters to battle large emergencies. The department answered approximately 450 calls per year and utilized two older pumper trucks, a pickup truck and two civil defense pump trailers.
From those early years, LVFR has grown to approximately 700 employees and operates out of 16 fire stations and other facilities such as the Fire Alarm Office, Fire Shop and Training Center. The department answers more than 84,000 emergency calls a year and has some of the most modern equipment to succeed in their tasks (Miramontes). It provides crucial services for the community such as public safety, emergency medical services, bomb squad, HAZMAT services, rescue operations, public education, fire prevention, arson investigation, and emergency management operations.

In 2006 the department was first accredited by the Commission on Fire Accreditation International, Inc (CFAI) after an extensive review process that involved fire officials from across the country. Only 114 agencies have achieved Internationally Accredited Agency status with the CFAI (City of Las Vegas Media Releases, March 2006). LVFR also has an Insurance Services Offices (ISO) Class One rating. ISO ratings are used to determine insurance rates customers pay in communities across the country. There are only eight fire departments in the United States that have both the ISO Class One rating and CFAI accreditation status and LVFR is one of them (City of Las Vegas Media Releases, June 2006).
BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2007, Las Vegas Fire and Rescue Chief Washington announced his retirement after 33 years of service. The City Manager, Doug Selby and Deputy City Manager, Betsy Fretwell decided to spend some time speaking with Fire Department staff on what qualities they would like to see in their new fire chief. Over the course of four months, from July through October, Selby and Fretwell visited all fire department personnel, whether located in a fire station (hereafter referred to as “the floor”) or in administration. This included all shifts at all stations and only missed those fire department personnel who may have been on vacation.

While Selby and Fretwell did learn about the leadership qualities the firefighters expected in a new chief, they also heard a myriad of concerns expressed about the Recruit Training Academy (the Academy) and the quality of the rookies it was producing. The UNLV Public Administration Masters Program provided a Program Evaluation Team (PET) that was asked to evaluate the concerns raised during the meetings with the City Manager and provide recommendations for improvements.

The Program Evaluation Team initially worked with the Assistant Fire Chief of the Training Division, Bertral Washington. He provided extensive background information about the firefighter recruitment process and the operation of the Recruit Training Academy. The PET met with Chief Washington and designed a scope of work that included a full assessment of the physical training program and manipulative skills. Meeting over the winter holidays, the team devised a survey for the rookies and developed questions for two focus groups, which would consist of experienced members of the floor. There was also initial discussion of surveying the Fire Training Officers (FTOs). The PET obtained the LVFR fitness program manual and an evaluation of the fitness program that had been completed by UNLV. The PET was interested in
Las Vegas Recruit Training Academy Evaluation

Cooper, Dudas, Huber, Jordan, & Martin

having a fitness expert review and critique the evaluation of the fitness program conducted by UNLV’s Office of Research and Development for Firefighter Wellness and Fitness.

In January 2008, a new training chief was appointed and the scope of the evaluation was reduced. Tom Miramontes was promoted from Fire Captain to Assistant Fire Chief and with his experience on the floor; he felt that he had a good grasp of where the problems were in the physical training portion of the academy. This led the evaluation team to reduce the scope of the evaluation to focus on the concerns raised by floor personnel, which was supported by Assistant Chief Miramontes. In addition to abandoning the evaluation of the physical fitness program, Chief Miramontes thought because of the low number of FTO’s, we would not get sufficient information from surveying them. Based on the advice from the Chief the FTO evaluation was also not conducted by the team.

The PET also interviewed Doug Selby and Betsy Fretwell to obtain first-hand feedback on their meetings at the fire stations in 2007. Based upon this interview and discussions with both Chiefs of Training, the following concerns were noted:

1. Recruits are not physically fit
2. Recruits lack basic skills
3. LVFR hires people who have failed other academies
4. LVFR has a lower washout rate than other academies
5. Fire Training Officers (FTOs) behave unprofessionally

These concerns appeared to directly relate to the Recruit Training Academy and the quality of firefighter being produced at the Academy. Therefore, the PET focused its evaluation on the Recruit Training Academy as assessed by both the Rookies and their Fire Captains.
DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY

The Recruit Training Academy (hereafter, the Academy) trains new recruits to Las Vegas Fire and Rescue to prepare them to become a Firefighter I. The Academy is a 20-week course covering "classroom education and training, drill field training and evaluations, basic skills, evolutions and scenario-based training, driver's training, physical fitness and wellness programs, hazardous materials training, Emergency Medical Technician-I Training, performance skills evaluations and benchmark testing" (LVFR Handbook, 3) It is important to note that a major portion of the Academy involves preparing the recruits to receive their Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) Intermediate Certification, as almost 90% of dispatches are for emergency medical services (Miramontes). The Academy trains approximately 20 recruits per class in 3-4 academies per year. The majority of the academies are for new recruits with one held periodically that is designed specifically for paramedics.

The evaluation team settled on conducting two surveys as the method for obtaining the needed feedback from the floor. The first survey was given to recruits from the last two Academies of 2006 and the first Academy of 2007. It was felt that these firefighters would have the most recent experience of the Academy but also have enough experience on the floor to provide feedback on areas for improvement in the academy, should any exist. Using an Internet survey service, SurveyMonkey.com, a total of 39 Recruits from the 3 academies were sent the link to the survey. The second survey was sent to the 93 Fire Captains located in the Fire Stations throughout the City of Las Vegas. The evaluation team believed that the Fire Captains would have the best perspective on any deficiencies in training exhibited by new recruits on the floor. The PET conducted follow-up interviews with several Fire Captains to obtain clarification and additional information on their survey comments.
RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Rookie Survey Results

In order to evaluate the experiences of the rookies in the Fire Academy, a survey was given to recent Recruit Training Academy graduates. All 39 recent graduates looked at the survey with 30 actually completing the survey, resulting in a response rate of 77%. The average age of the Rookies responding to the survey was 33 years old. The oldest in the class was 50 and the youngest Rookie was 21. Nineteen (19) of the Rookies completing the survey listed their race as White. In addition, there was one (1) African-American who completed the survey, one (1) Asian Pacific Islander, one (1) Native American and three (3) Hispanics who responded to the survey from the 3 Academy classes. Rookies were asked to rate how well the Academy prepared them as firefighters in nine (9) categories:

- Personal Protection Equipment;
- Hose Pulls;
- Hose Lay Evolutions;
- Fireground Tasks;
- Power Tools;
- Engine Company;
- Truck Company;
- Driver’s Performance;
- Overall Readiness.

The PET developed a scoring matrix to grid the results from the survey (see Appendix 4). The rookies rated almost all of the categories as either average or above average in how well the skills learned in the Academy prepared them to perform on the floor. One subcategory in the Engine Company section, Hose Service Testing, rated below average (Figure 1) and Airbrake Certification in the Driver’s Performance section rated below average (Figure 2).
Rookies were also asked to describe, in an open ended format, the areas of the Recruit Training Academy that were good, areas that needed improvement and to list some ideas based on their experiences where the Academy could make some improvements. Nearly 43% of those who were asked to identify areas of the Recruit Training Academy that need improvement described concerns related to the FTO’s. Concerns expressed by the rookies ranged from a lack of consistency among the trainers to trainers with little firefighting experience themselves. One rookie stated:

“Too many different instructors and lack of consistency in training. Instructors with little experience training newcomers with no experience.”

Expressing similar concern, another rookie stated:

“More organization and more recently experienced training personnel. On more than one occasion, we would sit around for up to an hour waiting for the FTO’s to figure out what they were going to do. Another thing is the people teaching us haven’t been on the floor in a long time and it was frustrating when you would ask a question and they had no idea. This happened quite often.”

Another 38% of rookies listed fireground tasks and live fire training as areas in the Academy that needed improvement. Examples listed by rookies included:

- “We need more training in the burn tower;”
- “We need more fire attack training;”
“More hands on experience is needed at real time speed;”

“Please spend more time on fire attack and actual scenarios;”

“Auto extraction, specialized firefighting (flammable liquids and gas fires);”

“Forcible entry needs to be addressed. More coordinated fire attack;”

“When a task is shown, performed and completed it should be done again given real fire department scenarios so that it can be applied as such when recruits hit the floor.”

Fire Captain Survey Results

A sixteen-question survey was emailed to 93 Fire Captains of the LVFR in an effort to understand in greater detail concerns expressed by the “floor firefighters.” Most of the results appeared to substantiate the concerns expressed verbally to the City Manager and Deputy City Manager during their visits with firefighters at their stations. Of the 93 Fire Captains in the LVFR, 34 responded to the survey mailed, a 37% response rate. The average length of service of the Fire Captains who completed the survey was 17 years. The survey consisted of both open and closed ended questions and those surveyed were given an option to leave contact information to allow the evaluators to speak with them directly. Eighteen (18) respondents (nearly 53%) provided their names and phone numbers to be contacted by the team.

Of those answering the survey, 97% felt the Academy was too easy and 84% believed the recruits entering the academy were not well prepared. Sixty percent (60%) rated Clark County’s training academy as the most difficult of the local academies, however 66% of respondents believed the City of Las Vegas and Henderson’s fire academies best prepares recruits for fire service. In initial discussions with Chief’s Washington and Miramontes, both reported that many of the floor firefighters believed the recruits entering the academy were “rejects” from other academies in the valley that have more stringent and difficult training programs. Results from the
survey supported this finding. Of the rookies surveyed, 77% had applied to other area Fire Departments (Clark County, North Las Vegas, Henderson) and of those, 69% failed to pass acceptance standards at those Fire Departments.

Chief Washington and his successor were both concerned about the perception of the FTOs from the floor firefighters and Fire Captains. FTOs were described as unprofessional and most of the concerns about the training academy were related to the training skills of the FTOs. When asked if FTO’s were professional when dealing with recruits, 52% responded “No.” A number of Fire Captain’s stated FTO’s do not “understand or lack the knowledge of being a firefighter.” Some described casual behavior between the recruits and trainers, and yet another described some of the FTO’s as “out of shape, not in proper uniform, always on the phone and did not speak proper English.”

Nearly 78% of the Fire Captains surveyed do not believe FTO’s understand the needs of the fire stations. Some of the open-ended reply’s to this item questioned the skill level of the FTO’s themselves. Many of the Fire Captains described the FTO’s as lacking in actual firefighter experience or as only “marginal” firefighters themselves before becoming FTO’s. One respondent summed up his feelings as follows:

“...This might be one of our greatest obstacles. Quality employees cannot be developed through inadequate employees. Academies are the climate and opportunity to eliminate employees that are truly (in)capable, and cannot perform the basic skills as a firefighter. Including, but not limited to: fitness, attitude, manipulative skills, knowledge, determination, discipline, professionalism, to mention a few. They should have qualities as an FTO, such as: Competence, respect of peers, passion for fire service, dedication, knowledge, discipline and ability to teach it. Most of the problem lies within the fact that they have never been a Fire Captain. This is a valuable perspective in teaching recruits.”

Many of the Fire Captains expressed similar concerns about the FTO’s, reflective of a serious disconnect between the fire stations and the academy. Twenty-seven (27) out of 31 of the
Fire Captain’s surveyed felt there lacked good communication/feedback between fire stations and the Academy with regard to the performance of the Academy graduates and nearly all of the Fire Captain’s surveyed believed the Academy would improve if floor firefighters from various stations taught classes or participated in the trainings. However, should a model of involving floor firefighters in the training be utilized, a number of respondents strongly urged there be consistency in how the training is conducted, which might prove difficult if bringing a cadre of floor firefighters in to conduct trainings.

In addition to the Instructors conducting the training at the Academy, many of the Fire Captains surveyed had concerns about the type and structure of the training the rookies were receiving. When asked which part of the Academy should be strengthened, the overwhelming majority of the Fire Captains answered “Skills Development (use of tools, hose lays, etc.). The majority of the Fire Captains surveyed (55%) believed the purpose of the Academy is to “prepare recruits to perform most techniques in a real world environment” while 34% of those surveyed felt the recruits should be taught basic skills and learn the real world techniques once assigned to the floor (Figure 3). When asked which skill components firefighters need the most work on when assigned to the floor for the first time, “basic skills” and “fire ground tasks” received 25% and 21% of the responses respectively.

**Figure 3**

![Bar Chart](image)

**What level of preparedness should the Academy be reaching with recruits?**

- 55%: Prepares recruits to perform most techniques in a real world
- 34%: Prepares recruits for "real world fire training."
- 11%: Make trainees able to pass certification standards.

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12
The survey asked two (2) questions about the skill components and areas of the academy where recruits needed enhanced training. Each of the two questions had an open-ended component where the Fire Captains were able to describe in detail the areas Fire Captains felt rookies lacked the required training needed to perform tasks in the "real world." As Figure 4 indicates, 25% of the Fire Captains felt the rookies needed training in basic techniques such as tool use, ladders, working in full turnouts, map reading, report writing and computer skills. Another 21% felt the recruits lacked skills related to fire-ground tasks. However, when asked for their opinions on ideas for academy improvement, 65% chose strengthening the training by changing how the training is delivered versus 35% who were more concerned about actual training skills such as live fire training and other hands-on experience.

**Figure 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Captain Identified Most Problematic Rookie Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic Skills: 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire-ground Tasks: 21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hose Pulls: 14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hose Lay Evolutions: 14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Tools: 11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truck Company: 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driver's Performance: 4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fire Captain Interviews**

The PET interviewed several of the Fire Captains who had indicated an interest in speaking further about the Academy. One Fire Captain interviewed was exasperated about the current state of the Academy and listed a litany of concerns ranging from the lack of qualified recruits to inexperienced and uncommitted training officers. However, a few Fire Captains provided a different perspective on the Academy, as they were concerned that the FTOs were not
being sufficiently supported by the Human Resources Department. These Fire Captains indicated that the FTO’s lack the power to fail recruits that are not performing to standard. They felt that the Recruit Training Center is being blamed for problems that result from outside influences, including politics, the union, city hall and Human Resources. In particular, it was pointed out that the FTOs are not allowed to fail recruits that belong to a protected class regardless if they are competent or not. It was further felt that the Human Resources Department is too involved in the hiring and passing process and that this explains why there is a zero wash out rate for LVFR.

The Fire Captains indicated that the recruits are not pushed to find their limits in the current Academy. “They need to be able to risk it all in order to save lives but the FTOs are not allowed to push the recruits if the weather is too hot or if they say they are too tired” (Fire Captain Interviews). One Fire Captain even had an example where the firefighter recruits refused to enter a building to put out the fire. The Fire Captain ended up having to have the fire extinguished but there were no negative repercussions to the recruits, who were members of a protected class. “These cadets should be weeded out in the academy” (Fire Captain Interviews). The Fire Captains indicated that Human Resources appears more concerned with meeting quotas than hiring the best qualified people and that the FTOs and Fire Captains are unable to get rid of firefighters that are incompetent.

Conclusions

The survey research and interviews suggest that a serious “disconnect” is prevalent between the floor firefighters and the Academy. The “disconnect” exists in the communication of expectations and the methods of training. Addressing this “disconnect” is the fundamental fix for the lack of goal alignment between what the Academy produces and what the Fire Stations expect. Findings from the data indicate a need for more frequent and recurring communications
between the Academy and the Fire Stations. Further, there may be a problem between the FTOs and Human Resources as pertains to the ability of the FTOs to drop recruits from the Academy.
COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

The PET conducted research on comparable fire departments to ascertain how their training academies are conducted and what processes are in place to support probationary firefighters. The organizations reviewed are the Clark County Fire Department, the Long Beach Fire Department, the Phoenix Fire Department and the Los Angeles Fire Department. It is hoped that this review will offer some ideas to LVFR for inclusion in its recruit training processes.

Clark County Fire Department

At the Clark County Fire Department, the Training Officer is a promotional position for a floor-firefighter. The Training Officer works under the supervision of a Deputy Fire Chief and must have five years of experience as a Fire Instructor II. This position is responsible for the initial and continued training of fire personnel in all aspects of emergency service. Examples of duties include:

Plans, coordinates and directs the activities involved in the development and implementation of the Fire Department Training program. Establishes long and short range goals and objectives and institutes procedures to achieve them; monitors progress and performance and implements corrective actions as necessary. Resolves operational problems and develops and implements innovative programs and procedures. Recommends development training and other educational programs. Identifies the need for and recommends development training and other educational programs; develops content of training sessions, including course outlines and materials. Performs similar and related duties as required. (Clark County Human Resources Department)

Fire Department Training Instructor’s are hired from outside of the Fire Department and are responsible for the day-to-day operation of the Academy. They teach all classroom courses, according to the job description on the human resource website. Examples of duties include:

Prepares, designs and delivers specialized training programs in the areas of fire safety and service operations, supervision and management. Assists in the scheduling of training classes/sessions. Coordinates training activities with other instructors and fire department personnel. Obtains necessary equipment, space and other resources necessary to conduct training. Produces necessary
Instructional aids and documentation; reviews and adapts prepared instructional materials for specific topics; develops student evaluation instruments to support instruction and the evaluation of test results.

Education and training experience is required and "candidates selected will be required to attain Fire Service Instructor I & II Certification as specified in NFPA 1041 within one year from date of hire" (Clark County Human Resources Department).

Three levels of firefighters volunteer to come off the floor for the duration of the academy to instruct the rookies. A Fire Captain is assigned to oversee the school. An Engineer is assigned to teach Apparatus sections of the training and Firefighters teach the hands on skills and live fire exercises. The Academy (Rookie School) is generally 20 weeks and the number of floor personnel assigned to the academy depends on the size of the academy (example, a class of 40 rookies will require 8-10 fire-fighters to come off the floor).

Employees who volunteer to come off the floor from the Suppression Division to the Training Division are compensated according to the Agreement between Clark County Firefighters Local 1908 and The County of Clark, State of Nevada. Article 34.8 states "employees...serving as instructors, shall receive premium pay at the rate of (10%) of their base salary and shall continue to receive any other premium pay they received prior to their temporary assignment to the Training Division."

Firefighters who successfully complete the Academy are on probation for 1 year as a Firefighter I and are evaluated continuously by Officers on the floor. At the conclusion of the first year and if approved by Officers on the floor, the employee must pass a test to become a Firefighter II.
Las Vegas Recruit Training Academy Evaluation

Long Beach Fire Department

The Long Beach California Fire Department (LBFD) in Long Beach, California, has designed a Recruit Training Academy that also ensures floor participation and communication. Six categories of Instructors deliver the Recruit Training Academy.

1. Training Captains are permanently assigned to the Training Center;
2. Specially detailed operations instructors are assigned full-time to the Training Center for the duration of the Academy;
3. Specially detailed firefighter-paramedics are assigned to conduct the EMT course;
4. Nurse Educators (RN’s) are assigned to oversee and teach the EMT course;
5. Peer instructors participate on a voluntary and as-needed basis;
6. Specialty instructors teach subject matter requiring significant depth of knowledge and experience (those chosen are recognized as the Department’s leading expert in their subject area)

The Emergency Medical Training (EMT) course is taught during the first 3 weeks of the Academy and is taught by two paramedics and the Nurse Educators. Operations instructors teach basic fire and rescue skills during the final 11 weeks. One training Captain is selected for every 4 recruits. In an Academy of 24 recruits, there will be 6 operations instructors. A seventh Training Captain serves as the Academy Coordinator. A few specialty instructors are also used during the 14-week Academy.

Peer instructors may be asked to provide training and may include as many as 25 volunteers. Some provide a few hours of time while others give several hours over the course of several days. These peer instructors then become an excellent source of future training officers for the Academy.
All Academy Instructors are encouraged to complete the Instructional Methods for Fire, Rescue and Emergency Medical Services course. Peer Instructors are required to attend a Peer Instructors’ Orientation Course. Academy Instructors at a minimum must meet NFPA’s Fire Instructor I competencies, plus must complete an additional 40-45 hour course created by Training staff and tailored to the needs of the LBFD. Peer Instructors must complete a 9-hour Orientation Course.

Every Captain in the Fire Department attends a 9-hour orientation course (recently reduced to 3 hours). The goal of the orientation is to explain how the Academy’s curriculum integrates with the Captain’s training and supervision responsibilities once Academy graduates are assigned to the floor. This orientation opens communication between the Fire Captains and Training staff. The Course places emphasis on the “handing off” of Academy graduates to their floor supervisors (Fire Captains).

**Phoenix Fire Department**

The Phoenix Fire Department, located in Phoenix, Arizona, has developed a system of support for the rookie firefighters leaving the Recruit Training Academy to help them adjust to the floor and provide any additional training that may be needed. They designed this process to reduce the expense of losing personnel during the training process and ensure success for Firefighter Recruits. As a result, during the 9-month probation period, there is only a 2% washout rate. A Probationary Management Officer is assigned to monitor the firefighter recruit and provide assistance when the recruit is having problems. The recruit spends time in 3 stations for three months each and is evaluated at each station. These postings include at least 2 Engine Company postings and 1 Ladder Company posting.
The recruits are evaluated on both a physical component and classroom testing. Each recruit must pass the testing to be removed from probationary status. These evaluations are performed at the Academy to ensure a fair process.

Training at the Phoenix Fire Academy is provided by both permanent FTOs and floor staff. The floor staff is usually a Fire Captain that is particularly good at a particular function (e.g. extrication or ventilation). Floor personnel are brought in from the field to train those components at the academy. Phoenix Lead FTO Navarro commented that this brought greater credibility to the classes. FTO Navarro further stated, “how would it look if a permanent academy instructor who hasn’t been in a ladder truck more than a few times taught those functions compared to the guy who has done it for fifteen to twenty years.”

Los Angeles Fire Department

The Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD), located in Los Angeles, California, created a multi-agency committee called the LAFD Quality Assurance Unit (QAU). The QAU is responsible for (1) helping to develop policies and procedures related to recruits and probationary Firefighters; (2) planning, implementing and developing programs designed to improve recruit performance; (3) evaluating the efficiency of current recruit training programs; (4) identifying trends and providing findings to enhance or improve recruit training; and (5) reviewing, processing and analyzing the monthly field evaluations for all probationary Firefighters (Fire Watch, 2005). The QAU Officers interview academy staff and graduates to identify policies and procedures that affect recruit training and independently observe and review delivery of training sessions. The purpose of this review is to maintain the consistency and quality of academy and field training.
Upon graduation, recruits assigned to a station are observed and evaluated by the QAU Officers. QAU Officers also attend the 4, 7 and 10-month probationary firefighter field evaluations. These evaluations are used to benchmark a probationary Firefighters progress. A probationary Firefighter is graded on their ability to demonstrate effective and safe ladder evolutions, required hose evolutions and the use of tools and equipment carried on the apparatus they are assigned to (Fire Watch, 2005). These efforts are undertaken to ensure probationary Firefighter success in the field and ensure clear communication between the Academy, the Floor and Management.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Rookie Recommendations

The Rookies who took the survey had some very distinct suggestions for improving the academy based on their recent experiences completing the training. Some of the suggestions that stood out were:

- “Assign the rookie to his or here probationary Fire Captain early in the rookie school process and not the last week. Have that Fire Captain at the [Training Center] to evaluate during benchmarks.”
- “More in-depth class on auto(mobile) extraction dealing with challenges of newer cars. More time on vertical ventilation and cutting on the roofs.”
- “More training in full gear on air to get used to working in those conditions.”
- “More ride-alongs.”
- “When assigning recruits probation stations, they should be assigned the busiest stations.”

In addition to a number of helpful suggestions from the rookies for improving the academy, 55% of those who answered this question also made reference to the Field Training Officer’s problematic level of experience and/or training skills.

Fire Captain Recommendations

The Fire Captain’s, when asked in an open-ended format to provide information or ideas they thought would be helpful in improving the Fire Training, provided very detailed and candid suggestions for enhancing training for the recruits. Some of the more practical suggestions included the following:
At the conclusion of the Academy, FTO’s should return to the floor to work as firefighters until the next Academy;

Recruits should spend time performing on-the-job training while still in the Academy.

Have Fire Captains, Battalion Chiefs and firefighters from the floor train the recruits.

Have recruits spend time as fifth rider on units periodically throughout the Academy (will give Fire Captains an opportunity to evaluate recruits prior to them being assigned to a station; gives Fire Captain’s an opportunity to supervise and train on the floor like an apprenticeship).

Nearly 53% of the Fire Captains who responded to the survey were willing to be further interviewed by the evaluators regarding their specific answers to the questions and to volunteer any additional information. Time did not permit the evaluators to call all of the Fire Captains on the list but a select few were contacted based on feedback we received from the City Manager and Deputy City Manager, and based on their responses to the questions.

Fire Captain Recommendations from Interviews

Several additional suggestions were made to improve the firefighter training in the interviews with some of the Fire Captains. It was noted that firefighters from the floor were involved in the academy training in years past. There were some problems with this as different floor firefighters taught different standards. However, training the trainers would help to fix this problem while providing recruits with trainers who operate in the “real world”. It was suggested that the firefighter recruits should not graduate the Academy until after their probation is completed on the floor.

It was also suggested that a smaller sized Academy would make it impossible for unfit recruits to “hide” or “slip through”. Smaller Academies were previously tried and “all of the
recruits that came out of these small academies went on to be respected firefighters“ (Fire Captain Interview). Finally, it was noted that FTOs used to work four ten-hour days and recruits worked five eight-hour days. This allowed the FTOs an extra 10 hours per week to prepare for the training classes. The FTOs rotated days and had different days off. With FTOs now working the same schedule as the recruits, there is little time to prepare and the FTOs end up looking unprepared and unprofessional in front of the Academy recruits.

**PET Recommendations**

The PET recommends that LVFR develop a variety of policies and/or programs to ensure good communication between the floor and the Academy. Recognizing that budgets are currently tight, there are nevertheless many low cost options for improving the Academy.

1. Develop an orientation for Fire Captains about the Recruit Training Academy so they know what the expectations are for recruits at the Academy and are made aware of any changes to the training. This will also provide a forum for the Fire Captains to provide input into the Academy and discuss issues with the FTOs.

2. If moving floor personnel into Academy training is not currently financially feasible, LVFR should have the FTOs work on coordinating the manipulative skills training so that consistency is maintained. It would also be beneficial, although perhaps more costly, to ensure the FTOs have access to ongoing professional training for themselves.

3. The PET believes it would be beneficial to have firefighters highly skilled in specific areas provide training at the Academy. This idea is supported by all sources of research. Survey data collected from Captains and recent Academy graduates support the idea of involving floor firefighters in academy skills training. In comparing other agencies training methods, the PET has found that the practice of using floor firefighters who
currently specialize in a skill to train Cadets is common among all comparative agencies. The practice appears to add credibility to the training and it naturally facilitates communication between Fire Stations and the Academies. This can be done on a voluntary basis as a less costly alternative. Recognizing that some pay differences may occur if a firefighter leaves the floor for several weeks or months, perhaps they could be placed on a list to be called first for overtime. As budgets improve in coming years, it would be best to provide a pay premium, such as that used by Clark County, and ensure these floor firefighters have opportunities for overtime during their time at the Academy. Pulling personnel from the floor will also impact coverage and may require additional personnel be hired. Finally, it is important that floor firefighters pulled into the Academy to be trainers be provided with training themselves to ensure consistency.

4. Provide on-the-job training for recruits while still in the Academy. They could spend some “apprentice” time at a station and ride along on calls as an observer. The Fire Captains can provide feedback to the recruit and the FTOs as they observe the recruits on the floor.

5. Assign recruits to their probationary Fire Captain early in the Academy. As the Academy progresses, the FTOs and Fire Captains can meet to discuss each recruit’s strengths and weaknesses. Further, each recruit can meet with their Fire Captain to discuss their progress at the Academy and any strengths or deficiencies that the Fire Captain notices in their floor performance. This would also provide the Fire Captain with the opportunity to work with the recruit to improve their skills.

6. LVFR could create a pre-Academy class to be held a few weeks prior to the start of the Academy. This class could cover items like terminology and hand tool familiarization.
The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department offers a pre-Academy class that is not required but strongly recommended prior to starting the Academy.

Several of the probationary period programs used by other fire departments and suggested in the Fire Captain survey might work well to improve Academy and floor communications.

7. Upon assignment to their station, LVFR could assign a floor firefighter as a mentor for the rookie. This person would participate in evaluating the rookie throughout their probationary period. It would be prudent to conduct three evaluations during the probationary period to be completed by all of the officers that recruits interact with on the floor. Adding this evaluation program will involve negotiation with the Union but is necessary to ensure at least minimum performance standards.

8. With the statistical analysis tools created as part of this study, LVFR administration can use the survey instrument for future performance evaluations of the Academy. If they use the same scores and rankings developed here, LVFR can determine whether improvements have been made to the training curriculum as reported by its graduates. With these tools, LVFR can view the performance of individual skills, skill sets and overall academy performance on a repeatable basis. Establishing benchmarks and goals based on those benchmarks will aid in determining whether they should focus on small areas or large areas of Academy curriculum. These tools coupled with the generally high levels of experience and expertise found among LVFR Chiefs and Administrators should combine to highlight inefficiencies, showcase successes and illuminate a pathway for the continued development and evolution of the Las Vegas Recruit Training Academy.
CONCLUSION

Several steps have already been taken by the Assistant Fire Chiefs of Training including creating a satellite office in the training center for the Assistant Fire Chief to get a better perspective on activities at the center and changing the physical fitness portion of the Recruit Training Academy. It is hoped that the recommendations in this evaluation will help the LVFR continue on this path to improvement of the Recruit Training Academy. Additional work will need to be done and can be accomplished through discussions with the FTOs and an improved communication network between the floor and the Academy. With the interest in seeing improvement to the Academy high at the City Manager level and with a highly skilled and motivated Chief of Training, Las Vegas Fire and Rescue is poised to create an improved Training Academy that will produce high quality firefighter recruits and consequently a safer community.
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