

Big Idea, Small Budget

The Olympia Fire Department uses a low-cost simulation program to certify incident commanders

Editor's Note: As the number of structure fires decreases, fire departments increasingly struggle with how to prepare company officers and battalion chiefs—many of whom have seen very few working fires—to lead incidents effectively. Assistant Chief Pat Dale of the Olympia (Wash.) Fire Department has built an innovative, low-cost program that uses simulations and task books to ensure incident commanders (ICs) are prepared for what they'll face on the fireground. Recently, I had an opportunity to catch up with Chief Dale about the program.

Timothy E. Sendelbach: Describe your department's philosophy toward incident command training.

Assistant Chief Pat Dale: Incident command training is becoming more important because we're seeing younger, less experienced fire officers, especially in smaller departments like ours that don't see a lot of structure fires. I see people coming to the Command Training Center newly promoted after they've been on the job only 5 years, and in that time they maybe went to one structure fire.

Within incident command, to me the emphasis needs to be on structural fires, because in the structural fire world that's where our risk is. Once you take out heart attacks and vehicle accidents, what's left that's killing firefighters? Structural fires.

TES: What was the impetus behind the program?

PD: For me it started with going to Phoenix and seeing their command training center. From the beginning I wanted to have something I was training toward, an objective. I focused on building a program to *certify* structural incident commanders. Our state certifies plumbers, electricians, morticians, you name it, but you can simply give a guy a fire engine and call him an IC. He's responsible for millions of dollars in equipment and people's lives, and he has no certification.

TES: So your goal was to set some specific criteria for those who will serve in the IC capacity?

PD: Yes, for both initial ICs and battalion-level ICs. It's a way for members to meet standardized criteria and prove their ability to perform in that position.

No program that I know of focuses on certification of incident commanders. Wildland fire has certifications from red card to IC, but programs that focus on the structural fire service don't exist.

TES: Describe the Olympia incident command training program.

PD: I built the program using the task book system from the wildland fire service, with the curriculum based on NFPA standards. Participants complete simulations that gain in complexity, starting with a simulation of a single-family room-and-contents fire, then moving to a two-story single-family balloon frame with basement, on to a restaurant, strip mall, etc. The set of objectives changes with each simulation.

Firefighters from the department complete about 36 hours of simulation, 90 minutes at a time. We run each shift one day a month, so it takes an individual about 2 years of in-service company time to complete the task book.

One key: Participants must repeat the simulations if they don't do it right the first time. If the other participants see someone fail the simulation but still get signed off, it would ruin the credibility of the program. So we provide remedial training followed by a second run of the simulation.

TES: How do the task books play a part in ensuring the ICs will make the right decisions?

PD: Task books use job performance requirements based on the fire officer curriculum. Where

the curriculum would ask, "Does the initial arriving officer recognize situations that require two-in/two-out?" the simulation puts them into that situation and allows you to evaluate whether they in fact recognize two-in/two-out situations. There's a check sheet for each simulation.

TES: What were the objectives built on?

PD: The curriculum is built on NFPA standards (1561, 1500) and NIMS. But it starts with the department's standardized deployment model. For example, if you're the first-arriving engine company at a structure fire, what's the standard deployment you follow? It might be: Do a size-up, initiate command, and recognize whether it's an immediate rescue situation or a two-in/two-out situation. Those steps become part of the objectives for the training.

Overall the training is focused on using NIMS principles to address smaller incidents, Type 4 and 5—incidents that occur over 30–60 minutes as opposed to the longer incidents we usually associate with NIMS.

TES: You're basically creating and training on a standardized model for NFPA objectives.

PD: Yes, exactly, and by doing so we can influence and advocate a certain type of behavior. A good example is the issue of two-in/two-out. In Puget Sound, we largely have three-person companies, so the fire officer's first question in many incidents is, "Are we going in, or are we going to wait?"

In a classroom setting, you might ask: "With a three-person company do you deploy two-in/two-out in such-and-such situation?" And students will say yes.

But when you take them into a real scenario, they don't necessarily adhere to two-in/two-out, they're confused about how to use it and what to do. Simulations allow you to confront the IC with the situation and judge how they react. We can do an immediate critique following the simulation and talk specifically about what actions they did or didn't take.



About 10 participants complete the command simulations simultaneously, which adds to the pressure for those serving in the IC and BC roles.

More Resources

For a 2-minute video overview of Olympia's Command Training Center, go to www.olympiawa.gov/cityservices/fire/

For a sample page from the Olympia incident command training task book, visit www.fire-rescue.com.

TES: Are you seeing the difference in the streets?

PD: Members are telling me that they're more comfortable as a result of the training. An acting battalion chief told me he was first-arriving on a structure fire, and he was kind of nervous, because it had been a while since he had acted as BC. So he started talking to himself in the SUV on the drive over, telling himself, "Imagine that you're just at the simulation." He said when he arrived, it was just like going through the training—and he did a great job.

Another example: We had a fire in a local cardboard manufacturing plant. The building has a big bowstring arched roof, and a fire started in the overhead from an electrical short. The cardboard fibers ignited all at once, creating a rolling fire that became a five-alarm incident. This was an opportunity to test the whole incident command system we'd trained on—staging, RIT, rehab, etc. And it worked really well at this incident.

The next week, the company took out a full-page ad in the newspaper thanking the fire service community for saving their business.

TES: How did you fund the training center—through a grant?

PD: We didn't apply for a grant. We're a small fire department—85 people, three stations—so we don't have a huge budget, but we were able to create the command training center relatively inexpensively. We took budget recovery money the city received, and we used it to rehab an old fire station that had been vacant for about 10 years. That was about \$75,000.

After that, I got a hold of some computers the city was replacing, and from there I just kept begging, borrowing, stealing and scratching for equipment to piece this

thing together. Along with the rehab costs, I'd say we spent around \$150,000 total. But it took a few years and a lot of networking.

Command training centers are usually associated with big cities, but small and medium-sized departments should know that building one is within reach. You don't have to be a large metro department to pull off something that's effective.

TES: What was the reaction among officers when the program was first rolled out?

PD: It's been positive from the start. People who come into it for the first time are tentative because they'll be in room full of their peers, and if they're in one of the two command "hot seats," there's a lot of pressure. But after you run a couple of simulations, they want to do more of it.

TES: Are there "lessons learned" that would make it easier for other departments looking to establish similar programs?

PD: Look for opportunities to form partnerships. We approached the local community college about the possibility of delivering the command training through their fire training program. Within a month it was part of the accredited curriculum.

We also partnered with our local dispatch agency. Like many county-wide dispatch centers, they dispatch more police calls than fire. The dispatchers are often intimidated by fire calls. So, as part of the command center I built a mock dispatch terminal, with live CAD feed and a console, and I always have a dispatcher from our countywide dispatch participate in the training. It's good to have them involved because we get to see a real person's face and improve the relationship.

TES: Do you see the command training fitting into a promotional/career development plan?

PD: The simulations are becoming a part of the tactics portion of our promotional testing, and it works really well. We're working toward making the curriculum a requirement to advance to a certain level. Labor is very supportive of that, so I expect that within the next year or so this task book will be a requirement of promotion.

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Successful command of incidents depends on recognition-primed decision making—reacting to an incident based on your ability to identify the appropriate response. Simulations provide "slides" that your brain can refer to when faced with actual incidents.



