

**PART ONE - INTRODUCTION**

*This is the first in a series of articles about professional status for the Fire and Emergency Services through a common system of training and education. Subsequent articles will discuss Training and Education, A Model for Training and Education; Independent Assessment of Skills and Reciprocity; and, The Future – Where We Go From Here.*

In his 1994 Master's Degree Thesis, Chief Ronny Coleman quoted Sir Eyre Massey-Shaw, the Fire Chief of the London Fire Brigade in 1873. When speaking of the people in the fire service 130 years ago, he said, "...that the business [fire], if properly studied and understood, is worth being regarded as a profession."<sup>1</sup>

Think about this – you are the fire chief in your community, and your son or daughter expresses a desire to become a physician. They ask if you know what training and education they need. "Sure," you say, "four years of college, four years of medical school, internship, residency, pass the medical boards." "How about an attorney?" "A little different" you say, "Four years of college, three years of law school, pass the Bar exam." And then another of your children asks, "Mom / Dad, I want to be the fire chief, just like you. What do I need to do?"

That's not as easy to answer. It varies from place to place, depending upon the organization, the structure of the department and the governing agency. The process isn't the same wherever you go; frequently it is a slow and uneven process, or one solely based on popularity. Too often, the process frustrates talented men and women; we lose our best and brightest. These are the very people who epitomize the word 'professional' – the ones who have the aptitude and drive to help the department face new challenges.

Professional status is a term that has been bandied about in the Fire and Emergency Services for years. What constitutes "professional" status is in the eye of the beholder. Were we to look at a 'professional' independent of the fire service, to some, it means the performance of a series of skills in a manner that is far above average. To others, a professional is associated with performing skills "full-time," that is to say, for a living. Many feel that the distinguishing characteristics of a profession are years of formal education, approval of an accrediting board and continuing education requirements. More than likely, it is the last statement with which most would agree.

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<sup>1</sup> Massey-Shaw, E., *Fire Protection, A Complete Manual Of The Organization, Machinery, Discipline and General Workings Of The Fire Brigade Of London*. C & E Leighton, 1876, p. xiii. From Coleman, Ronny J., *The Evolution of California Fire Service Training and Education*, California State University, Long Beach, Master's Degree Thesis, May 1994, p. 27.

Definitions aside, it is the walk down the main street in any city or town in America that demonstrates who in the community is professional. The physicians and nurses, the architects and engineers, the attorneys and the accountants are among the top professions in any community. What makes them so?

Each has a unique set of knowledge and skills that are independent of a particular organization or place; they are 'portable,' skills and held in equal regard no matter where the person practices. In the process of becoming a professional, there is an accredited and independent testing process that assures competency to the public. Professionals are associated with others in their profession through some formal organization; they typically put service to others as more important than profit; and they assume responsibility for their professional acts. Typically, their profession has some continuing education requirements, and the work is client centered.

Interestingly enough, the Fire and Emergency Services have most of those things. In theory (although not perhaps in current practice), providing emergency services is a 'portable' skill; many professionals move from department to department, from state to state. We have independent testing and assurance of competencies, e.g., NFPA Standards, certification; and in some cases, requirements for continuing education. The Fire and Emergency Services has several professional organizations, and the services delivered are certainly client centered. Profit just isn't in the lexicon; all we concern ourselves with is people.

Then why aren't we given the professional status of physicians and nurses, architects and engineers, and attorneys and accountants? Well, those professions have some things that the Fire and Emergency Services do not yet have; there are a few more steps.

Those six professions (and the others like them) have other substantive tenets; principal among them is a universally recognized system to acquire the knowledge and skills to practice. Their systems of acquiring knowledge are reciprocal among all states. When physicians or lawyers or nurses move from state to state, they may have to present their credentials to the professional board in their new state. They may have to take an exam, or perhaps take some refresher courses – but they don't have to go back to school to learn the basics all over again. You can learn surgery in Texas, and operate in Minnesota. You can attend law school in Massachusetts and appear in court in Washington. You can learn electrical engineering in Montana and design computers in Silicon Valley in California.

But if you are a fire officer, with up-to-date professional training, and you decide to "practice" your profession in another state, you may have to go back to rookie school. That's right, rookie school – learning about classes of fire, types of extinguishers, coupling hose and raising ladders.

It's no one's fault. Right now, there is no one universally recognized and reciprocal system to acquire the knowledge and skills required in the Fire and Emergency Services. None. It's the largest hurdle associated with professional status that we have yet to

overcome. It isn't the only thing – but it is the most significant one right now. The remaining issues will be tackled. It has happened in other professions.

It is interesting to see where our current 'professions' were one hundred years ago. Most people probably don't realize that medical education was haphazard in this country until 1910. In the late 1700's, most physicians apprenticed, and a few attended medical schools in Europe. In the 1800's there were many 'for-profit' schools of medicine in the U.S. that were of questionable quality. It wasn't until 1910 that Abraham Flexner, the American education reformer, wrote *Medical Education in the United States and Canada*. He exposed the inadequacies of most of these private medical schools. Subsequently, the American Medical Association and the Association of American Medical Colleges established standards for course content, qualifications of teachers, laboratory facilities, affiliation with teaching hospitals, and licensing of practitioners that survive to this day.<sup>2</sup>

Many people also don't realize that although Abraham Lincoln was a lawyer, he never went to law school; he apprenticed. Law schools began in this country about 1875. Less than 100 years ago, babies were born at home, delivered by midwives; and some dental care was provided by barbers (yes, barbers!) called "Sanitaries."

Professions have been specialized too. Fifty years ago, pediatricians removed tonsils in their office; today surgeons do this in hospitals. Forty years ago, most nurses were "R.N.'s" with diplomas from three-year nursing schools. Today, higher educated nurses are called Nurse Practitioners, and can diagnose illness, order medical testing and prescribe drugs. Attorneys have specialized practices too – corporate, civil, criminal, personnel and a host of others. This increased specialization is a natural outgrowth of the complexity and increased requirements of practice.

Are the Fire and Emergency Services becoming specialized? You bet. The principal responsibility of the fire and emergency profession is the reduction of community risk – public education, fire prevention, code enforcement, and health and accident risk reduction.

When those prevention activities fail, what once was the fire department is now the emergency response of first and last resort. Citizens know that if they call you, they are going to hear sirens in a few short minutes. You're first on the scene of everything from a heart attack to a car accident, from a hazardous materials release to a trench rescue. Fire, earthquake, flood, hurricane, emergency birth, airplane crash, train derailment or terrorist event; all anyone need do is dial 9-1-1. They're expecting you.

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<sup>2</sup> "Medical Education," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2000  
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Twenty or thirty years ago, the foundations for professional status for the Fire and Emergency services were laid. Performance standards were established. Colleges and universities recognized the need for formal education and began degree programs. Fire departments began to require certifications, and many began to require degrees or advanced degrees for hiring or promotion. Uncommon thirty years ago, but quite common today, is the hiring of people with professional training and education from outside the organization (instead of through the ranks) to come in to run it. That's the evidence that we're ready to make the next move up the ladder of professions.

One of the principal challenges we have is that aspiring fire service professionals are staggered by the number of independent systems of training and education. There is no 'one way' for the student to determine which is the most appropriate training and/or education. There's no 'one-way' to become the chief. The problem is exacerbated by the reality that there is little chance that one system will recognize that student's performance in another system. Moving from fire department to fire department (or even more difficult – from a fire department in one state to a fire department in another), training or education already received may not be recognized.

The Fire and Emergency Services today is assuredly further along the path to professional status than those in medicine and law were one hundred years ago. We have a body of knowledge, we have standards and we have processes to assure competency (available through the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC) and the National Board on Fire Service Professional Qualifications (NBFSPQ or ProBoard). We have places to acquire professional knowledge, but right now, they are locally based – they aren't a part of a system that everyone recognizes. The missing link is a nationally recognized, reciprocal system of training and education. The good news is that we have all the parts; nothing has to be invented or established. These parts just need to be integrated:

- Training systems (available through local, State and the National Fire Academy).
- Education systems (available through 2-year, 4-year, graduate and National Fire Academy).
- Independent Assessment of Skills (IFSAC and ProBoard).
- Reciprocity among systems of training and education.