

## **PART FOUR – COMBINING THE SYSTEMS: INDEPENDENT ASSESSMENT OF SKILLS / RECIPROCITY**

*This is the fourth in a series of articles about professional status for the Fire and Emergency Services through a system of training and education. In Part One, the need for a system of training for the fire and emergency professional was discussed, and the challenges with our current separate systems were identified. Comparisons among other professions (Medicine, Law, Nursing etc.) and the Fire and Emergency Services were examined. Part Two discussed the Training and Education systems available to the fire service today – local, state and national programs and the way they compliment and supplement each other. Part Three discussed the Fire and Emergency Services Higher Education effort (FESHE), the development of model two and four-year degree curricula, syllabi and content, and the release of the thirteen USFA/NFA courses into four-year bachelor degree programs. Part Four will discuss the Independent Assessment of Skills and Reciprocity.*

Currently, the principal parts of a system of professional development exist. Each local, State, higher education and federal training organization, in their own way, has been working toward the same goal – the training and education of the men and women in the Fire and Emergency Services toward professional status.

The most practical approach to accomplishing the next step – assembling the training and education into one professional and reciprocal system – is a voluntary one. It should be a cooperative effort that will provide benefits to both the training and education systems and the students they serve. It is what other professions have done in the past. It is what the Fire and Emergency Services need to do now.

### **Independent Assessment of Skills**

Part of that system must include some process by which individuals are certified as competent to practice. Assessment of knowledge, skills and abilities is completed after a particular course of study. In the medical profession, the State Medical Association may be the agency, not the medical school. In most states, attorneys must “pass the Bar” to qualify to practice law, and the “Bar Exam” is independent of the law school. Nursing, engineering, architecture and accounting are other examples of professions with certifying agencies that are independent of the professional school. The assessment of individual knowledge, skills and abilities in every profession is independent of the school.

Fortunately for us, the fire service already has certifying agencies, the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC) and the National Board on Fire Service Professional Qualifications (NBFSPQ or ProBoard). Certifications are awarded to individuals because they have demonstrated competency, and the certifying agency assures that competency to the public. The more familiar certifications to those in the Fire and Emergency Services are Firefighter I, II, III; Fire Officer I, II, III, IV; and Fire

Instructor I, II. Other professional associations offer certification in other related fields – fire investigation, fire inspector and emergency medical technician are but a few.

Another important part of the equation is the Committee on Professional Development in the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). Committee members are representatives of the professional practitioners. For years, the IAFC has worked on a number of initiatives to credential fire chiefs (the Chief Fire Officer Designation - CFOD) and fire departments (Commission on Fire Accreditation International - CFAI) to recognize personal and organizational achievement, and assure some level of competency to the public.

## **Reciprocity**

With the descriptions of the systems that the fire service enjoys - training education and independent assessment, the next logical step is to combine these parts into one system of professional development for the fire service that is universally recognized and reciprocal.

The first step was to strengthen reciprocity by having all of the State fire training systems participate as full partners in the USFA/NFA system of training and education. Full partner means more than what they and we are currently doing; it means that your state training system is the USFA/NFA in your state. As such, they are required to hire USFA/NFA instructors to teach our courses, issue our certificates, and register the students they train in our student database. When a student takes four USFA/NFA courses in one state, and three in another, there will be one central place that the student can go for the transcripts of that training. The USFA/NFA is the catalyst and the repository.

States may now deliver six-day or two-day NFA courses, and three of our most popular two-week residential courses: Fire / Arson Investigation, Interpersonal Dynamics in Fire Service Organizations and Strategic Management of Change. These courses are in addition to the current deliveries already available to them in our six and two day programs. This program is called Enfranchisement. States are the NFA in their state; therefore, they may hire our instructors to teach our courses. Each State is eligible to apply for a \$25,000 grant to deliver these extra courses.

Beginning in 2000, State Training Systems were authorized to deliver USFA/NFA courses. Many of these courses currently have college credit award recommendations associated with them. To maintain that credit recommendation, the American Council on Education annually reviews our courses, methodologies and instructor qualifications. In order to sustain the credit recommendations, States are required to deliver USFA/NFA courses using NFA qualified instructors.

This is a very important point. State fire training systems may deliver NFA courses. It then follows that State fire training systems must also *accept* the training people received from the NFA in either our resident or field courses. That is one of the foundations of

reciprocity. If you take an NFA course anywhere in the country, it is accepted anywhere in the country.

Moreover, through the great work of the North American Fire Training Directors Association (NAFTD), all of the NFA courses have been “cross-walked” to the ProQual standards. This was an NAFTD peer review, not something decided in an ivory tower. Now, a student who takes an NFA course gets two “professional status” benefits – college credit, and some of the elements required for professional certification.

### **Endorsing State Developed Courses into the National Fire Academy Curriculum**

The second way to strengthen reciprocity is to recognize that State fire training systems have developed courses that meet very high quality standards, and at the same time, meet local need. Throughout the nation, there are needs for professional training that are not national in scope. For example, the New York City Fire Department may need a course on subway fires. The State of Kansas may have need for a farm rescue course. It’s pretty obvious that FDNY will probably never need a farm rescue course, and it will be a while before the State of Kansas has its own subway system. There has got to be a way to meet those needs.

Again, working with the State fire training systems, the USFA/NFA not only addressed a way that individual regions can meet their needs, but has done it in a way that also strengthens reciprocity. The USFA/NFA has given State training systems a way to include their top-level courses into the national curriculum. To accomplish this, we’ve formed a partnership with the State Training directors and agreed upon the criteria and standards for selection and approval of these courses. If the course meets the criteria, then it becomes a part of the national curriculum. These state developed courses, which are peer-reviewed and approved, are called Endorsed courses. Students who pass an Endorsed course may receive USFA/NFA certificates and be registered in our database. One of the key benefits is that an Endorsed course is taught by local instructors.

A third way to strengthen reciprocity and increase the number of courses delivered is to give States the opportunity to deliver train-the-trainer courses for any of the thirty-seven two-day Direct Delivery USFA/NFA courses. Those local trainers, working through the State system, may issue our certificates and register their students in our database.

States may issue NFA certificates on any of the 34 NFA hand-off courses delivered by local instructors when they register the student in our database.

States may deliver any of these courses - USFA/NFA developed courses (enfranchised), or approved state courses (endorsed) at a state training facility, a regional training facility, a college or university, or a local fire department – it is their choice.

To give the State training systems the opportunity to deliver this increased training, each has the opportunity to apply for a \$25,000 grant for the sole purpose of delivering these above mentioned courses.

**What are the benefits of a common system of training and education and reciprocity to the fire and emergency services?**

The foremost benefit to the Fire and Emergency Services is that it is the next logical step in establishing the professional status of the men and women in the Fire and Emergency Services. There is already a recognized body of professional knowledge. We now are beginning a universal system that allows everyone equal access to that professional knowledge.

The second principal benefit is that more people can now participate in USFA/NFA courses. We know that everyone cannot attend our classes in Emmitsburg. Enfranchisement permits States to deliver our courses locally at local training sites, using our instructors, with full college credit recommendation.

The third benefit is the reduction in course development costs. Currently, fire departments fifty miles away from each other are spending time, effort and money to develop the very same course. They have no idea that someone so close is working just as hard, spending just as much money and facing the same development obstacles they are. With an endorsement system available, departments can contact the state to find out what courses are already available before they decide to begin developing a course. No training system in this country has all of the people and money they need to develop courses – this solves a lot of those development problems.

The fourth benefit is reciprocity. Each State is now a part of a national system, empowered to issue USFA/NFA certificates for training and education provided. It therefore logically follows that States would accept certificates as evidence of training received in some other jurisdiction. Those basics are already built into the system; it simply saves training time and money. No one has to repeat a course because they moved; no department has to re-train a person in courses they've already had. It is similar to the status enjoyed by physicians, nurses, attorneys, engineers, architects, accountants and others.

The fifth benefit is that it increases the number of training courses available to State and local training systems, either through Enfranchisement, Endorsement or increased Train-the-Trainer courses.

The sixth benefit is that colleges and universities are a part of the system, building an environment which colleges can award credit for certification received, and that State fire training systems may accept some college credit toward certification requirements. Following the model curriculum, students should be able to transfer college credit between systems, and employers would have a firm understanding of the knowledge, skills and abilities of those who hold degrees in the fire field.

The seventh benefit is that the training and education model follows a logical sequence, endorsed by the International Association of Fire Chiefs Professional Development Committee's Officer Development Handbook.

### **What are the challenges?**

The State Fire Training Directors and the USFA/NFA staff have worked diligently for three years on this concept, overcoming obstacles, negotiating agreements, and identifying improvements. With the concept approved and endorsed by the National Fire Academy Board of Visitors, and the Co-Chair representatives of the State and Local fire training group (TRADE), the initial phases of the program have begun.

In 2000, states were notified that \$25,000 grants which could be used to deliver USFA/NFA courses were available, and since then all have applied and used those funds. The program allowing State Training Systems to deliver USFA/NFA developed courses (Enfranchisement) was also begun in 2000, and on the same day, the agreement that established the criteria and process to endorse state courses into the national curricula was announced. All of the funding and administrative pieces are in place.

Our next challenge is one of participation and cooperation – encouraging local training systems and colleges to cooperate and participate in the system. That is what we need all of you to help us do.