

Fires may be down, but demand for McHenry County fire services rising

Published: Monday, Nov. 2, 2015 11:55 p.m. CST

Firefighting is no different from law enforcement, military service or any other dangerous line of work in that new technologies only work as well as the trained professionals wielding them.

Although gadgets such as thermal cameras and improved life-safety equipment are aiding firefighters in their missions, the enemy they're fighting has changed significantly over the years as well.

The number of reported fires has steadily decreased – they have more than halved over the past 25 years – but they are more dangerous and are burning much faster, according to local fire chiefs. Fire departments nationwide are in a push to learn new tactics to face that changing threat.

Chiefs such as Algonquin-Lake in the Hills Fire Protection District Chief Peter Van Dorpe warn the decrease in reported fire calls is deceptive and should not be taken as an indicator that firefighters are safer or that fewer are needed.

“We all have an obligation to save the taxpayers money. You look at the statistics, you take a broad, easy look, and fires are down, so why do we need all these firefighters? On the surface, it looks like you don't need as many of them. In reality, yes, you do,” Van Dorpe said.

Just less than 1.3 million fires were reported nationwide last year, regardless of type – a 4.7 percent increase from 2013 and an average of one every 24 seconds, according to the National Fire Protection Association, which tracks such statistics.

Fires in 2014 caused \$11.6 billion in damage, and killed 64 firefighters and 3,275 residents. Last year's total, despite the uptick, still is less than half of the 3 million fire calls reported in 1980.

About 75 percent of the 494,000 structure fires reported last year came from homes and apartments. But a structure fire two generations ago is much different from the structure fires of today, Van Dorpe and Woodstock Fire Rescue Chief Ralph Webster warned.

Newer homes are much larger, made of newer materials that burn hotter and faster, and filled by homeowners with appliances, furniture and belongings that are made of highly flammable petroleum-based polymers. Even most wooden furniture, which of course will burn when heated, is treated with flammable polyurethane coatings.

“I challenge you to find even 25 percent of the stuff we have in our homes being made of

natural materials,” Webster said.

What this means for firefighters is they have to attack fires more aggressively before structures collapse. This also means firefighters have less time to search larger houses for trapped residents.

Thermal cameras and equipment that allow firefighters to enter burning structures that previous generations could not has to be paired with new techniques and new skills, said Van Dorpe, who is a member of the advisory board for the Firefighter Safety Research Institute run by Underwriters Laboratories, the worldwide safety consulting and certification company based in Northbrook.

“The present push isn’t about the technology that’s available to us; it’s to gather more information on how buildings burn and why they fail,” Webster said.

An example Van Dorpe cited about the changing nature of fires is the escape time homeowners have when their smoke alarms start sounding. Conventional wisdom still holds that smoke detectors, when properly placed on every floor and in every sleeping area, can increase escape time by up to 15 minutes.

In reality, in the modern American home filled with flammable belongings, that lead time can be as short as two minutes, Van Dorpe said.

The changing nature of the threat is backed somewhat by the fact that although fewer firefighters and residents are dying in fires, property damage from fires has increased steadily.

The average loss per structure fire, adjusting for inflation and excluding the Sept. 11 terror attacks, has increased 35 percent since 1977. When inflation is not factored in, the average \$19,931 loss cost per structure fire last year is 431 percent greater than the average \$3,757 in 1977.

What’s more, although there are fewer fires being reported, McHenry County’s fire departments hardly are sitting idle, Webster and Van Dorpe said.

Most area fire districts are hybrids in which most, if not all, firefighters also are dual-trained as paramedics and EMTs. And that mission has changed to meet an ever-growing need.

Long gone are the days in which the rescue squad’s primary task merely was taking injured people to the local hospital. Emergency medical personnel must first stabilize the victim at the scene before transport, be it for a broken ankle or someone having a heart attack.

“They have to intervene on the scene. If you’re having a heart attack, we have to save you there. That takes more than two people,” Van Dorpe said.

That requires a pool of talented and trained individuals, and their workload is increasing. Woodstock Fire Rescue received 1,100 calls in 1993, the year in which its fire and rescue districts merged.

The 4,500 calls it receives annually is more than a 300 percent increase, Webster said. Of the 31.6 million total calls fire departments received last year, almost two-thirds were for medical assistance, according to National Fire Protection Association data.

“There are less actual structure fires, but we’ve been busier than we ever have been,” Webster said.

Although Van Dorpe said governments have to watch the bottom line, taking it away from public safety is not a good idea.

“We have to guard against reducing to the point that we can’t get there in time, and if we get there, and I have to search this bigger house one room at a time, we may not be able to get to you,” Van Dorpe said.

Copyright © 2015 Northwest Herald. All rights reserved.
