THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF BECOMING AN ACCREDITED AGENCY

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

Fire Service Accreditation:
The Advantages and Disadvantages of Becoming an Accredited Agency

Kristopher W. Shrader
Deputy Chief
Martinsville Fire & EMS Department
Martinsville, Virginia
Certification Statement

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

Signed: ________________________________

Kristopher W. Shrader
Abstract

The problem is that the administration of the Martinsville Fire & EMS Department (MF&EMS) does not understand the advantages or disadvantages of becoming a Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI) accredited agency. The MF&EMS hypothesizes that CFAI accreditation is the department’s next step towards quality improvement. The purpose of this applied research project is to determine the advantages and disadvantages associated with becoming an accredited fire and EMS department.

The descriptive research method was used to answer the following research questions: (a) What are the advantages of becoming an accredited agency? (b) What are the disadvantages of becoming an accredited agency? (c) What factor should the MF&EMS use to determine whether to pursue CFAI accreditation?

An extensive literature review was conducted to identify relevant sources of information that was directly related to the research problem to answer the research questions. The results of this research project suggest that there is much to gain by becoming CFAI accredited. It is recommended that the MF&EMS pursue CFAI accreditation, incorporate accreditation into its strategic plan, and to lobby various Virginia fire service organizations to consider the development of a state fire and EMS agency accreditation program.
Table of Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... Page 3

Table of Contents ........................................................................................................ Page 4

Introduction ............................................................................................................... Page 5

Background and Significance ..................................................................................... Page 7

Literature Review ....................................................................................................... Page 10

Procedures ................................................................................................................. Page 28

Results ......................................................................................................................... Page 31

Discussion .................................................................................................................... Page 36

Recommendations ....................................................................................................... Page 42

Reference List .............................................................................................................. Page 45

List of Tables

Table 1: Full-Time Personnel Division Assignments ................................................... Page 7

Table 2: Annual Estimates of the Population for City of Martinsville ....................... Page 8

Table 3: Fundamental Characteristics of Accreditation .............................................. Page 12

Table 4: The Nine Law Enforcement Standard Subject Areas .................................. Page 14

Table 5: CALEA Initial Accreditation and Continuation Fees .................................... Page 15

Table 6: CFAI Accreditation Fee Structure ................................................................ Page 18

Table 7: The Ten Categories of the CFAI Accreditation Model ................................. Page 19

Table 8: APWA Benefits of Achieving Accreditation ................................................ Page 21

Table 9: Walter’s Advantages of Accreditation .......................................................... Page 24

Table 10: CFAI’s List of Advantages of Accreditation .............................................. Page 25
Fire Service Accreditation:
The Advantages and Disadvantages of Becoming an Accredited Agency

Introduction

There is a growing trend in the United States for various occupation groups to develop programs to enhance their operations and ensure compliance with recommended or recognized best practices of their professions (American Public Works Association [APWA], 2008). These improvement programs most often take the form of accreditation. Some occupation groups have long standing histories of accreditation, such as physicians, lawyers and higher educational institutions (Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools [COCSACS], 2008; Selden, 1960). Through the use of an accreditation process, these occupations have elevated the quality and effectiveness of the programs and services they provide and improved their organizational professionalism (Commission on Fire Accreditation International [CFAI], 2006; COCSACS, 2008).

Emergency services occupations are included in this growing trend of seeking accredited status (CFAI, 2006; DuPont, 1993; Emergency Management Accreditation Program [EMAP], 2006). The fire service has long used organization standards and measurements from the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA) and the Insurance Service Office (ISO) to gauge or benchmark their performance (Purcell, 2005; Walter, 1998). In her article, Walter (1998) states, although NFPA and ISO standards are extremely valuable for the purposes for which they were created, the time has come for the fire service to elevate its level of
professionalism through a process by which citizens, elected and appointed officials, and fire and emergency service personnel can assess when they have achieved an appropriate level of professional performance and efficiency. (¶ 3)

The CFAI (2006) echoes the same opinion as Walter and goes on to say, “...the time has come for the fire service to elevate its level of performance and professionalism through the use of a more comprehensive system of assessment” (p. 9).

Fire service executives are finding it increasingly more difficult to sway local government officials to increase emergency service budgets, without being able to document direct improvements or enhancements to the delivery of services to the community (CFAI, 2006; Walter, 1998). In today’s economy, every expenditure must be justified. A system that establishes benchmarks and a means of measuring capabilities is needed to assist fire service executives in evaluating their community’s risk and fire service needs (CFAI, 2006; EMAP, 2006; Walter, 1998). A comprehensive program, such as accreditation, could help fire service executives evaluate the performance of their organization (CFAI, 2006; Walter, 1998).

The problem is that the administration of the Martinsville Fire & EMS Department (MF&EMS) does not understand the advantages or disadvantages of becoming a CFAI accredited agency. The purpose of this applied research project is to determine the advantages and disadvantages associated with becoming an accredited fire and emergency medical services (EMS) department. The descriptive research method is used for this applied research project. The research approach will entail evaluating collected literature on accreditation for its advantages, as well as identify any disadvantages associated with the process. Literature for this research will come from written texts, journals, and internet databases and sites.
Literature will be explored to answer the following research questions: (a) What are the advantages of becoming an accredited agency? (b) What are the disadvantages of becoming an accredited agency? (c) What factor should the Martinsville Fire & EMS Department use to determine whether to pursue CFAI accreditation?

Background and Significance

The MF&EMS is a small career/volunteer combination department that covers twelve square miles, serving approximately 15,000 citizens from two stations. The department is comprised of 31 uniformed full-time employees, twelve uniformed part-time employees, and fifteen volunteers. The department is composed of four divisions that include: Administration, Operations, Prevention & Support and Emergency Management & Safety. Division staffing levels are outlined in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Personnel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Operations</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire Prevention &amp; Support</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency Management &amp; Safety</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>31</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The department provides fire prevention and protection services, EMS at the advanced life support (ALS) level, and operations level response to hazardous materials incidents. In addition, emergency management functions are coordinated and maintained through the department.
The City of Martinsville is a small community located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, 45 miles south of Roanoke, Virginia. Martinsville has a Council/Manager form of government. Martinsville attracts visitors from all over the world for NASCAR Sprint Cup Series, Craftsman Truck Series, and Late Model Stock Car Racing at Martinsville Speedway. Cultural activities include the Virginia Museum of Natural History and the Piedmont Arts Association.

However, during the late 1990’s, the city lost many jobs in the furniture and textile industries due to the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) and the expanding global economy. Unemployment rates skyrocketed and Martinsville consistently has had the highest unemployment rate in Virginia. For August, 2008, Martinsville’s unemployment rate was 12.1% as compared to the Virginia Statewide average of 4.6% (Virginia Employment Commission [VEC], 2008). The city has also experienced a 5% reduction in its population from July 1, 2000 to July 1, 2007 (United States Census Bureau [USCB], 2007). Population estimates for the City of Martinsville are listed in Table 2 (USCB, 2007).

Table 2: Annual Estimates of the Population for City of Martinsville.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>7/1/2000</th>
<th>7/1/2007</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>% Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15,356</td>
<td>14,578</td>
<td>-778</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The net result of these facts has resulted in a diminishing tax base, which has had an adverse effect on the MF&EMS’s budget.

MF&EMS’s Fiscal Year 08/09 Operating Budget is $2,042,700, of which $1,761,800 is personnel expenses. For the past several years only minor adjustments have been made to the department’s operating budget, and a Capital Budget has been virtually non-existent, with the exception of vehicle replacements. In addition, it is anticipated that the Governor of Virginia
will reduce the amount of local funding this current fiscal year. The department may be forced to reduce its budget by five, ten or fifteen percent as a result. The city, in its current economic state, cannot afford any budgetary increases that are not justified by significant improvements in the delivery of services.

MF&EMS received an ISO Public Protection Classification Rating of Class 4 during our evaluation in March, 2008, which goes into effect on October 1, 2008. The department has spent the past five years working to improve its ISO rating. Prior to this evaluation, the MF&EMS was rated at an ISO Class 5. It was during this time that the topic of accreditation was mentioned. MF&EMS Administration is interested in accreditation; however, when we discussed the idea we found that we had numerous questions, and relatively few answers.

MF&EMS is committed to continuous quality improvement, as evidenced by our recent upgrading of our ISO rating. It is hypothesized that accreditation is our next logical step towards quality improvement. However, MF&EMS Administration is not familiar with the requirements or process of accreditation. Research must be conducted to explore the advantages of becoming accredited, as well as to determine the disadvantages associated with the accreditation process. This applied research project will provide the necessary information for MF&EMS Administration to make an educated decision to pursue accreditation or not.

The Executive Development course of the National Fire Academy’s Executive Fire Officer Program (2006) states the following goal, “Lead effectively and efficiently within a dynamic and complex organization by facilitating the development of teams and the application of research findings” (United States Department of Homeland Security [DHS], 2006, p. SM 0-3). Conducting research on an issue, and then using the knowledge gained to apply research findings to
develop solutions was a major focus of the course. This applied research project will utilize the applied research techniques learned during this course to provide the knowledge needed for the MF&EMS Administration to examine accreditation and make an educated decision to pursue accreditation or not.

The United States Fire Administration (2008) website lists the following three operational objectives:

1. Reduce the loss of life from fire-related hazards, particularly among these target audiences: 14 years and younger age group, 65 years and older age group, and firefighters.
2. Help communities develop comprehensive all-hazard risk reduction plans.
3. Appropriately respond in a timely manner to emergent issues.

(Operational Objectives Section)

This applied research project supports these objectives by conducting research on accreditation and evaluating its ability to enhance operations and ensure compliance with recommended or recognized best practices of the fire service. Through the use of an accreditation process, other occupations have elevated the quality and effectiveness of their programs and services they provide and have improved their organizational professionalism (CFAI, 2006; COCSACS, 2008).

Literature Review

The objective of the literature review process is to collect and evaluate available literature on accreditation for its advantages, as well as identify any disadvantages associated with the process. Research was conducted at the National Fire Academy’s Learning Resource Center located in Emmitsburg, Maryland. In addition, research was done at Martinsville City
Library and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Online Libraries. Literature examined for this applied research project included written texts, scholarly journals, trade journals, fire service publications, and internet databases and sites. The focus of the research was to identify relevant sources that directly relate to this research problem.

Accreditation

What is accreditation? The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2008) states, “Accreditation is: (a) A highly successful and well-tested system of quality assurance and quality improvement, (b) An outstanding example of an effective public-private partnership, and (c) An outstanding example of reliable and responsible self-regulation” (p. 2). The CFAI (2006) defines accreditation as, “A process by which an association or agency evaluates and recognizes a program of study or an institution as meeting certain predetermined standards or qualifications” (p. 205). Occupation groups develop accreditation programs to enhance their operations and ensure compliance with recommended or recognized best practices of their professions (APWA, 2008).

Accreditation is an assessment of an organization’s ability to fulfill its mission and evaluate the organization’s compliance with the requirements of the accrediting body (COCSACS, 2008). The accreditation process seeks to ensure that a basic level of quality is maintained by an organization (World Wide Learn [WWL], 2008; United States Department of Education [USDE], 2008). It is a statement of an organization’s continuing commitment to provide effective programs or services (COCSACS, 2008). The COCSACS (2008) has established a set of fundamental characteristics of accreditation, which are found in Table 3 (p. 3).
Table 3: *Fundamental Characteristics of Accreditation.*

- Participation in the accreditation process is voluntary and is an earned and renewable status.
- Member institutions develop, amend, and approve accreditation requirements.
- The process of accreditation is representative, responsive, and appropriate to the types of institutions accredited.
- Accreditation is a form of self-regulation.
- Accreditation requires institutional commitment and engagement.
- Accreditation is based upon a peer review process.
- Accreditation requires an institutional commitment to student learning and achievement.
- Accreditation acknowledges an institution’s prerogative to articulate its mission within the recognized context of higher education and its responsibility to show that it is accomplishing its mission.
- Accreditation requires institutional commitment to the concept of quality enhancement through continuous assessment and improvement.
- Accreditation expects an institution to develop a balanced governing structure designed to promote institutional integrity, autonomy, and flexibility of operation.
- Accreditation expects an institution to ensure that its programs are complemented by support structures and resources that allow for the total growth and development of its students.

Accreditation is a self assessment process that normally involves external review (APWA, 2008; Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs [BECA], 2008). A self assessment is a written summary of an organizations performance, compared to an accrediting body’s established standards (Eaton, 2006). There are benefits to conducting self assessments, such as
strategic planning requirements and improved management of an organization (APWA, 2008; Purcell, 2005). The self assessment evaluates the operation and performance of the organization against the benchmarks or standards establish by the accrediting body (USDE, 2008). The accreditation self assessment assists the organization in evaluating its current policies and procedures for strengths and areas that that need improvement (APWA, 2008). Self assessment can be used as a tool to assess, evaluate, and monitor the organization’s policies and performance (WWL, 2008). Accreditation self assessment also evaluates the organization’s means of quality assurance and quality improvement (Eaton, 2006).

Law enforcement in the United States has an established history of the use of accreditation (DuPont, 1993). The Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA) is the international accrediting body for law enforcement. CALEA administers the Law Enforcement Accreditation Program (LEAP), which was developed to further law enforcement as a profession (CALEA, 2008). The LEAP is a systematic process for law enforcement agencies to perform an internal review and assessment of their agencies policies and procedures (CALEA, 2008). The purpose of this self assessment is to assist the agency in making the necessary policy and/or procedure changes to meet international accepted standards (CALEA, 2008). The LEAP is a voluntary accreditation program. CALEA’s LEAP standards are viewed as the benchmarks for law enforcement agency’s policies and procedures (CALEA, 2008).

According to CALEA (2008), LEAP accreditation standards are maintained through a system of constant review and revision. When a proposal for a standard change is made, the request is evaluated by the Standards Review and Interpretation Committee (SRIC). After careful review, the SRIC may endorse or reject the proposed change. If the proposed change is
endorsed, the SRIC develops a draft standard and submits it to CALEA for approval to solicit law enforcement community input. Any recommendations received are review and considered by the SRIC. Once the input period is over, the SRIC make any necessary changes to the draft standard and then submits a final draft of the standard for CALEA for final approval.

The LEAP standards address nine law enforcement subjects, which are found in Table 4 (Standards Section).

Table 4: The Nine Law Enforcement Standard Subject Areas.

| Role, responsibilities, and relationships with other agencies. |
| Organization, management and administration. |
| Personnel structure. |
| Personnel process. |
| Operations. |
| Operations support. |
| Traffic operations. |
| Prisoner and court-related activities. |
| Auxiliary and technical services. |

It is through these standards that accreditation helps law enforcement agencies to evaluate their policies and procedures and to make any necessary changes.

CALEA (2008) also stated, once the law enforcement agency completes the self assessment, CALEA is contacted and an on-site assessment is done. The on-site assessment team reviews the agency’s self assessment and then verifies each component, ensuring compliance with established CALEA standards. The agency is responsible for the assessment team’s lodging and meal expenses while the team is on-site. After the on-site assessment team
Accreditation completes their review, a report is sent to CALEA’s Agency Review Committee. The Agency Review Committee then conducts hearings to determine if the agency meets all applicable standards. Accredited status is awarded once the committee is satisfied that the agency has met the standards.

The cost for CALEA accreditation is based on the agency’s number of authorized full-time employees. Payment of these accreditation fees can be made one of three ways: lump sum single payment, two installments, or three installments (CALEA, 2008). There is also an annual continuation fee that includes the cost for the agency’s next on-site visit (CALEA, 2008). Table 5 shows CALEA’s (2008, Cost Section) current fees for initial accreditation and the fees associated with continued accreditation.

Table 5: CALEA Initial Accreditation and Continuation Fees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Authorized Full-time Employees</th>
<th>Lump Sum Single Payment</th>
<th>Two Installment Payments of</th>
<th>Three Installment Payments of *</th>
<th>Annual Continuation Fee **</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - 24</td>
<td>$5,425</td>
<td>$2,830</td>
<td>$4,385</td>
<td>$3,435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 - 199</td>
<td>$8,400</td>
<td>$4,390</td>
<td>$5,425</td>
<td>$4,030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200 - 999</td>
<td>$13,075</td>
<td>$6,845</td>
<td>$7,065</td>
<td>$4,965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000 - Up</td>
<td>$16,900</td>
<td>$8,455</td>
<td>$8,400</td>
<td>$5,730</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes On-site Fees
** Annual Payments Include Estimated On-site Assessment Charge

Agencies are invoiced based on their selected payment type.

Accredited status with CALEA is good for three years. During this period, the accredited agency must maintain compliance with the standards by submitting an annual report (CALEA, 2008). The annual report must contain a summary of how the agency is maintaining accreditation, and restate their commitment for doing through the remainder of their accredited status (CALEA, 2008).
The Virginia Law Enforcement Professional Standards Commission (VLEPSC) is the law enforcement accrediting body within the Commonwealth of Virginia. The VLEPSC is comprised of the Virginia Sheriffs’ Association, the Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police and the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS). The Commissions (VLEPSC, 2008b) goals are:

To increase the effectiveness and efficiency of law enforcement agencies in the Commonwealth through the delivery of services; to promote cooperation among all components in the criminal justice system; to ensure the appropriate level of training for law enforcement personnel; and to promote public confidence in law enforcement.

Law enforcement agencies, as defined by the Code of Virginia, are eligible for VLEPSC accreditation (VLEPSC, 2008b).

The VLEPSC accreditation process is similar to the CALEA process. VLEPSC accreditation involves a self assessment, completed by the law enforcement agency, and then a site visit by an assessment team to verify compliance. After the site visit is completed, the assessment team submits a report to the DCJS Virginia Accreditation Center (VAC) for review by their Executive Board (VLEPSC, 2008b). Once the VAC Executive Board approves the agency’s request accredited status is awarded. The accredited status is good for four years, during which a yearly Annual Verification of Compliance report must be completed and submitted to the VAC for review (VLEPSC, 2008b). The cost for Virginia law enforcement agencies to gain initial or re-accredited status is $250.00, plus lodging and meal expenses for the on-site assessment team (VLEPSC, 2008a).
The Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI) is the accrediting body for fire service agencies. During 1988, the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) and the International City-County Management Association entered into a Memorandum of Understanding to develop a means for a voluntary fire services accreditation program (CFAI, 2006; Walter, 1998). After developing the accreditation program, CFAI became the overseer of accrediting fire service agencies in 1996 (Walter, 1998). The CFAI (2006) states the following as its mission, “The mission of the CFAI is to assist the fire and emergency service agencies throughout the world in achieving excellence through self-assessment and accreditation in order to provide continuous quality improvement and enhancement of service delivery to their communities” (p. 7).

The CFAI accreditation process involves four steps: registered agency, applicant agency, accreditation candidate, and accredited agency (CFAI, 2008). Registered agency status is the first step in the accreditation process. To become a registered agency, the interested fire service agency must complete an application for registration and submit it to the CFAI with a $350.00 Registered Agency Fee (CFAI, 2008). Once the interested fire service agency is notified that it has been given registered agency status, the newly registered agency will have access to the CFAI network, which includes the CFAI newsletter that lists various events and training classes (Jaeger, 2006). Registered agencies also receive a copy of the latest edition of the Fire & Emergency Service Self-Assessment manual, which is the guide the agency will use during their self-assessment (CFAI, 2008). Registered agency status is good for up to three years (CFAI, 2008). A registered agency must upgrade their application to applicant agency status before
their registered agency status expires or risk losing its status and having to reapply and paying another $350.00 to regain their registered agency status (Jaeger, 2006).

The next step in the CFAI accreditation process is applicant agency. After the registered agency has examined the self assessment manual and is ready to pursue accreditation, the agency must apply for applicant agency status (CFAI, 2008). The applicant agency must also pay another accreditation fee based on the agency’s population served within the jurisdiction (except Department of Defense agencies) (CFAI, 2008). Table 6 outlines the accreditation fees based on population (CFAI, 2008).

Table 6: CFAI Accreditation Fee Structure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population Served</th>
<th>Fee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 - 9,999</td>
<td>$2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000 - 49,999</td>
<td>$3,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000 - 99,999</td>
<td>$4,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000 - 199,999</td>
<td>$5,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200,000 - 499,999</td>
<td>$6,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500,000 - 999,999</td>
<td>$8,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 1 Million</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Defense</td>
<td>$2,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The applicant agency period is 18 months (CFAI, 2008). An accreditation manager must be appointed by the agency. This person will have to attend a CFAI sponsored self assessment workshop (Jaeger, 2006). Before the end of this 18 month period the applicant agency must complete the documentation required from the self assessment manual, which includes a risk assessment and strategic plan (CFAI, 2008).

The CFAI (2006) accreditation model lists ten categories, which fire service organizations will use to evaluate their performance. Table 7 lists these categories (CFAI, 2006, p. 20).
Table 7: *The Ten Categories of the CFAI Accreditation Model.*

- Governance and administration
- Assessment and planning
- Goals and objectives
- Financial resources
- Programs
- Physical resources
- Human resources
- Training and competency
- Essential resources
- External system relationships

Within these ten broad categories, there are 45 criteria which are further broken down into 244 detailed performance indicators (CFAI, 2006). However, a fire service organization does not have to meet all 244 performance criteria to become a CFAI accredited agency (CFAI, 2006). From the 244 performance indicators there are 77 core competencies that the fire service organization must meet in order to become accredited (CFAI, 2007).

After the CFAI receives the agency’s completed documentation from the self assessment manual, which includes a risk assessment and strategic plan, the agency is upgraded to accreditation candidate (CFAI, 2008). An on-site assessment team of trained professional is sent to verify the self assessment the agency submitted (Purcell, 2005; Walter, 1998). The assessment team reviews the accreditation candidate’s self assessment and submitted plans for compliance with CFAI standards (Fleger, 2002; Walter, 1998). The assessment team typically takes three to five days to complete their evaluation (Jaeger, 2006).
While there are no further accreditation expenses, the accreditation candidate agency is responsible for any expenses (travel, lodging, and meals) incurred by the on-site assessment team (CFAI, 2008). The accreditation candidate agency is also responsible for any expenses (travel, lodging, and meals) incurred by the on-site assessment team leader during his/her travel to the accreditation hearing before the CFAI (CFAI, 2008). The CFAI (2008) recommends that, “...agencies budget approximately $6,000 for their on-site visit and $1,000 - $1,500 for the team leader's travel to the Commission meeting to present the teams’ findings” (Candidate Agency Status Section).

Jaeger (2006) states, once the assessment team completes their evaluation, a final report is submitted to the accreditation candidate agency and the CFAI with the assessment teams’ recommendation. The assessment team can make one of three recommendations: (1) accredited status, (2) defer agency status, or (3) withhold accreditation. Accredited status is given to agencies that are in compliance with the categories and criteria of the self assessment. Defer agency status is given to agencies that are deficient in one or more areas that are easily corrected, or there was insufficient information for the assessment team to recommend accredited status. Withhold accreditation is recommended when an agency obviously is not in compliance with the categories and criteria of the self assessment, and the agency must document the corrective actions prior to reapplying for accreditation candidate status.

Accreditation candidates that are awarded accredited status must maintain and renew their status (Fleger, 2002). CFAI requires an annual report along with an annual accreditation fee of 1/5 of their applicant fee (CFAI, 2008). The annual report documents and changes or updates to the agency’s self assessment and/or submitted plans (Jaeger, 2006). Accredited
status is good for five years, at which time another on-site assessment team will re-evaluate the agency to ensure compliance (Jaeger, 2006; Walter, 1998).

Advantages of Accreditation

Accreditation indicates that an agency complies with the established standards of the accrediting body (APWA, 2008). The American Public Works Association, the accrediting body for public works agencies, lists several benefits to achieving accreditation. An edited version of the list is found in Table 8 (APWA, 2008, Commonly Asked Questions Section).

Table 8: APWA Benefits of Achieving Accreditation.

- Formal recognition of well run agencies
- A mechanism to evaluate the organization
- A target for improving operations
- Public recognition of public works functions
- Justifying budget requests
- Instilling pride in personnel
- Raising national public works profiles
- Benefiting in personnel recruitment
- Encouraging documentation of policies
- Encouraging improvement of procedures
- Raising competencies in public works
- Consistent, comprehensive practices
- Encouraging employee involvement
A public works agency that is accredited shows the community it serves its commitment to quality and organizational professionalism. While the process of accreditation is intensive, the overall benefit to the agency offsets any potential disadvantages (APWA, 2008).

The accreditation of institutions of higher education has been in practice for over 100 years (Eaton, 2006). Accreditation is the mechanism by which colleges and universities are monitored and evaluated to ensure compliance with established standards (WWL, 2008). Accreditation ensures that a quality education is offered by an institution (Eaton, 2006). Institutions of higher learning seek accreditation to show students and employers the school has meet certain standards of quality (BECA, 2008). Most employers want to know if the school an employee graduated from is accredited (BECA, 2008; Eaton, 2006). Students want to know that their degrees will be recognized by employers after they graduate (WWL, 2008). In addition, accreditation is important for the student that wishes to transfer to another school (BECA, 2008; Eaton, 2006). College credits from an accreditation are easily transferred, whereas credits from non-accredited schools are not (Eaton, 2006).

Colleges and students also benefit financially from being accredited. Federal education funding may be conditional based on accreditation (BECA, 2008). Students may only be eligible for federal and state loans if they attend accredited colleges (Eaton, 2006; WWL, 2008). Also many private individuals and foundations donate funds to colleges, and whether or not a school is accredited could affect their decision to donate (Eaton, 2006). Accreditation can be closely tied to school funding and student access to loans.

CALEA (2008) lists several benefits to becoming an accredited law enforcement agency. CALEA accreditation offers greater accountability within the agency by setting standards for the
management of written policies and procedures, training requirements, lines of authority, and written reports. Accreditation can reduce agency risk and provide a defense for civil lawsuits. CALEA accreditation also instills confidence in government officials and the community. Accreditation also provides a mechanism for law enforcement agencies to prove their commitment to excellence.

The VLEPSC (2008a) states, “State accreditation is the best measure of an agency’s compliance with professional law enforcement standards” (¶ 1). The VLEPSC (2008a) also suggests that through accreditation an agency may protect itself against potential liability. Law enforcement agencies are subject to a great deal of risk and liability. Becoming an accredited law enforcement agency can minimize their exposure to risk and liability.

CFAI accreditation offers benefits to the fire service agency as well. The accreditation process, through the self assessment model, can identify areas the agency is performing well, as well as areas that need improvement (Purcell, 2005). Improvement through self assessment is the theory behind CFAI’s accreditation process (Fleger, 2002). The CFAI’s self assessment model requires the development of a strategic plan (CFAI, 2006). The overall success of the organization hinges on good strategic and operational planning (Fleger, 2002). The documentation of policies and procedures, and the development of strategic plans can assist the department during the budget process (Purcell, 2005). It is easier to gain support for increased department funding when there is a documented justification of need.

Walter lists several advantages to fire service accreditation. Table 9 lists these advantages (Walter, 1998, What Are The Benefits Section).
Table 9: Walter’s Advantages of Accreditation.

- The self-assessment and accreditation process will assist departments of any size or composition in justifying budget allocations.
- A concurrent product of the self-assessment is the development of a strategic or master plan for the agency.
- The self-assessment and accreditation process will complement any local or state-mandated growth management plan or land development regulation pertaining to fire protection.
- All performance indicators in the self-assessment process are correlated and cross-referenced with Insurance Service Office (ISO) components and with the standards of the Commission on the Accreditation of Ambulance Services (CAAS), thus avoiding a possible duplication of efforts.

By achieving accreditation, the fire service can show the community and elected officials that they are utilizing available resources and capabilities to provide services to an acceptable national standard (EMAP, 2006). Accreditation can improve an agency’s ability to objectively evaluate their fire and life safety protection (Fleger, 2002). The fire service is being more closely watched and they should have a recognized means to evaluate its performance (Walter, 1998). Local government officials and the community have high expectations of the fire service, and expect that the organization will provide “top notch” services, in a fiscally responsible manner (Fleger, 2002).

Jaeger (2006) cited many benefits that he believed would result from the Des Plains Fire Department (DPFD), Illinois, pursuing CFAI accreditation. Jaeger (2006) noted that the DPFD would benefit from the development of standards of response coverage, which is required by CFAI for accreditation. He also noted self assessment procedures would benefit the DPFD
Systematic self-assessment procedures assist an agency in evaluating its operation and performance against the benchmarks or standards establish by the accrediting body (USDE, 2008). Jaeger (2006) noted that the DPFD would also benefit from accreditation by organizing its records. During the on-site assessment, the assessment team is verifying the documentation submitted in the self-assessment. Jaeger (2006) stated, “The accreditation process outlines a process for record maintenance” (p. 18), which aids in the on-site verification process. Jaeger also estimated that the DPFD would benefit from becoming an accredited agency during their budget process. The accreditation process will assist departments of any size or composition in justifying their budget allocations (Walter, 1998).

The CFAI lists several benefits to becoming an accredited fire and EMS agency. Table 10 lists these advantages (CFAI, 2008, What Are the Benefits Section)

Table 10: CFAI’s List of Advantages of Accreditation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promoting excellence within the fire and EMS agencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging quality improvement through a continuous self-assessment process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assuring colleagues and the public that your organization has definite missions and objectives that are appropriate for the jurisdictions you serve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing a detailed evaluation of a department, detailing the services it provides to the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying areas of strength and weakness within a department.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating methods or systems for addressing deficiencies while building organizational success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging professional growth for your department in addition to its personnel involved in the self-assessment process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing a forum for the communication of organizational priorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fostering national recognition for a department by colleagues and the public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a mechanism for developing concurrent documents to include strategic and program action plans.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Accreditation provides a practical, systematic process for fire service executives that establish benchmarks and a means of measuring agency capabilities by evaluating their community’s risk and fire service needs (CFAI, 2006; EMAP, 2006; Walter, 1998). A comprehensive program, such as accreditation, can help fire service executives evaluate the performance of their organization (CFAI, 2006; Walter, 1998). The CFAI accreditation process provides a model method for evaluating fire service agencies (CFAI, 2006). Purcell (2005) states, “Accreditation, in my opinion, is one of the best things to happen to the fire service” (p. 98).

*Disadvantages of Accreditation*

There are some risks associated with becoming an accredited agency (APWA, 2008). Pursuing accreditation, and the possibility of failing to become accredited, could prevent some agencies from even trying (Selden, 1960). The pressures from external, and/or internal sources may cause an agency to lose its focus and fail in their attempt at accreditation. The accreditation process is not easy and should not be taken lightly (Purcell, 2005).

The accreditation process does require a significant amount of time and effort to complete (APWA, 2008). Changes in agency operations and/or management policies may have to be made to meet the standards of the accrediting body. Purcell (2005) noted that Charlottesville Fire Department, Virginia, expended more than 600 staff hours during their accreditation process. Accreditation requires an agency to have sufficient documentation of its policies and procedures, which could be very time consuming depending on what the agency already has in place (APWA, 2008).
There are also accreditation fees that must be paid. The APWA (2008) estimates that accrediting fees for a medium size public works agency would be between $10,000 and $15,000. Fees for CALEA accreditation range from $5,425 for departments employing less than 24 authorized personnel to $16,900 for departments employing more than 1,000 authorized personnel. CFAI (2008) accreditation fees range from $2,500 to $10,000, depending on the population served. Accreditation fees can be a deterrent, especially for smaller agencies (DuPont, 1993).

There are also additional expenses for the on-site assessment teams. The accreditation candidate agency is responsible for any expenses (travel, lodging, and meals) incurred by the on-site assessment team (APWA, 2008; CFAI, 2008; CALEA, 2008). For CFAI accreditation, the candidate agency is also responsible for any expenses (travel, lodging, and meals) incurred by the on-site assessment team leader during his/her travel to the accreditation hearing before the CFAI (CFAI, 2008). The CFAI (2008) recommends that, “...agencies budget approximately $6,000 for their on-site visit and $1,000 - $1,500 for the team leader’s travel to the Commission meeting to present the teams’ findings” (Candidate Agency Status Section). These expenses are in addition to the candidate agency’s accreditation fees, which raises the costs of accreditation and must be taken into account.

These additional expenses do not include any indirect agency expenses (staff time, new equipment, etc.) associate with the accreditation process. Indirect expenses such as personnel costs could prevent agencies with “tighter” budgets from pursuing accreditation (DuPont, 1993). Research by DuPont (1993) indicates, “By far the reason most stated for not seeking [CALEA] accreditation was that it was too costly in time, money, and staffing, especially for
small agencies” (Data Analysis Section, ¶ 4). DuPont (1993) concludes that many smaller law enforcement agencies will not pursue accreditation until some alternate funding sources are made available.

Procedures

This applied research project utilized the descriptive research method to explore the advantages and disadvantages of becoming an accredited agency. The procedures used to gather the needed information began with recognition of the of the stated research problem; which is, the administration of the MF&EMS does not understand the advantages or disadvantages of becoming a CFAI accredited agency. The next phase of the applied research project was to conduct a review of available, applicable literature. The information obtained was examined and then utilized to form recommendations for the department to include its annual strategic planning update.

Research literature for this applied research project came from written texts, scholarly journals, trade journals, fire service publications, and internet databases and sites that were discovered by the author of this research paper. Research was conducted at the National Fire Academy’s Learning Resource Center located in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Utilizing the National Fire Academy’s Learning Resource Center Card Catalog, a search was conducted to indentify literature related to fire service accreditation. In addition, research was done at Martinsville City Library and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Online Libraries for literature pertaining to accreditation. The focus of the research was to identify relevant sources of
information that directly related to the research problem, research questions, and ultimately the intended purpose of this applied research project.

Limitations

The author of this applied research paper realizes that there are limitations to this research. During the literature review, many of the scholarly journal articles related to the research problem were inaccessible for examination. Access to these articles required either membership, and associated fees, to the parent organization or charged fees for access to their articles. The author did not have available funds to purchase those articles. While the author believes that enough relevant information was obtained and examined to make educated recommendations, it is realized that there is much more written on this research problem that was not reviewed.

Also, during the literature review, limited information was discovered concerning the disadvantages of becoming an accredited agency. Most sources only covered the advantages. The few sources that did discuss the disadvantages focused on accreditation being too costly in time, money, and staffing. Again, the author realizes that there is more written on this research problem that was not reviewed.

In addition, the author considered the use of a survey tool to gather feedback from CFAI accredited fire departments, who were similar demographically to MF&EMS. The survey tool was to obtain information concerning their agency’s accreditation experience, both positive and negative. However, due to a lack of experience in the use of surveys, the author decided not to conduct a survey. The information obtained could have been useful in assisting the
author review other fire and EMS agency’s opinions concerning the advantages and disadvantages of becoming a CFAI accredited agency.

**Definition of Terms**

CFAI accreditation candidate – a fire or emergency service agency, which was previously an
CFAI application agency, that has completed and submitted all required documentation,
and is awaiting evaluation by an on-site assessment team.

CFAI accredited agency – a fire or emergency service agency that has met the requirements of
the CFAI accreditation process and has been awarded accreditation status.

CFAI applicant agency – a fire or emergency service agency that has decided to pursue
accreditation, and applied to the CFAI for application agency status. The application agency
must complete and submit all required documentation within 18 months of their
application date.

CFAI registered agency – a fire or emergency service agency that is interested in accreditation
and has applied with the CFAI and been registered. Registered status is good for three
years from the date of application.

Combination department – a term used to describe a fire department or emergency service
organization that is comprised of both paid and volunteer personnel.

North American Free Trade Act – an agreement that combined the economies of the United
States, Mexico and Canada into a world-trading block.

Unemployment rate – the percentage of the population who are unemployed, who are actively
seeking work.
Results

In this applied research project, three research questions were developed based upon the problem statement and purpose of the research. Utilizing the descriptive research method, relevant literature was collected and examined for information to answer each of the research questions. The results of the literature are organized by research question.

*Research Question #1*: What are the advantages of becoming an accredited agency?

The literature review revealed many advantages to becoming an accredited agency. Becoming accredited indicates that an agency complies with the established standards of the accrediting body (APWA, 2008). The APWA, the accrediting body for public works agencies, lists several benefits to achieving accreditation. These include: recognition for being well managed, having procedures in place to evaluate the organizations operations and make improvements, help justify budget requests, instill pride in personnel, used as recruitment tool, and raised levels of competencies (APWA, 2008).

It was also learned that the accreditation of institutions of higher education has been in practice for over 100 years (Eaton, 2006). Accreditation is the mechanism by which colleges and universities are monitored and evaluated to ensure compliance with established standards (WWL, 2008). Institutions of higher learning seek accreditation to show students and employers the school has meet certain standards of quality (BECA, 2008). Colleges and students also benefit financially from being accredited. Federal education funding may be conditional based on accreditation (BECA, 2008). Students may only be eligible for federal and state loans if they attend accredited colleges (Eaton, 2006; WWL, 2008). Also many private
individuals and foundations donate funds to colleges, and whether or not a school is accredited could affect their decision to donate (Eaton, 2006). Accreditation can be closely tied to school funding and student access to loans.

CALEA (2008) lists several benefits to becoming an accredited law enforcement agency. CALEA accreditation offers greater accountability within the agency by setting standards for the management of written policies and procedures, training requirements, lines of authority, and written reports. Accreditation can reduce agency risk and provide a defense for civil lawsuits. CALEA accreditation also instills confidence in government officials and the community. Accreditation also provides a mechanism for law enforcement agencies to prove their commitment to excellence.

The VLEPSC (2008a) states that, “State accreditation is the best measure of an agency’s compliance with professional law enforcement standards” (¶ 1). The VLEPSC (2008a) also suggests that through accreditation an agency may protect itself against potential liability. Law enforcement agencies are subject to a great deal of risk and liability. Becoming an accredited law enforcement agency can minimize their exposure to risk and liability.

CFAI accreditation offers benefits to the fire service agency as well. The accreditation process, through the self assessment model, can identify areas the agency is performing well, as well as areas that need improvement (Purcell, 2005). Improvement through self assessment is the theory behind CFAI’s accreditation process (Fleger, 2002). Walter (1998) lists several advantages to fire service accreditation; such as, justifying budget allocations and the development of a strategic or master plan. By achieving accreditation, the fire service can show
the community and elected officials that they are utilizing available resources and capabilities to provide services to an accepted national standard (EMAP, 2006).

Jaeger (2006) cited many benefits that he believed would result from the DPFD pursuing CFAI accreditation. Jaeger (2006) noted that the DPFD would benefit from the development of standards of response coverage. He also noted that systematic self assessment procedures assist an agency in evaluating its operation and performance against the benchmarks or standards establish by the accrediting body (Jaeger, 2006; USDE, 2008). Jaeger also estimated that the DPFD would benefit from becoming an accredited agency during their budget process.

The CFAI lists several benefits to becoming an accredited fire and EMS agency. These include: encouraging quality improvement through a self-assessment process, providing a detailed evaluation of a department identifying areas of strength and weakness, and encouraging professional growth for your department in addition to its personnel involved in the self assessment process (CFAI, 2008). Accreditation provides a practical, systematic process for fire service executives that establish benchmarks and a means of measuring agency capabilities by evaluating their community’s risk and fire service needs (CFAI, 2006; EMAP, 2006; Walter, 1998). The CFAI accreditation process provides a model method for evaluating fire service agencies (CFAI, 2006). Through the use of an accreditation process, the fire and emergency service agencies have elevated the quality and effectiveness of the programs and services they provide and improved their organizational professionalism (CFAI, 2006).
Research Question #2: What are the disadvantages of becoming an accredited agency?

The literature review did discover some potential risks with becoming an accredited agency (APWA, 2008). Pursuing accreditation, and the possibility of failing to become accredited, could prevent some agencies from even trying (Selden, 1960). The accreditation process does require a significant amount of time and effort to complete (APWA, 2008). Changes in agency operations and/or management policies may have to be made to meet the standards of the accrediting body.

There are also accreditation fees that must be paid. The APWA (2008) estimates that accrediting fees for a medium size public works agency would be between $10,000 and $15,000. Fees for CALEA accreditation range from $5,425 for departments employing less than 24 authorized personnel to $16,900 for departments employing more than 1,000 authorized personnel. CFAI (2008) accreditation fees range from $2,500 to $10,000, depending on the population served. Accreditation fees can be a deterrent, especially for smaller agencies (DuPont, 1993).

There are also additional expenses for the on-site assessment teams. The accreditation candidate agency is responsible for any expenses (travel, lodging, and meals) incurred by the on-site assessment team (APWA, 2008; CALEA, 2008; CFAI, 2008). For CFAI accreditation, the candidate agency is also responsible for any expenses (travel, lodging, and meals) incurred by the on-site assessment team leader during his/her travel to the accreditation hearing before the CFAI (CFAI, 2008). The CFAI (2008) recommends that, “…agencies budget approximately $6,000 for their on-site visit and $1,000 - $1,500 for the team leader’s travel to the Commission meeting to present the teams’ findings” (Candidate Agency Status Section). These expenses are
in addition to the candidate agency’s accreditation fees, which raises the costs of accreditation and must be taken into account.

These additional expenses do not include any indirect agency expenses (staff time, new equipment, etc.) associate with the accreditation process. Indirect expenses such as personnel costs could prevent agencies with “tighter” budgets from pursuing accreditation (DuPont, 1993). Research by DuPont (1993) indicates that, “By far the reason most stated for not seeking [CALEA] accreditation was that it was too costly in time, money, and staffing, especially for small agencies” (Data Analysis Section, ¶ 4). DuPont (1993) concludes that many smaller law enforcement agencies will not pursue accreditation until some alternate funding sources are made available.

Research Question #3: What factor should the Martinsville Fire & EMS Department use to determine whether to pursue CFAI accreditation?

The literature review did not reveal any one factor that an agency should use to determine whether to pursue CFAI accreditation or not. There are numerous potential benefits to CFAI accreditation. These included: encouraging quality improvement through a self-assessment process, providing a detailed evaluation of a department identifying areas of strength and weakness, and encouraging professional growth for both the department and its personnel (CFAI, 2008). The accreditation process provides a practical, systematic means for fire service executives to establish benchmarks and a mechanism for measuring agency capabilities by evaluating their community’s risk and fire service needs (CFAI, 2006; EMAP, 2006; Walter, 1998). Through the use of the CFAI accreditation process, fire and emergency
service agencies have elevated the quality and effectiveness of their programs and services that they provide, and improved their organizational professionalism (CFAI, 2006).

Also, there are possible disadvantages that must be considered as well. The accreditation process does require a significant amount of time and effort to complete (APWA, 2008). There are also accreditation fees that must be paid. These fees can be a deterrent, especially for smaller agencies (DuPont, 1993). There are also additional expenses for the on-site assessment teams, which include the travel, lodging, and meals expenses incurred by the assessment team (APWA, 2008; CALEA, 2008; CFAI, 2008). Indirect expenses such as personnel costs could prevent agencies with “tighter” budgets from pursuing accreditation (DuPont, 1993).

In addition, the MF&EMS must take into account the current economic state of the City of Martinsville and surrounding areas when. Martinsville has the highest unemployment rate in Virginia (VEC, 2008). The city’s population has steadily declined over the past seven years (USCB, 2007). These facts have resulted in a diminishing tax base for Martinsville. In addition, it is anticipated that the Governor of Virginia will reduce the amount of local funding this year. The department may be forced to reduce its budget by five, ten or fifteen percent as a result. The city, in its current economic state, cannot afford any budgetary increases that are not justified by significant improvements in the delivery of services.

Discussion

There were several commonalities noted while examining the collected research literature. Through the use of an accreditation process, many occupations have elevated the
quality and effectiveness of the programs and services they provide and improved their organizational professionalism (CFAI, 2006; COCSACS, 2008). The APWA lists recognition for well managed agencies and of public works functions as benefits of their accreditation process (APWA, 2008). Institutions of higher learning seek accreditation to show students and employers the school has meet certain standards of quality (BECA, 2008). CALEA accreditation instills confidence in government officials and the community (CALEA, 2008). Accreditation also provides a mechanism for law enforcement agencies to prove their commitment to excellence (CALEA, 2008). The CFAI states that accreditation promotes excellent within fire and EMS agencies and provides for the professional growth of the department and its personnel.

The MF&EMS is committed to continuous quality improvement. The dedication and hard work by our staff was demonstrated during our last ISO evaluation, during which the department improved its protection rating from a Class 5 to a Class 4. It is hypothesized that by seeking CFAI accreditation the department can continue its momentum in improving our management and operations.

Accreditation involves a self assessment process (APWA, 2008; BECA, 2008). A self assessment is a written summary of an organizations performance, compared to an accrediting body’s established standards (Eaton, 2006). There are benefits to conducting self assessments, such as strategic planning requirements and improved management of an organization (APWA, 2008; Purcell, 2005). The self assessment evaluates the operation and performance of the organization against the benchmarks or standards establish by the accrediting body (USDE, 2008). The accreditation self assessment assists the organization in evaluating it current policies and procedures for strengths, and areas that that need improvement (APWA, 2008). It
can be used as a tool to assess, evaluate, and monitor the organization’s policies and performance (WWL, 2008). It also evaluates the organization’s means of quality assurance and quality improvement (Eaton, 2006).

The CFAI accreditation process, through the self assessment model, can identify areas the agency is performing well, as well as areas that need improvement (Purcell, 2005). Improvement through self assessment is the theory behind CFAI’s accreditation process (Fleger, 2002). The CFAI’s self assessment model requires the development of a strategic plan (CFAI, 2006). The overall success of the organization hinges on good strategic and operational planning (Fleger, 2002; Walter, 1998).

The MF&EMS would benefit from a standardized means of self evaluation. CFAI self assessment model provides a guide for fire and emergency service agencies to follow. This would help the department to objectively evaluate its current policies and procedures and make any necessary changes. The self assessment model would also require the development and maintenance of a community risk assessment and strategic plan.

The accreditation also assists organizations financially. Colleges and students also benefit financially from being accredited. Federal education funding may be conditional based on accreditation (BECA, 2008). Students may only be eligible for federal and state loans if they attend accredited colleges (Eaton, 2006; WWL, 2008). Also many private individuals and foundations donate funds to colleges, and whether or not a school is accredited could affect their decision to donate (Eaton, 2006). Accreditation can be closely tied to school funding and student access to loans.
Accreditation assists agencies justify budget requests (APWA, 2008). Walter (1998) lists justifying budget allocations as an advantage to accreditation. The documentation of policies and procedures, and the development of strategic plans can assist the department during the budget process (Purcell, 2005). It is easier to gain support for increased department funding when there is a documented justification of need.

By achieving accreditation, the fire service can show the community and elected officials that they are utilizing available resources and capabilities to provide services to an acceptable national standard (EMAP, 2006). Accreditation can improve an agency’s ability to objectively evaluate their fire and life safety protection (Fleger, 2002). The fire service is being more closely watched and they should have a recognized means to evaluate its performance (Walter, 1998). Local government officials and the community have high expectations of the fire service, and expect that the organization will provide “top notch” services, in a fiscally responsible manner (Fleger, 2002).

Local government officials want to know that budget allocations are being expended in an efficient and effect manner. The MF&EMS budget would benefit from the accreditation process. By developing the risk assessments and plans required in the self assessment, the department could better justify budget requests. With the poor economic condition of the city, accreditation might not increase our budget allocations, but it might at least help us maintain current budget levels.

There were some disadvantages noted while examining the collected research literature. Pursuing accreditation, and the possibility of failing to become accredited, could prevent some agencies from even trying (Selden, 1960). The accreditation process does require
a significant amount of time and effort to complete (APWA, 2008). Changes in agency
operations and/or management policies may have to be made to meet the standards of the
accrediting body.

There are also accreditation fees that must be paid. The APWA (2008) estimates that
accrediting fees for a medium size public works agency would be between $10,000 and
$15,000. Fees for CALEA accreditation range from $5,425 for departments employing less than
24 authorized personnel to $16,900 for departments employing more than 1,000 authorized
personnel. CFAI (2008) accreditation fees range from $2,500 to $10,000, depending on the
population served. Accreditation fees can be a deterrent, especially for smaller agencies
(DuPont, 1993).

There are also additional expenses for the on-site assessment teams. The accreditation
candidate agency is responsible for any expenses (travel, lodging, and meals) incurred by the
on-site assessment team (APWA, 2008; CALEA, 2008; CFAI, 2008). For CFAI accreditation, the
candidate agency is also responsible for any expenses (travel, lodging, and meals) incurred by
the on-site assessment team leader during his/her travel to the accreditation hearing before
the CFAI (CFAI, 2008). The CFAI (2008) recommends that, “...agencies budget approximately
$6,000 for their on-site visit and $1,000 - $1,500 for the team leader's travel to the Commission
meeting to present the teams' findings” (Candidate Agency Status Section). These expenses are
in addition to the candidate agency’s accreditation fees, which raises the costs of accreditation
and must be taken into account.

These additional expenses do not include any indirect agency expenses (staff time, new
equipment, etc.) associate with the accreditation process. Indirect expenses such as personnel
costs could prevent agencies with “tighter” budgets from pursuing accreditation (DuPont, 1993). Research by DuPont (1993) indicates that, “By far the reason most stated for not seeking [CALEA] accreditation was that it was too costly in time, money, and staffing, especially for small agencies” (Data Analysis Section, ¶ 4). DuPont (1993) concludes that many smaller law enforcement agencies will not pursue accreditation until some alternate funding sources are made available.

While the process of accreditation is intensive, the overall benefit to the agency offsets most, if not all potential disadvantages (APWA, 2008). The biggest obstacle for an organization desiring to become accredited appears to be the overall cost. It was noted that the expense for accreditation, including indirect costs, were quite high. These expenses could prevent agencies with “tighter” budgets from pursuing accreditation (DuPont, 1993).

The one exception noted was the costs for VLEPSC accreditation. The cost for Virginia law enforcement agencies to gain initial or re-accredited status is $250.00, plus lodging and meal expenses for the on-site assessment team (VLEPSC, 2008a). A similar accreditation process for Virginia fire and emergency service agencies does not currently exist; however, a similar program could offer significant cost savings.

The associated cost of CFAI accreditation will be the biggest hurdle for the MF&EMS to overcome. It is feared that there will budget reductions next fiscal year. Despite the many advantages to accreditation this research project noted, and the benefits to the MF&EMS, our ability to pay for accreditation is in doubt.
Accreditation

Recommendations

The author of this applied research project sees the benefit of MF&EMS pursuing CFAI accreditation. The results of this research project suggest that there is much to gain by becoming CFAI accredited. However, it is also realized that with the city’s economic state funding will be an issue. With this in mind, the author makes the following recommendations.

MF&EMS should incorporate CFAI accreditation into its strategic plan. The department is currently beginning the process of revising its six year strategic plan and accreditation should be included as a long term goal of the department.

MF&EMS should apply for registered status with the CFAI. The cost would be $350.00 and would be good for three years. By applying for, and receiving registered status the department would receive a current edition of the CFAI assessment manual and access to CFAI events and workshops that would assist the department during completion of the self assessment manual. The $350.00 registered status fee would be paid from funds in the department’s current budget.

MF&EMS Administration should make a presentation to the City Manager explaining the process and benefits of becoming an accredited fire and EMS agency. Depending on the City Manager’s reaction, the author suggests two options.

Option #1: City Manager supports the MF&EMS in seeking accreditation. MF&EMS, in conjunction with the City Manager, should revise its accreditation presentation and deliver it to City Council to gain their support. If there is no support for the department to pursue CFAI accreditation, then move to option #2. Should City Council support the department pursuing CFAI accreditation, form an accreditation team and begin working to complete the self
assessment and any required documentation. Develop an accreditation budget, and continue to progress through the accreditation process.

Option #2: In the event the either the City Manager or City Council rejects the department’s proposal to pursue CFAI accreditation, the MF&EMS should continue with the completion of the self assessment manual and any required documentation. Even though the department would not receive CFAI accredited status, they would still benefit from going through the self assessment process. The department would demonstrate its dedication to becoming an accredited agency, which would be of benefit should the department be able to present accreditation to the City Manager and/or City Council again. Registered status is good for three years and the City’s economy could improve.

MF&EMS should contact the Virginia Department of Fire Programs, the Virginia Fire Service Board, and the Virginia Fire Chief’s Association to lobby for a state fire and EMS agency accreditation program. Virginia’s law enforcement agencies have already demonstrated that state level accreditation can be done.

These recommendations are specific for the MF&EMS. Other fire and emergency service organizations must evaluate their own operations and determine if CFAI accreditation would benefit their agency. The author of this applied research project would recommend that others building upon research contained in this project consider the use of a survey tool. A survey tool designed to obtain information concerning a fire and emergency service agency’s accreditation experience, both positive and negative, could have been useful in assisting the author review other fire and EMS agency’s opinions concerning the advantages and disadvantages of becoming a CFAI accredited agency.
In conclusion, MF&EMS would benefit from pursuing CFAI accreditation. This research project has revealed many advantages to becoming accredited. The accreditation process would continue the department’s strive for continuous quality improvement. The self assessment process of accreditation would assist the MF&EMS in objectively analyzing its policies and procedures, and make any necessary changes. The self assessment would also push the department to complete a community risk assessment, and keep its strategic plan up to date. By completing the self assessment and the required documents, the MF&EMS would have better information to justify future budget requests.

The MF&EMS would benefit from the accreditation process even if City leaders fail to fund the CFAI accreditation fees and the department does not achieve accredited status. The department realizes the City’s current economic state, but cannot use that fact as an excuse for not pursuing accreditation. The department should also begin lobbying the Virginia fire service community for a more affordable state fire and emergency service accreditation program. Pursuing accreditation will improve the overall management and operations of the MF&EMS, and the department would benefit from the accreditation process even if it does not achieve accredited status.
References


