



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON MILITARY, NATIONAL, AND  
PUBLIC SERVICE

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

**Subject: Meeting with Local Volunteer Firefighters, Cranfills Gap, TX**

The following is a record of a meeting with Commission staff and the Cranfills Gap Volunteer Fire Station, which took place on 19 July at Cranfills Gap Fire Station. At the meeting, participants discussed the needs and concerns of rural volunteer firefighters, including recruitment and funding. The conversation was facilitated by Mr. Tom Kilgannon, and included Ms. Debra Wada, Mr. Steve Barney, and Ms. Shawn Skelly. This memorandum is not a verbatim transcript of the discussion.

**Attendees:**

- Commissioners: Debra Wada, Tom Kilgannon, Shawn Skelly, Steve Barney
- Commission Staff: Jud Crane, Morgan Levey
- Volunteer Firefighters from the Cranfills Gap station; including the Fire Chief (who was also the county-wide firefighter association president and the Cranfills Gap mayor), a volunteer who assisted with much of the finance and administrative issues of the station, and a volunteer who assisted with training.

**Key Takeaways:**

- The Fire Chief said he was the county-wide firefighter association president, and every station is having the same problem – they cannot get young people to show up.
- The station has 27 volunteers: two are 70, most are 55-65, only 1-2 are under 20 – and those are the ones they really need as there is a lot of weight to haul around when fighting fires.
- The Fire Chief summarized the station's recruiting issues as coming down to: "If you're not from a family that's in it, you don't see it. My dad was chief, just like his dad. My kids were in it, when they were here. We've had a number over the years join, but they can't make a living here, so they leave."

**Meeting Discussion**

*Mr. Kilgannon kicked off the meeting introducing the Commission and the goals of talking with the Cranfills Gap, TX Volunteer Fire Department.*

**Fire Chief** volunteer firefighters are not very plentiful anymore, and everyone wants the glory but not the work. Individuals must pay to be certified as a firefighter; the minimum courses cost \$800. For their department, individuals must be able to use all 7 trucks. The community has a youth fire program – but when individuals reach 18, they leave.

*Ms. Wada aske, “How many work at the station?”*

**Firefighter** said they have 27 on the rolls, but only 15 were active. All members are unpaid volunteers.

*Mr. Kilgannon asked how many incidents they respond to in a year, and what kind of incidents they are.*

**Fire Chief** answered that in a wet year, they could see 35 fires all year – but this year they had already reached 32 (by mid-July). Clifton<sup>1</sup> and some places will see over 100 calls in a year. Some of the fires are structure, but mainly they respond to brush/grass fires and car crashes.

*Mr. Kilgannon asked, how extensive the training is.*

**Fire Chief** responded everything concerning training is a safety issue – the less training a volunteer has, the more likely they are to get hurt. There are two meetings a month – one for the business of the station, one to review training. They just paid \$8,000 for a new set of training equipment.

*Mr. Kilgannon asked, for a volunteer who first shows up, what they have to go through to get on their first call.*

**Fire Chief** responded they must be able to drive a firetruck at the scene, must learn how to adjust and shoot water. If an individual just walks in, they can tag along at calls for a month, and if the current members of the fire department approve, the station will consider training them.

*Ms. Wada asked what commitment a new volunteer could expect.*

**Fire Chief** explained this is an issue facing county-wide: some stations have 30 members on the rolls and cannot get 8 to show up at a fire – the commitment is to show up at any hour, no matter what. Not just when it is convenient. He relayed that he has had volunteers leave in the middle of a call. If the station does not respond to 911 calls, they could lose county funding and people could get hurt.

*Ms. Skelly asked about the station’s funding.*

**Fire Chief** framed his response by pointing out that some of their equipment was uniquely expensive: they have 911 beepers they always keep with them that cost \$500. They just got a grant from Texas Forest Service for a \$200k truck, for which they must pay 10 percent. FEMA offers money, but the “red tape” is too much, and they never received any funds. The Texas Forestry Service money was first requested in 2012. Most projects took 2 years for the funding to show up. Overall station insurance is \$6,000 a year.

**Firefighter** continued that most of the funds come from Bosque County donations. The station raises approximately \$30k a year, to cover 100 square miles and approximately 1,000 people. They use a high school mailing list to cover approximately 700 of those families, but the process of mailing those letters takes a week of volunteers’ time. Average donation is around \$100, with a range

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<sup>1</sup> A nearby larger town.

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of \$25 – \$1,000. A big fire at a property owned by doctors from Dallas resulted in a \$5,000 donation. **Fire Chief** added, people are willing to donate if they see the firefighters doing something with their money. They also added that taking out 3-4 trucks to respond to a fire can cost \$500-600 in fuel alone, and expenses like \$200 tires add up quickly.

*Mr. Crane asked what volunteers' day jobs were, and if the local business community was understanding of the requirements for volunteer firefighters.*

**Fire Chief** responded most volunteers work 8am to 5pm, and local businesses sometimes pay employees to respond to calls, sometimes they do not. When volunteers do respond, the fires can take 8, 10 hours to extinguish – and sometimes will come in consecutive days. **Firefighter** volunteered that he runs a business and employed 4-7 people last year – and required his employees to join the volunteer fire department. Some businesses in town are shut down completely when firefighters respond to a call – they may only have 1-2 employees working a shift that day.

*Mr. Kilgannon said, we have heard all these challenges, why do you love it so much?*

**Firefighter** responded, “It’s a job, someone has to do it.” **Fire Chief** explained that there *is* some adrenaline and a sense of accomplishment from being able to conquer something, “Get out there, get a job done, show that you did it. I hate re-kindles – they’re embarrassing. Gotta be in your blood. I had three kids, two are firefighters, one is the assistant chief.”

*Mr. Kilgannon asked if the station ever recruits at schools.*

**Firefighter** responded they did, for fire prevention week, which was usually a few hours and they would let the kids shoot some water. Did not usually come with a recruiting pitch, as they do not have the personnel to do that. **Firefighter** also expressed skepticism that high-school age kids had a wide range of commitments, such as a range of varsity sports.

**Mr. Barney** asked about the age of the volunteers at the station.

**Fire Chief** responded that two are 70, most are 55-65, only 1-2 are under 20 – and those are the ones they really need as there is a lot of weight to haul around when fighting fires. **Fire Chief** continued, saying he was the county-wide firefighter association president, and every station is having the same problem – they cannot get young people to show up. Clifton will have 4-5 show up for a large fire.

**Fire Chief** summarized the issue as: if you’re not from a family that’s in it, you don’t see it. My dad was chief, just like his dad. My kids were in it, when they were here. We’ve had a number over the years join, but they can’t make a living here, so they leave.

*Mr. Barney asked, if a volunteer is injured, whether insurance covers the cost?*

**Firefighter** confirmed it did, under workman’s compensation.

*Mr. Barney asked where they obtain water for a larger fire.*

**Firefighter** responded most departments have tenders, that is where mutual aid—which he defined as responding to another station’s call—helps as a big fire will require 6-7 tankers. Not a lot of people have the experience to drive the big tankers.

*Mr. Kilgannon asked who the station reported to.*

**Fire Chief** said they have guidelines and associations, and the county gives them a lump sum of money. Each department must have a certain amount of men, equipment, etc. They want to know

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what the stations are doing with county money. Stations are broken up into Class A, B, C. That's where they get rules like meeting twice a month.

*Mr. Kilgannon asked if EMTs were separate.*

**Fire Chief** said they are part of the Emergency Services Department (ESD) and are all paid. There are three ambulances for the whole county. The station used to do first-responder, but the law changed too much so they got out of it. The station will help people if they need it and will set aside helicopter landing zones (LZs), but none of the station volunteers want to be paramedics.

*Mr. Kilgannon then thanked the participants, and asked if they could be shown around the rest of the station.*

*Meeting ends.*