

## *International standards and their impact on* **MUNICIPAL FIRE DEPARTMENTS**

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The Canadian fire service has a diverse make-up. With over 3,700 departments nation-wide, they range from the smallest of volunteer departments to larger urban centres with multiple halls and multiple services. Regardless of size, the risks they face are the same. Only the frequency of response may change.

It is for this reason that there is a reliance on international standards to ensure a common expectation on the level of operations and protection of the responders. More often than not, these will be National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards.

Municipal leaders need to understand the origin of these standards and how they are developed so as to better understand their application and impact.

### **NFPA Background**

NFPA is a not-for-profit international standards development organization that was founded in 1896. In Canada, it labours under three misconceptions.

The first misconception is that the standards are American standards. This could not be further from the truth. Canadians also played a key role in NFPA's origins, since a Canadian insurance company was one of

the founding members. There are a number of Canadian members on the board of directors and a Canadian, Fire Chief Terry Allen of Cambridge, Ontario, chairs the Fire Services Section. All provinces certifying fire fighters do so to NFPA standards.

The second misconception is that NFPA is just about fire. The reality is that NFPA standards apply to many aspects of emergency response, public safety, and the built environment. There are over 40 NFPA reference standards in the National Building Code of Canada.

The third misconception is that NFPA just writes standards. Again, incorrect. NFPA's public education campaigns have been used throughout Canada for decades, including Risk Watch®, Learn Not to Burn, and of course Fire Prevention Week. NFPA is an essential component of the fabric of Canadian public fire and life safety.

### **Framework for Emergency Operations**

NFPA standards provide the essential framework for emergency service operations. They provide guidance on aspects such as professional qualifications, best practices, safety, communications, and reporting. Each standard is on a 3 to 5 year cycle for review. This helps to ensure that the latest understanding of fire loss experience, science and technology, fiscal concerns,

and public expectations are considered.

NFPA's standard development process is uniquely open and democratic, and has enjoyed widespread adoption because of this. Under an open consensus-based framework, anyone can participate in the standards development process (you need not be a member); all comments are responded to by the technical committees.

These committees have a balanced representation from all segments of society, and all results are fully disclosed in the public domain. The standards development process prides itself on being open and balanced. In doing so, a balance is ensured between acceptable risk, society's expectations, and costs.

### **Fire Insurance Ratings**

In Canada, the Fire Underwriters Survey (FUS) is a key tool used nationally by insurers to assess a community's fire protection measures. In the FUS, a community is assigned a dwelling protection rating and a community protection rating. These have a direct impact on fire insurance premiums paid by homeowners and businesses respectively.

In determining FUS ratings, the fire departments' operations are assessed against rating guidelines that have in turn been developed based on NFPA standards. This was determined to be the only method to consistently perform these assessments across Canada. Assessing the impact of any



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fire department changes on the FUS ratings makes for good public policy as expenditures and service changes could be reviewed against the impact these may have on insurance premiums paid by homeowners and businesses.

A good starting point for a municipality may be to perform a self-assessment against *NFPA 1201 Standard for Providing Emergency Services to the Public 2004 Edition*. This document outlines the requirements for the structure and operations of emergency service organizations and can help in the review or updating of a fire department's master plan.

### Master Planning Essential

Fire department master planning is essential regardless of the community's size. The plan should involve public comment, and should identify

the services that are provided by the fire department, the level of response, as well as any capital plans. This document then serves as the basis upon which the department should report back to council.

Annually, the fire department should be identifying the services it provided and how well it achieved these services. It should also identify any shortfalls and resource needs. Often, the requirement to meet NFPA standards forms the basis of the submissions for training, equipment and personnel resources.

In Canada, legal rulings have always supported public officials in defining policy but have also required operations to meet common standards such as NFPA. For example, municipal leaders determine whether a water rescue service is needed for the community. If the service is to be per-

formed, then the fire department needs to be resourced with equipment and training to follow NFPA standards, so as to safely carry out operations. Failure to do so exposes them and the community to increased liability. Even when NFPA standards are not referenced or adopted in legislation, past rulings have used them as best practices and a measure of due diligence.

### Evolving Best Practices

NFPA standards represent the continuing evolution of best practices for emergency services. They are increasingly being used by the fire service and others to identify training, equipment and personnel resource needs. These are consensus-based standards that have been well integrated into North America's public emergency response framework. [MW](#)

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