



City Council Staff Report

From: City Manager

Report Type: INFORMATION REPORTS

Lead Department: Fire

Meeting Date: March 11, 2024

Report #:2401-2493

TITLE

Santa Clara Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) Countywide Fire Service Review
Report: Highlights and Recommendations for Palo Alto Fire Department

RECOMMENDATION

This report is informational and does not require action by the City Council

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LAFCO Countywide Fire Service Review Report assessed the risks and service demands for the County and reviewed the performance and resources of the nine Fire and Emergency Service Providers.

The report identifies some notable findings and challenges in the performance of the Palo Alto Fire Department. Among the findings is the mention of PAFD being the only fire agency in the county that is the primary ambulance provider in its community. On the other hand, the challenges include the recommendation to increase resources, improve facilities and equipment, and explore partnerships and other areas that require continued attention to enhance services.

The city has responded to LAFCO (attached).

The full report can be found online here:

<https://santaclaralafco.org/sites/default/files/FireSRReview-FinalReport-2023.pdf>

BACKGROUND

LAFCO is responsible for regulating the boundaries of cities and special districts in the county. LAFCO enlisted the services of AP Triton to conduct a comprehensive Countywide Fire Service Review for Santa Clara County. This review focuses on fire and emergency services provided to the 1.9 million residents of Santa Clara County (SCC).

The county has nine fire and emergency service providers. American Medical Response (AMR) provides emergency medical transport services for most of the county, while the Palo Alto Fire Department (PAFD) serves Palo Alto and Stanford University.

The Countywide Fire Service Review provides valuable information for LAFCO, cities, special districts, and the public to understand and improve fire and emergency services. It highlights the need to address resource needs for current and growing demands, seismic protection and capacity issues for facilities, interoperability challenges, and coordination among agencies to enhance service delivery and response capabilities.

This memo reflects highlights, challenges, and recommendations for Palo Alto and the Palo Alto Fire Department, summarizing the final report.

ANALYSIS

Highlights

- PAFD provides its residents a full range of services, including being the only fire agency in Santa Clara County to be the primary ambulance provider.
- PAFD is the busiest fire department in Santa Clara County, running 107 calls per 1,000 residents.
- PAFD has a 90th percentile performance time standard for emergency responses adopted by City officials of 8:00 minutes or less.
- The City of Palo Alto meets State laws for transparency and accountability, including making information easily accessible to the public, maintaining a compliant website, providing ethics training and economic interest reporting, following financial reporting requirements, and adhering to open meeting requirements. In addition, the city goes beyond these requirements through several efficient web-based tools with accessible platforms to access various city documents and information, and a forum for online civic engagement.
- PAFD leads a program as the official Agency for Hazmat Business Plans and above-ground storage tanks for the entire County.
- Palo Alto and Stanford are noted as the top two of all 14 designated communities at the highest risk of wildfire in the County.
- PAFD shares a reserve Ladder Truck with the Mountain Fire Department (MVFD). However, MVFD has a new truck on order and plans to terminate the agreement once the new truck is in service.
- The City of Palo Alto's financing levels are sufficient to provide an adequate and sustained level of fire and EMS services but are not yet able to fund pre-pandemic service levels (this data is as of 2022).
- The city benefits from a shared Computer Automated Dispatch system and automatic aid agreements between Palo Alto, Mountain View, and Los Altos.

Challenges

Measuring Performance

Two primary measures are used in Fire and Emergency Response for performance.

Response Time: Response time is the time from receipt of a 9-1-1 call to the time the first unit arrives on scene. The standard in the field is to measure the 90th percentile response time i.e. 90% of the responses are at or below the set time standard. The adopted standard for PAFD is a 90th percentile response time of 8:00 minutes or less.

Unit Hour Utilization (UHU): Unit Hour Utilization measures workload for each response unit. This is the percentage of time during the day the unit actively responds to a call. This measure shows how busy the system is and if units are available enough to respond to the service demand of an area. UHU measurements also capture if there is enough time in the day for the firefighters on the unit to complete necessary daily tasks, such as report writing, training, and required breaks. The maximum UHU recommended is 10% which allows a system to be primarily self-sufficient and optimizes staff injury prevention.

Once UHU reaches 10% for a primary responding unit, a Fire Department will see increased challenges to meet the standard 90th percentile response time due to the unavailability of resources for immediate response. An agency would need to add resources or experience reduced call volume to meet response time standards.

- Performance
 - Palo Alto's adopted standard is 8:00 minutes or less 90% of the time. The study period shows Palo Alto's 90th percentile response time is 9:41 minutes. Other cities adopted time standards can be found in Figure 6 of the LAFCO report; none of the agencies are meeting their adopted emergency response standard.
 - Palo Alto has a high percentage of on-duty units that exceed a 10% UHU and significantly exceeds the average incidents per 1000 people in Santa Clara County. The study notes that PAFD is "excessively busy" and recommends that PAFD should add additional resources to manage the call volume and improve response time performance effectively.
 - PAFD has one engine at 10.7% and three ambulances significantly exceeding 10% of UHU. The three remaining engine companies are over or close to 9% UHU. The report specifically notes a concern for Fire Station 4, "Two of the medic units are stationed with another response unit. However, Medic 64 operates with a 19.1% UHU and is the only resource assigned to station 4."
 - Given the growth projected for the city and the existing unit utilization level, there are challenges meeting the current and projected demand for service for both ambulances and three of the four fire engine companies. LAFCO recommends that an additional engine company be assigned to Fire Station 4 to improve performance, and an additional ambulance to improve the sustainability and performance of the EMS transport response system citywide.

- Facilities
 - Five fire stations are over 50 years old, and 4 have either unknown seismic protection or no protection. Generally, Palo Alto's stations are older and do not meet the requirements of modern firefighting. A facility improvement and replacement plan is needed.
- Apparatus
 - Fifty-five percent (55%) of Palo Alto's fleet are in good or better condition; 31% are fair, and 13% are in poor condition. The Squad unit, engine, and a utility vehicle all need replacement, as of the 2022 report data. Subsequent to this, the air-light unit (Squad) is currently being built, and staff are evaluating electric vehicle options to inform the purchase of new vehicles.

Agency Comparison

The Cities of Mountain View (MVFD) and Santa Clara (SCFD) are the most comparable to Palo Alto in the County. Mountain View and Santa Clara are comparative cities in Santa Clara County because they are the most similar to Palo Alto regarding population, call volume, geography, and land use. All three are relatively small cities with a mix of residential homes and businesses, and the unique demands of the west side of the Bay Area are near Interstates 101, 280, and Cal Train. Mountain View is Palo Alto's direct neighbor with a similar population size and land use mix of residential, commercial, and industrial. Santa Clara is most comparable when considering call volume. Santa Clara's population is larger but similar to Palo Alto's daily population, which includes workers and visitors. Another critical criterion is that they operate a fire department with a traditional service delivery model. It should also be noted that no comparison is exact, for example, Palo Alto provides full emergency medical services, including transport of patients neither of these agencies is the primary responsible organization for this service, which lies with the County of Santa Clara for emergency medical transport care.

Attachment 1 to this report provides an infographic with some key data points of comparison from the report.

- PAFD is servicing a larger geographic area with a call demand profile of a higher population due to the increase in activity during the day.
- PAFD geographic area includes significantly more open space with a higher fire danger but has fewer fire-suppression units than MVFD and SCFD.
- PAFD is 1:41 over the 8:00 minute 90th percentile adopted standard, while MVFD is 0:55 over their 7:20 minute standard, and SCFD is 1:03 seconds over their respective 7:00 minute standard.
- PAFD's busiest engine has a UHU of 11%, compared to MVFD at 8% and SCFD at 7% Ambulance UHUs are much higher at 22% or 19%, while Engine 61 has a UHU of 11%, and the remaining three engines are at 9% UHU.
- PAFD has older facilities with the average Fire Station age at 46, compared to MVFD at 35 and SCFD at 36.
- Countywide Fire Services Review Report Recommendations and Potential Implementors

The specific recommendations outlined by LAFCO were responded to in the attached letter.

FISCAL/RESOURCE IMPACT

There are no fiscal impacts in receiving and reviewing the report. The Fire Department is reviewing investment needs to maintain, improve, and anticipate future service needs and risks and expects to review these as part of the Fiscal Year 2025 budget process.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The Fire Department plans to conduct an extensive Strategic Planning process beginning in Fiscal Year 2025 that will convene residents, businesses, and other relevant stakeholders in determining the goals and focus areas for the Fire Department.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

No environmental review is required since no Council action is requested.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: City of Palo Alto Response to Santa Clara Local Agency Formation Commission Countywide Fire Service Review Final Report

Attachment B: Infographic Comparison of Palo Alto, Mountain View and Santa Clara data from the LAFCO Report

APPROVED BY:

Geo Blackshire, Fire Chief