



# Achieving Organizational Excellence through Accreditation

How good is your department? How well does it perform toward meeting its mission? How much have you reduced the gap between today's performance expectations and your future performance expectation? | **BY RICK BLACK**

Historically, most of us relied on a citizen survey, annual fire loss report and/or annual response time report to answer these questions. We mix in our ISO rating and our "gut" feeling and believe we answered these questions as comprehensively as we could.

But if we were completely transparent with ourselves; we didn't even scratch the surface of responding to these simple questions. And if we were put in a position of having to empirically prove our answers; we would have great difficulty. Each of the tools we used to answer such questions was not comprehensive in and of themselves. They only addressed a small element or portion

of overall responsibilities. We realize that we need a complete and comprehensive process by which we appraise everything we do as an emergency response organization and from that appraisal we determine baseline and benchmark performance expectations and subsequent plans for improvement. Such a process exists in the Commission on Fire Protection, International Fire Department Accreditation Model.

In the past 13 years, you have, at one time or another, heard about this model. But you decided, directly or indirectly, that it was something you were not ready to take on just yet. Maybe you are dealing with chal-

lenges related to misperceptions of the process, the economy or complete transparency.

Common misperceptions include cost, workload and process. The process involves three steps to become an accredited agency.

**Step 1: Registered Agency Status.** This is a three year status that provides you with the current edition of the Fire and Emergency Service Self-Assessment Manual (FESSAM). It provides you with direct access to our developed tools and templates to assist you with starting your internal self-assessment as well as access to our newsletters and e-mail notifications. Three years of what I call the



Lincoln (Neb.) Fire Department members (from left) Scott Avery, Peer Team Leader; Scott Wiebe, Captain; Amber Wade, Firefighter; Ernst Piercy, CFAI Chair; Dean Staberg, Deputy Chief; and, Eric Jones, Captain.

**“Exploratory Status.”** Your not committed to anything but provided with many tools. The total cost of this status is \$500. This equates to less than your allocated annual amount for toilet paper.

You can become a registered agency by going to our website ([www.publicsafetyexcellence.org](http://www.publicsafetyexcellence.org)) and clicking on Forms and Applications.

**Step 2: Applicant Agency Status.** This status is where you decide that the organization is committed towards presenting itself as a Candidate for Accreditation within 18 months (career and combination) or 24 months (volunteer). The Applicant status is a time bound status whereby the organization completes its self-assessment process; Standard of Cover process and Strategic Plan. You can actually begin this work while you are a registered agency so that your 18 or 24 months is not stressful.

While you spent your time in Registered Agency status, you had three years to budget for your applicant status fee. You are also assigned to a mentor during the Applicant Status who will guide you, answer questions for you and review your draft documents as you develop them and provide feedback for improvement.

**Step 3: Candidate Agency Status.** You have completed the self-assessment process and are ready to present yourself as a Candidate for Accreditation. There is no fee for this status because you will pay the travel, per diem and lodging costs for the team of your peers who will verify and validate that you are doing what you say you are doing and that what you are doing is within industry best practices. This team will make a recommendation to accredit, defer or deny. The Commission will hear the teams' recommendation and report and make a final decision.

If you are successful, it is at the end of this status that you become an Internationally Accredited Fire Department. To maintain your accreditation, you must remain compliant with the standards or objectives that you set and with best practice objectives. You also pay 1/5 of your applicant fee each year.

The cost, comparatively, is small but many believe it requires too much work on an already stressed staff. When you review the FESSAM, you will see that you are already doing most everything that is required to be measured — your probably just not doing it to the detail required.

Many accredited departments have said that the self-assessment process allowed them to better prioritize what they were doing and how they were doing it. It is hard work but it's work that you are already or should already be doing. The self-assessment component of this process will result in the most comprehensive study of your entire organization that you have ever been a part of. Every detail; every corner; every closet will be explored and identified for potential improvement. So you see, Self Assessment for quality improvement is the greater value of this process.

The recent reductions of budget line items in response to the economy is a real issue for many departments but what we are seeing is that accredited departments are using their self-assessment process as the very lifeline to continue moving forward with their Capital Improvement Plan or at the very least, to maintain their current performance level. They are able to do this because they have provided empirical (versus anecdotal) data that illustrates their baseline performance in every category of their organization and its relationship with industry best practices. This process does require a tremendous amount of transparency and quite honestly, such a requirement serves as a challenge for some leaders. But the nature of organizational growth and change promises

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**Accreditation has a significant value to fire departments during tough economic times while fighting budget cuts. Core competencies provide strong justification for maintaining levels of service required for retaining accredited status. In addition to many cuts we faced, Atlanta Fire Rescue would have lost much more had it not been for the value city administrators placed on accreditation. Our public education section was initially cut, but later restored after our accreditation manager revealed it as a core competency.**

— *Kelvin Cochran*  
*Former Chief, Atlanta*  
*Fire Department*  
*U.S. Fire Administrator*

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**Accredited agencies are high-performing organizations that are using the best practices for both management and operations. As important as the recognition of effective policies and procedures is in the process, the identification of goals for continuous improvement is invaluable. I am proud that our city is one of only very few in Illinois where the fire, police, and public works departments are all accredited.**

— *David M. Limardi*  
*City Manager, Highland Park, Ill.*  
*President, International City/*  
*County Management Association*

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**In Columbus, Ohio, our city council was considering hiring an outside consultant to review staffing and overtime issues within the Columbus Division of Fire. They set aside \$75,000 for this initiative. I was able to demonstrate definitively the benefits of information and data contained in the Comprehensive Risk Assessment and Standards of Response Coverage document, when used in conjunction with our Self Assessment Report. They were also impressed that the process involves a comprehensive review of all Division of Fire operations. The funds were ultimately made available for other uses, and our mayor told me that once his staff learned more about it (accreditation) they reported that it only made sense to pursue it.**

**We are very proud of being accredited, and for us, the benefits most definitely outweigh the costs.**

*— Ned Pettus Jr.  
Chief, Columbus (Ohio)  
Fire Department*

that such transparency will be had in the not-so-distant future. So the real question is, do you want control of this transparency and improvement model or do you prefer that something or someone else control it for you?

The benefits of Accreditation are evident but I will submit to you that the real benefit lies with Organizational Self-Assessment. In fact, I have direct experience that proves if you are doing this to become Accredited; you will lose out on the full benefit that the process has to offer. If you are doing this to appraise and improve your organization — you will bear many fruits of organizational success, especially in the midst of challenging times.

So far, we have focused on the Self-Assessment component. There are three other components that are required to become a Candidate for Accreditation. They are Community Risk Assessment; Standards of Cover and Strategic Planning.

A comprehensive and complete Community Risk Assessment should be the foundation upon which deployment standards, objectives and policies are developed. NFPA 1710, 1720 and any other best practice should only influence your local decisions, not make them. The community risk that exists today, combined with community expectation, should carry the greatest influence on your deployment objectives.

Combine industry best practice with community risk and expectation and you have the makings for a credible and community driven baseline and benchmark deployment expectation. Look at pages 72 and 73 of our current seventh edition FESSAM and you will see best practice baseline and benchmark travel time by population density. Is it possible for you to deviate from those numbers and remain credible? Absolutely! You may have complete justification within your own level of risk. While the area of your community in question may be considered rural, you have three to five years of data that clearly illustrates that the frequency and probability of emergency incident is low. Combine that with evidence that you have informed your community of current performance and industry best practices and they have demonstrated acceptance of performance and plans for improvement. A team of your peers would be hard pressed to believe that you are grossly deviating from industry best practices. Within this quick example; the saving grace of understanding was community risk and historical data. It's all about the risk that you are responsible for protecting. You can even advance the population density to suburban or urban and add increase risk. But if all of your high and moderate risk contains protection through advanced code enforcement; then that may have an impact

### Initial Steps Toward Becoming an Internationally Accredited Fire Department

- Join the network of Organizations seeking Excellence by becoming a registered agency ([www.publicsafetyexcellence.org](http://www.publicsafetyexcellence.org))
- Attend the Basic CFAI Workshop Series to ensure that you are trained in the entire process and are moving in the right direction (<http://publicsafetyexcellence.org/Default.aspx?tabid=81>)
- To gain classroom and field knowledge, function as a trained peer assessor before starting the process in your organization
- Develop an internal team to work on the self-assessment process and conduct in-service training with them
- Begin the self-assessment process and yield many results whereby plans for organizational improvement are created

### Benefits of Accreditation

- Affirmation of industry best practice performance to community
- International recognition of achievement
- Accountability to remain credible through peer-developed processes

on local policy decisions as well. The bottom line is this — Deployment Expectations absent of a well defined and comprehensive community risk, is simply not credible.

The Standard of Cover component is one of the greatest challenges that the Fire Service faces today. This component of Accreditation is where the Organization simply answers the question, “Are you able to match resource to the demand of risk contained in your community?” Naturally, the organizational answer will require much data and analysis but what this component of the accreditation process allows you to do is first assess what risk lies in your community today; what the demand of that risk has, or eventually will place on your resource capacity; and what your performance expectations are towards meeting the demand. You cannot begin to develop your Standards of Cover document until your community risk analysis is complete. Once completed then you along with personnel who have records management and GIS skills go to work looking at past, current (baseline), best practice and future (benchmark) performance expectations. You are able to develop baseline and benchmark distribution (first due) objectives for suppression, EMS, hazmat and technical rescue incidents by category of risk. You are also able to determine the Effective Response Force (ERF) that each risk demands in order to

be mission successful. The ERF is the result of what is called a Critical Task Analysis. Critical tasking is where you identify what tasks must be accomplished in a defined period of time in order to be mission successful. For example, a single family dwelling would be considered by

is, doesn’t your community already think you are doing this?

Strategic Planning has long been confused with Master Planning. In its overly simplest form; Master Planning deals with “stuff” and contains a long range outlook of around 20 years toward when to acquire such

## Are you able to match resource to the demand of your community based risk?

most as a moderate risk occupancy. Considering the studies on flashover, we will use the first 10 minutes as our critical time frame. What tasks must be accomplished in the first 10 minutes? Your answer to this question defines the Effective Response Force for moderate risk suppression (building) incidents.

A quick side note, the ERF is more easily tracked when you update your “Full First Alarm” assigned to reflect the ERF assignment. More elements of a comprehensive and complete SOC document can be found in our 5th Edition Standards of Cover manual which can be purchased through our website or provided to you when you attend our Basic SOC Workshop. Again, some may think, “Why would I go through all of this just to have someone say we are credible with industry best practices?” My humble but straightforward response

stuff. The Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) is a good example of a Master Plan. Strategic Planning deals with “people” and “direction.” It requires a shorter outlook of 3-5 years and answers the questions, who are we? Why do we exist? For whom do we exist? Where are we as an organization? Where are we going? How will we get there? This required component of the Accreditation Process must have direct relationship to the Organizational goals and objectives as well as the financial program of the department.

There is no better time than now to begin the most comprehensive appraisal of your organization then right now. The following action steps are created to assist you with beginning your organizational self-assessment process and start of Journey of Organizational Excellence through the Accreditation process.

### Benefits of Self-Assessment

- Assessment of organizational performance versus inventory based system
- Identification of organizational weaknesses
- Migration from anecdotal to empirical-based data
- Develop plans for improvement
- Tremendous budget-supporter

### Applicant Agency Cost

#### Based on Population Served:

|                                   |          |
|-----------------------------------|----------|
| Serving 0 to 9,999 .....          | \$4,000  |
| Serving 10,000 to 49,999 .....    | \$5,000  |
| Serving 50,000 to 99,999 .....    | \$6,000  |
| Serving 100,000 to 199,999 .....  | \$7,000  |
| Serving 200,000 to 499,999 .....  | \$8,000  |
| Serving 500,000 to 999,999 .....  | \$10,000 |
| Serving more than 1,000,000 ..... | \$11,500 |