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WESTERN LAKES FIRE DISTRICT ASSESSES CRITICAL NEED FOR ADDITIONAL STAFFING, NECESSARY FUNDING

Options assessment explores challenges, potential solutions to bring WLFD services in line with community needs, national standards

OCONOMOWOC, WIS. – Today, the Western Lakes Fire District (WLFD) released an options assessment detailing the staffing challenges faced by the District, the identified solutions and potential options for municipalities served by the District to provide necessary funding.

The options assessment cites increased calls for services, a growing population and decreased availability of local paid-on-call firefighters as putting a significant strain on WLFD, resulting in increased response times that put residents at risk and increase losses due to fire.

“In just four years, we have seen a 74 percent increase in calls for service,” said Bradley Bowen, WLFD Fire Chief. “In 2021, due to a lack of in-station staffing, our fire response times grew and does not meet national standards. We have to increase our staffing to ensure we are serving and protecting local residents to the best of our abilities.”

Key to WLFD’s challenge is insufficient in-station staffing to respond to calls. Currently, in-station staff must wait for paid-on-call staff to arrive before responding to the vast majority of fire calls that come in, at a time when the number of available paid-on-call staff continues to decline.

“Historically, paid-on-call staff were from the community,” said Chief Bowen. “However, since 2001, WLFD has seen a 69 percent decline in paid-on-call-staff who live within five miles of a station, dramatically increasing the time it takes for a paid-on-call staff member to report to the fire station when a call comes in - resulting in increased response times.”

WLFD’s decreased resident paid-on-call staffing is in line with the experiences of fire departments across the region, state and nation as a downward trend in available paid-on-call staff has reached an all-time low.

Additionally, challenges tied to staff recruitment and retention have impacted WLFD. Every year, WLFD loses an average of 40 part-time staff members, largely due to higher-paying job opportunities, including with other fire departments, or other hourly job opportunities in the community. WLFD’s part-time firefighter and EMS staff are currently paid \$14 an hour. For comparison, a part-time hourly salary at local convenience stores range from \$15-\$20 an hour.

Department leaders and municipal staff from communities served by WLFD have assessed community needs and concluded the following measures are necessary to bring fire and EMS

capabilities in line with industry standards and best practices, as dictated by the demands, size, makeup and population of the community:

1. Fund additional staff, including:
 - 33 additional full-time firefighter / paramedics (11 per shift spread across the WLFD footprint);
 - 3 additional Battalion Chiefs (one per shift);
 - 15 internship positions (positions are not new, but new Department of Labor regulations require that intern positions be paid positions);
 - 1 full-time administrative assistant; and
 - 1 additional fire inspector.
2. Maintain current staff by increasing wages to avoid staff departures to other departments, be competitive in the market and enhance staff recruitment and retention.

Bolstering WLFD's staff and increasing wages would require an additional \$6.3 million provided by the communities that receive WLFD fire services, based on a funding formula that accounts for a community's calls for service, population, the value of their facilities and land value.

The options assessment identifies three key options for moving forward:

1. Maintain the status quo
2. Make cuts and service reductions at the municipal level
3. Identify additional sources of revenue through a wheel tax or increased property tax levy via referendum

"As a community, we have a decision to make about the level of service we want and need and how we can identify the funds necessary to make it a reality," said Chief Bowen. "This assessment is a critical first step in beginning a community dialogue around the future of fire and EMS services in our area."

The options assessment was presented to municipal elected officials and staff at the WLFD's March 9 Joint Owners meeting. It is available in its entirety at <https://westernlakesfd.org/>. In the coming weeks, community members will receive a survey designed to help municipal leaders determine the best path forward.

ABOUT WESTERN LAKES FIRE DISTRICT

The Western Lakes Fire District has deep roots in Lake Country. In 1968, the Dousman Fire Department changed its name to the Dousman Fire District as it expanded its service area. That began a series of deeper partnerships among area communities to enhance fire protection service. In 2013, the Summit Fire District merged with the Dousman Fire District and in 2017, the City of Oconomowoc Fire Department and Dousman Fire District consolidated to become the Western Lakes Fire District (WLFD). In 2020, the Okauchee Fire Department and Stone Bank Fire Department consolidated and joined WLFD.

Together, WLFD serves a population of more than 54,500 from 11 municipalities in Waukesha, Jefferson and Dodge Counties. WLFD provides both Fire and EMS services to the City of Oconomowoc, Town of Oconomowoc, Town of Merton, Town of Ottawa, Village of Dousman, Village of Lac La Belle and Village of Summit. The District provides EMS services to the Town of Ashippun, Town of Concord, Town of Sullivan and Village of Sullivan.

Learn more at <https://westernlakesfd.org/>.

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