

Town Uses Data to Back Money-Saving Decisions

By MITCH EVICH

Is it necessary for a fire engine to tail an ambulance on routine emergency calls? No one doubts that firefighters fulfill a crucial role in helping to move people who are seriously injured. But whether the fire trucks themselves are always needed, says Amesbury Fire Chief Jon Brickett, is another question.

“The traditional rationale for having the fire engine on the scene is that if a fire call does come in, we can get to the site quicker,” Brickett says. “In theory, that’s not a bad idea, because the truck is already out on the road. But there’s little truth to back that up. It’s just perception.”

That perception, Brickett concluded soon after assuming the fire chief’s position in the fall of 2007, was costing Amesbury money. Diesel fuel was above \$5 a gallon, and fire trucks typically get less than five miles to the gallon. They are also expensive to maintain, and can cost \$500,000 or more to replace. Brickett, with the support of Mayor Thatcher Kezer, proposed the purchase of an SUV to take over the “chase car” role. The Ford Explorer the town acquired cost \$28,000 and gets close to twenty miles to the gallon. And because the vehicle is new, maintenance costs have been minimal.

Brickett says the idea to use a chase car arose from “AmesStat,” the data-based approach to management that Kezer introduced when he became mayor in 2006. Brickett, a twenty-seven-year veteran of the Fire Department, says he

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Mayor Thatcher Kezer’s emphasis on using data to back decision-making helped lead to the use of an SUV to accompany ambulances on routine calls.

appreciated Kezer’s mantra: that decision-making must be backed up by data. Using Fire Department numbers, Brickett was able to overcome skepticism—within his department and beyond—about whether an SUV chase car made sense. Once the car was introduced, the fuel costs for responding to medical calls dropped from \$1.44 per call to 18 cents per call, saving the department more than \$1,000 in the first five months.

Revenue Opportunity

Fuel and maintenance savings aren’t the only benefits Amesbury realized by purchasing the Ford Explorer. There are also avoided personnel costs. Any time a fire truck leaves the station, there must be at least three firefighters on board. In the past, if a fire truck was en route to an accident scene and another ambulance call came in, off-duty firefighters would need to be paged at home to follow the

second ambulance. This not only added to the response time, it increased the Fire Department's overtime costs. Sending out the SUV, by contrast, requires just a driver.

The staffing issue has become particularly important in a town with a growing senior population. (Brickett says assisted care services are now the largest source of jobs in Amesbury.) "Double calls"—simultaneous requests for ambulances—were once rare, but these days it is not unheard of for Amesbury dispatchers to get three or even four calls at once, according to Brickett. Of the 2,500 to 3,000 emergency calls Amesbury can now expect each year, roughly two-thirds require an ambulance.

While the rise in ambulance calls has placed demands on the Fire Department, it also has created an opportunity to generate additional revenue. Amesbury has mutual aid agreements with several neighboring towns, including ones across the border in New Hampshire. Because Amesbury had only two ambulances, however, there was a limit to the number of calls the town could respond to. When mutual aid calls came in, Brickett says, it was necessary to send an ambulance with two paramedics, even though the ambulance itself wasn't needed—only the paramedics were.

To address this problem, town officials sought, and received, state approval to use the SUV as a "non-transporting ambulance," equipped with lights, radio, sirens and other safety equipment. The use of the chase car as a quasi-ambulance widens the number of calls the Amesbury Fire Department can respond to, while lessening wear and tear on the town's two ambulances.

"We've had many conversations that begin, 'So Chief, when do you think it's necessary to have a third transporting ambulance?'" Brickett says, noting that such a vehicle would cost in the neighborhood of \$150,000. "But what we've done is we've actually answered that question, and done it very frugally."

On the billing side, the Fire Department has benefited from the use of durable laptops and wireless technology that enables information to be uploaded automatically; the information begins its journey to a billing company as soon as an ambulance is backed into the fire station. With the previous paper-based



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By restructuring its custodial staff, Amesbury has been able to devote more attention to maintenance of its school buildings and grounds.

system, Brickett says, it could be four or five weeks before the information was sent to the billing company. "And by then," he says, "the insurance company had already doled out all the money," leaving Amesbury without compensation.

One Size Doesn't Fit All

Kezer points out that the Fire Department's use of the chase car is just one of several programs put in place to enable the town to operate more efficiently.

Schools Superintendent Charles Chaurette estimates that over the past six years, the town has saved between \$1.5 million and \$2 million by using its own fleet of vans to handle much of the transportation required by the school district's special-needs students. Thirty-five of the fifty-eight special-needs students ride in the town-operated vans, while transportation for the other twenty-one, some of whom need to travel far beyond the town's borders, is handled by private firms. Because the town vans operate on three- to four-year leases, Chaurette says, the year-to-year costs tend to hold steady, allowing for reliable budgeting.

This past year, Amesbury took the unusual step of restructuring its school custodial staff as a means of enhancing its maintenance program. The initiative grew out of a problem with chronic absenteeism among some school custodians. With the cooperation of the custodians' union, the town decided to outsource most basic

janitorial chores, thereby reducing the in-house staff from sixteen to eight. But the remaining staffers were rehired at a higher pay scale for tasks that require skills such as carpentry, painting, landscaping and lighting maintenance, rather than simply cleaning floors. While the town won't see immediate cost savings from the change—the cost of outsourcing basic custodial duties is roughly equal to the money saved by eliminating the eight in-house positions—the long-term benefits will be considerable, including an improvement in municipal building maintenance that will help to avoid costly repairs that would result from neglect. The initiative, Chaurette says, "is going to pay off in the dollars that are going to be saved in cost-avoidance down the road."

"A lot of the challenges I'm facing today are because of decisions made ten or fifteen years ago," he says. "What we're trying to do is break that cycle of making short-term decisions that get you through the current year or situation, but create a bigger problem down the road."

Kezer notes that the town has turned to both "in-sourcing" as well as outsourcing solutions—depending on the specific need. "The overlying theme is the process of analyzing and coming to decisions on how best to deploy our resources. I think that's the good news story for Amesbury: that we have found different approaches to meet these different needs." ❁