

Spotlight: City of Calimesa (California) Fire Department



As the ranks of volunteer firefighters continue to shrink, and retention and recruitment become more difficult, many departments are forced to look at different staffing models and start thinking outside the box. This is one example of a department that was able to successfully adapt and incorporate what they refer to as the “reserve/intern” program.

Prior to 1990, the citizens of Calimesa, California received fire service through a combination of efforts which were managed by the California Division of Forestry, Riverside County Fire Department along with a robust group of volunteer firefighters from Calimesa, Company 21. Subsequent to the City of Calimesa’s incorporation in 1990, the city continued a relationship with Cal -Fire through the county of Riverside Fire Department. The volunteer program was reformatted to a regional concept Volunteer-Reserve program which slowly led to the demise of active volunteer firefighters serving from within the community.

The original contract provided the city with a 2/0 staffed (2-person) Basic Life Support (BLS) engine company. The county’s regional ambulance service, American Medical Response (AMR), responded to all medical calls and provided Advanced Life Support (ALS). In 2012, the County of Riverside adopted a new policy which required a 3/0 staffed (3-person) engine company.

Due to the increased cost associated with the county's new staffing policy, the city did not agree to the terms as the city simply could not sustain the increased financial commitment. Subsequently, on April 13, 2016, the city received a notice of cancellation from the county stating the contract would be cancelled effective July 1, 2017, unless the city upgraded to a 3/0 staffed paramedic (ALS) engine company.

The city explored various alternatives and was determined to find a solution which would be both cost effective and meet the needs of the community. To further that effort, in November 2016, the City hired fire consultants to assist city staff in analyzing multiple potential in-house staffing models. Early in 2017, the city negotiated an extension of services with the county through December 31, 2017. The extension provided additional time in which to implement an in-house fire department.



2 - Most of the staff in front of the engine following a memorial they attended for a city council meeting.

The initial staffing model included a fire chief, a deputy fire chief, three fire captains, six firefighters, and a pool of intern/reserve firefighters. Prior to the launch of the in-house department, all fire suppression employees attended a 6-week training (tower) academy in addition to meeting the current credentialing required for their respective positions.

At midnight on January 1, 2018, the City of Calimesa Fire Department went into service and began responding to calls. The original staffing model called for a 4/0 staffed engine company three career firefighters and one Intern/reserve firefighter. The full-time firefighters were, and still are, assigned to a 48/96 shift schedule. The reserves work one 24-hour shift a week. The fire department currently possesses two type 1 fire engines, one squad, and three command vehicles. The city now staffs a fire chief, a deputy chief, two battalion chiefs, three captains, nine full-time firefighters, and a pool of intern/reserve firefighters. The city also currently employs an administrative assistant to assist the respective chiefs and other city staff by ensuring certain administrative tasks are performed accurately and timely.

“The model we’ve used when we created the department was what we believed to be the most beneficial and cost saving platform for fire and emergency medical services to meet the needs of our growing community.”

-Chief Johnson

The city utilizes a combination department concept which supplements daily staffing levels with reserves. As of May 2019, the city currently staffs one Type 1 engine (4/0), and one squad (2/0). This staffing pattern calls for one captain, two career firefighters and one reserve firefighter on the engine and one career firefighter and one reserve firefighter on the squad. Reserves are trained, treated like and expected to integrate with the career staff. Currently, all full-time career firefighters are recruited and hired directly from within the reserve program.

The fire department works closely with all other city staff and city contractors, the city-owned senior center and library, as well as schools and mobile home parks. For example, when the senior center hosts events, the on duty shift usually attends. The fire department staff can be found serving meals, cleaning up and gladly assisting with anything needed during the event. The fire department also works together with City Hall in a similar manner and in turn, both City Hall and the senior center assist the fire department in any way possible.

“The Calimesa Fire Department is a great department. I have been with the department for a little over 19 months as a reserve and now a full-time firefighter. I’ve gained new skills and knowledge in my time here at the department. I really enjoy working with the department that is growing so quickly. We are family here, we’re like brothers and sisters.”

-Firefighter Becerra

Calimesa has historically run between 1,800 and 1,900 calls per year. In 2016, this peaked at approximately 2,000 calls. In 2018, Calimesa Fire Department responded to roughly 1,800 calls, and as of May 2019, have logged 600 calls. Fire dispatch services are provided via the Riverside County Fire Department.

The City of Calimesa Fire Department’s mission statement is to provide a peace of mind for our community through efficient response times, highly trained fire personnel, and support staff, as well as cooperation and coordination with surrounding fire agencies, most of all to prevent fires through prevention and education programs. Calimesa Fire Department is founded on compassionate, community-oriented service dedicated to the health and safety of our residents.



3 - Training with fog machines.



4 - Calimesa Engine from when it was an all volunteer fire department.



5 - Chief Johnson introducing the Calimesa Fire Department to the garden club in the senior center



6 - Teaching the garden club about fire safety.



7 - Engine 1