



Holding Their Feet to Our Fires: Rural Emergency Services and the Struggle to Serve in the Face of Ignorance and Corruption*

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Commentary

At the Guardians 2024 Conference, I provided a narrative on the overlooked world of emergency services in rural areas. As a professor at the Colorado School of Mines and a volunteer professional firefighter, I examined many of the challenges faced by rural emergency services, and the impact of societal ignorance and political corruption on their operations.

I began by introducing the concept of a ‘parallel universe’ where emergency services operate. This universe, though integral to public safety, often remains invisible to the general populace. I highlighted the disparity in the public recognition of military personnel versus emergency service workers, despite the latter frequently facing dangerous (even existential) situations more often than the former.

The immediate backdrop for my presentation was the Quarry Fire near Denver in Colorado (Wertz et al. 2024), a stark reminder of the perilous work undertaken by emergency services even near major urban areas. Providing important education about the significant risks wildland fires pose, I also noted that these fire events occur frequently in the Rocky Mountains and across the entire West. These inherent risks are too often unnecessarily exacerbated by organizational failures.

My dual role as an academic and a firefighter provide me an unusual perspective on the issues at hand. I serve in two fire protection districts in Colorado: Elk Creek FPD (2024a) under Fire Chief Jacob Ware and Hartsel FPD (2024) under Fire Chief Brian Cook. Elk Creek FPD is a ‘combination’ district staffed by both paid and volunteer firefighters, whereas Hartsel FPD is served by volunteers except for its Fire Chief.

I underscored the financial challenges faced by rural fire departments, noting the high costs of equipment and the necessity for replacing vehicles and other essential equipment after limited periods of time due to safety requirements. Most fire departments in Colorado are organized as fire protection districts (FPDs), defined as “a special district which provides protection against fire by any available means and which may supply ambulance and emergency medical and rescue services” (Colorado Legislature 2023, p. 4). These FPDs are allowed under Title 32 of the Colorado Revised Statutes to levy taxes on property within their boundaries – upon the concurrence of the citizens served. The FPDs’ Fire Chiefs provide operational oversight, while an elected

Board of Directors oversees each District’s funds and strategic direction. The crux of my argument revolved around the problematic and politicized nature of this management oversight by the Directors. Effective management requires either prior knowledge of the subject matter or a willingness to learn it on the job. Too many Board members lack this expertise, leading to mismanagement and inefficiency. I criticized the notion that a manager can manage anything, advocating instead for a better-informed and fact-based approach to governance especially by those who wish to serve the community as elected FPD Directors.

I lamented the politicization of elections for FPD board members, which have become local microcosms of US national politics. I identified two extremes among Board members and candidates: those with deep experience with a desire to foster the common good, and political hacks with no interest in learning or understanding the subject matter. This latter group, which I termed “corrupt”, poses significant dangers to public safety for the community of residents who live in the FPDs.

In defining corruption, I distinguished between ‘financial corruption’ and ‘moral corruption’. The latter, I argued, involves obstructing those who selflessly serve the public – with interference by the obstructionists motivated by desire for their own personal or political gain. I noted that Elk Creek FPD has experienced significant problems due to such corruption, endangering both firefighters and, more importantly, the population they serve.

I provided specific examples of the problems caused by corrupt board members. These individuals use their positions to promote personal agendas, such as preventing development within the District (over which FPDs have no say), rather than addressing real issues that are part of the FPD’s responsibility for public safety, such as dealing with the increasing frequency, complexity, acuity, and overlap of fire incidents and other emergencies, as well as rising costs. I highlighted the importance of mutual-aid agreements with neighboring Districts, noting that Elk Creek draws more aid in this manner than it provides, effectively being subsidized by the tax payers in its neighboring FPDs.

The solution proposed by Chief Ware and his fellow Fire Chiefs, also supported by my colleagues and me, was Consolidation (Elk Creek FPD 2024b): a process aimed at combining three FPDs (in this case Elk Creek, Inter-Canyon, and North Fork Fire) to reduce overhead, streamline processes slowed by mutual aid and to increase the tax base. This solution would allow for the hiring of more full-time firefighters, improving response times and overall efficiency. However, this proposal met with resistance from an uninformed and politically motivated Board

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member and his supporters.

I detailed the campaign of misinformation and disinformation waged by the opponents of Consolidation. These individuals, via fliers and continual social-media posts as well as emails to a large, private group of readers, spread false claims about increased response times and resource reallocations, violated election laws, and engaged in smear campaigns against firefighters and their Fire Chiefs. Despite these efforts, the overall combined electorate of the three FPDs voted in favor of Consolidation. However the Elk Creek FPD electorate itself narrowly rejected it, causing the proposal to fail overall.

In the aftermath, emergency services continue to struggle with the same structural and operational challenges already noted. I emphasized the need for informed and proactive citizen involvement to address these issues. I and a group of concerned citizens conducted an after-action review of the Consolidation election process in order to identify lessons learned and strategies and tactics for future efforts. This review highlighted the importance of protecting the Elk Creek FPD's trademarked logo (misappropriated by the opposition during the Consolidation initiative), defining the field of play, reaching out through personal networks, exposing dirty tricks immediately, and providing a detailed strategic plan.

My colleagues and I are now advocating for Unification ([Elk Creek FPD 2024c](#)) a similar process to Consolidation, also proposed by Chief Ware and his fellow Fire Chiefs, and with virtually identical organizational results. Because there would be no associated increase in property-tax rates, Unification does not require voter approval. Instead only approval by the respective Boards is required. This proposal has garnered preliminary support from the three Boards of Directors and shows promise in addressing the structural challenges faced by the FPDs wishing to merge. Unification would result in lower taxes for Elk Creek and one other district, matching the lowest property-tax rate of the three merging FPDs related to fire and other emergency services.

I concluded by emphasizing the importance of listening to experts and prioritizing public safety over political agendas. I highlighted the dedication of my fellow emergency service workers, who put their lives on the line for the greater good of the community. Despite our challenges, the support and appreciation from the community for firefighters and other emergency services staff motivate us to continue our vital work — many of us, as volunteers, expect and receive absolutely no financial compensation.

My presentation ([slides](#) and [video](#)) at the Guardians 2024 Conference examined critical issues facing rural emergency services. I called for informed and proactive citizen involvement, emphasizing the need for fact-based governance as well as the dangers of political interference. Advocacy by the Fire Chiefs, and my fellow citizens and colleagues for Unification provides a hopeful path forward, aiming to enhance public safety and support the dedicated individuals who, as career or volunteer emergency responders, serve their communities selflessly.

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