



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

Philip Koch and the BHAVI Guardians Committee†

Commentary

At the Guardians 2024 Conference, Philip Koch provided a compelling narrative on the often overlooked world of emergency services, particularly in rural areas. Koch, a professor at the Colorado School of Mines and a volunteer firefighter, shed light on many of the challenges faced by rural emergency services, and the impact of social ignorance and political corruption on their operations.

Koch 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. He 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 backdrop for Koch’s 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. Koch provided important education about the wildland fires that pose significant risks and occur frequently in the Rocky Mountains and across the entire West. He emphasized that these risks are unnecessarily exacerbated by organizational failures.

Koch’s dual role as an academic and a firefighter provided him with a unique perspective on the issues at hand. He serves in two fire protection districts in Colorado: Elk Creek FPD (2024a) with Fire Chief Jacob Ware and Hartsel FPD (2024) with Fire Chief Brain Cook. Elk Creek FPD is a so-called ‘combination’ district with both paid and volunteer firefighters, while Hartsel FPD is served mostly by volunteers except for its fire chief.

Koch 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 a certain period of time due to safety requirements. He explained that 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 Koch’s argument revolved around the problematic and politicized nature of management oversight. Effective management, he argued, requires either prior knowledge of the subject matter or a willingness to learn it on the job. But too many board members lack this expertise, leading to mismanagement and inefficiency. Koch criticized the notion that a manager can manage anything, advocating instead for a better-informed and fact-based approach to governance by those who wish to serve the community.

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

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

Koch 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, rather than addressing real issues which affect the FPD’s responsibility for public safety, such as dealing with increasing fire incident frequency, complexity, acuity, and overlap, as well as rising costs. He 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 its neighboring FPDs.

The solution proposed by Koch and his colleagues was Consolidation (Elk Creek FPD 2024b), a process aimed at combining three FPDs (Elk Creek, Inter-Canyon, and North Fork Fire) to reduce overhead, streamline processes to benefit improved 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 member and his supporters.

Koch detailed the campaign of misinformation and disinformation

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waged by the opponents of Consolidation. These individuals spread false claims about increased response times and resource reallocations, violated election laws, and engaged in smear campaigns against firefighters and chiefs. Despite these efforts, the overall combined electorate of the three FPDs voted in favor of Consolidation, but the separate Elk Creek FPD electorate narrowly rejected it, causing the proposal to fail overall.

In the aftermath, emergency services continue to struggle with the same structural challenges. Koch emphasized the need for informed and proactive citizen involvement to address these issues. He and a group of concerned citizens conducted an after-action review to identify lessons learned and strategies for future efforts. They 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.

Koch and his colleagues are now advocating for Unification ([Elk Creek FPD 2024c](#)) a similar process to Consolidation with identical organizational results because there would be no associated increase in property-tax rates. However, it does not require voter approval, instead only approval by the respective Boards. 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 related to fire protection and emergency services.

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

Philip Koch's presentation ([slides](#) and [video](#)) at the Guardians 2024 conference shed light on the critical issues facing rural emergency services. He called for informed and proactive citizen involvement, emphasizing the need for fact-based governance and the dangers of political interference. Advocacy by Koch and his colleagues for Unification provides a hopeful path forward, aiming to enhance public safety and support the dedicated individuals who volunteer to serve their communities selflessly.

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