



The Need to Establish a National Office for Fire Service Statistics

Background

All Canadians are deserving of an equitable and effective level of fire protection in their communities. By the same token, all Canadian fire fighters are deserving of equal protections against the dangers they face on a daily basis. The only way to measure whether this is being achieved in Canada is with reliable, comprehensive, national statistics that use standardized reporting criteria, in the same way that federal departments and agencies collect information about other important public safety issues.

For example, issues relating to crime and justice in Canada are addressed through detailed statistical reports released annually by Statistics Canada. This authoritative and national statistical collection serves the public as well as the law enforcement community as it gives the ability to accurately identify the state of crime in Canada and track emerging trends in crime and justice. This in turn enables the public and law enforcement professionals to properly advocate for their own safety, and allows law enforcement officials to direct resources where they are needed most.

Similarly, Health Canada, a federal department, has taken the responsibility of tracking national statistical information on West Nile Virus every year in Canada in order to learn about the scope of the disease, to identify problem areas and to ensure that local health officials have the information they need to adequately protect local citizens from this danger. Information about several other diseases is also tracked by Health Canada.

But when it comes to fire protection and other elements of emergency response, there is no equivalent in terms of comprehensive, complete national fire service statistics. There is no useful annual report issued by a government department or agency, and no national organization or agency with the mandate and the resources to collect, analyze and disseminate complete fire service statistics.

Reliable national fire statistics for Canada are impossible if even one province or territory's statistics, as collected by the office of its fire marshal or fire commissioner, are unavailable or out of date. The truth is that many provinces' statistics are out of date. For example, in February 2009, some provinces had statistics available only from 2006 or earlier. In British Columbia, selected fire loss statistics up to 2007 were individually available upon request, but the last year for which fire statistics were compiled and published in a report was 2003.

In the past, there was an attempt to compile national fire loss statistics through a group called the Council of Canadian Fire Marshals and Fire Commissioners, or CCFM&FC. This group consists of the appointed fire marshal or commissioner in each province and territory. With the assistance of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), this group reported national fire loss statistics. But the figures were not reliable, as they were incomplete, woefully out of date and they did not encompass a full range of issues relating to the fire service and public safety.

In early 2010, the latest information available in a national fire loss report from the CCFM&FC is from 2002, and data from two provinces is completely missing. What is the real number of Canadian fire fighters who died in the line of duty in 2002, or any other year? No one has ever properly counted. What is the national average in terms of fire department or EMS response time in Canada? These important numbers are unknown.

This is unlike the situation in the United States, where a single government agency – the United States Fire Administration (USFA) - collects, analyzes and disseminates a full range of national statistics on the fire service each year. This is done through a system called NFIRS, which stands for National Fire Incident Reporting System. NFIRS utilizes a standard, national reporting system for tracking fire incidents in over 20,000 U.S. fire departments. The USFA also administers a National Fire Data Center, which has the specific mandate to operate the National Fire Data Center for the collection, analysis, publication, dissemination and marketing of information related to the Nation's fire problem and USFA programs, manage USFA research efforts in fire detection, prevention, suppression and first responder health, safety and effectiveness.

The ability to properly address the state of fire protection in Canada, including public and fire fighter safety, does not reliably exist due to the fact that there is no single, national entity with the responsibility of tracking fire service and emergency response statistics.

In March 2010, NDP MP Don Davies (Vancouver-Kingsway BC) introduced a private member's bill in the House of Commons to address this problem. Bill C-495, if enacted, would create a national office for fire service statistics within Statistics Canada. In addition, two private members' motions were reinstated in the House of Commons in March 2010. Motions M-96 from NDP MP Irene Mathysen (London-Fanshawe, ON) and M-249 from NDP MP Charlie Angus (Timmins-James Bay ON) call on the government to establish a national office for fire service statistics.

The IAFF supports Bill C-495 and motions M-96 and M-249 and the introduction of any other legislative initiative that addresses this important issue at a national level.

Cost

The IAFF agrees that it is fair to consider the question of cost with this issue as it is with any legislative demand. The cost of establishing a national office for fire statistics would be unknown until the potential model has been decided, for example whether the function could be performed with existing resources within the federal government and whether previously-budgeted funds could be reallocated toward this need. At the same time, the IAFF asserts that money should not be the overriding factor when it comes to public and fire fighter safety.

IAFF Position

The IAFF asserts that in the name of public and fire fighter safety, the federal government should assign the responsibility of collecting, analyzing and disseminating national fire service and emergency response statistics to a federal department or agency, and that a reliable annual report of national fire statistics for Canada should be made available to all fire service stakeholders and to the public.

This responsibility could be given to or shared among any number of federal departments or agencies, including Industry Canada, which has responsibility for Statistics Canada; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Labour Canada.

IAFF Arguments

- ✓ All Canadians are deserving of equitable levels of fire protection and public safety
- ✓ Detailed national statistics are used to address a wide range of crime and public health issues in Canada
- ✓ There is currently nothing available in terms of comprehensive national fire service statistics in Canada
- ✓ The need to establish a Canadian office for national fire service statistics has also been expressed by other fire service stakeholders such the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC), the standards industry and the scientific community
- ✓ The U.S. recognizes this need and serves the public and fire service stakeholders with a National Fire Incident Reporting System and National Fire Data Center

Current Status

There is currently nothing available in terms of up to date, reliable, annual fire service and emergency response statistics in Canada. In the name of public and fire fighter safety, the IAFF calls on the federal government to assign this responsibility of annually collecting, analyzing and disseminating comprehensive, national fire statistics to a competent department or agency.

For more information about this issue or any other issue affecting Canada's professional fire fighters, visit www.iaff.org/canada or contact the IAFF Canadian Office at (613) 567-8988. The International Association of Fire Fighters represents 297,000 professional fire fighters in North America, including over 21,000 in Canada. The IAFF is affiliated with the AFL-CIO and the Canadian Labour Congress.