

# How to Achieve Excellence without Breaking the Bank

The all-encompassing CFAI model provides well-planned, cost-effective and continuous improvement in fire and rescue services. | **BY RICHARD FAGAN**

Fire and rescue service customers want quick and dependable emergency response performance with well-trained and equipped personnel at a reasonable cost. This is a true statement whether there is a solid or shaky economy. In most places in North America, current revenue resources are shrinking, demand for services are increasing, and accountability for quality service (let alone continuous improvement) with fiscal restraint as the norm.

The components of the CFAI Accreditation Model (Strategic Plan, Risk Assessment/Standards of Cover, and Self Assessment) provide for a custom description and appraisal of all parameters of the local fire rescue service, an accurate description of community hazards and risks, the local "quality" standard for emergency response and coverage, and the fire rescue service's plan (with goals, objectives and performance measures) for improvement by addressing critical issues and service gaps. This all-encompassing model, if applied, provides well-planned, cost-effective continuous improvement in services. The local fire and rescue service, if accredited by CFAI, has had a third party quality endorsement on the agency's service, assuring high quality performance for the tax dollars provided by its customers.

Because the application of the CFAI model requires significant work at accomplishing the required criteria for accreditation, agencies may turn to consulting firms for assistance, particularly in establishing the Strategic Plan and Standards of Cover documents. Some agencies have found that it may be easier to hire a consulting firm to complete these documents as a project, rather than assigning inexperienced personnel to do this work.

In 2005, the CPSE Board of Directors determined that it might serve agencies well, and also change the accreditation work in these areas from "project work" to "process work", if facilitation and support were made available as an option for a price to train, coach and guide agencies through the accreditation process and document requirements. It was believed that CFAI Peer Assessors and Team Leaders well indoctrinated and experienced with the CFAI Accreditation Model, and who had the proper credentials to work as CPSE Technical Advisors in specialty areas such as Strategic Planning, Standards of Cover and Self Assessment, could facilitate this agency work at a reasonable cost. The new Technical Advisor Program facilitation option would allow agencies to accomplish their accreditation study and documentation requirements while learning the process with quality leadership, coaching and mentorship aligned in the Accreditation Model, and in a cost-effective way.

Since that time, the CPSE Technical Advisor Program has served to assist numerous agencies in their journey to accreditation. The program is able to put technical advisors who have had "best practices" exposure in our industry from the accreditation review processes into agencies to facilitate their Strategic Planning, to instruct and coach them through their community Hazard and Risk Assessment, to guide and lead them through their Standards of Cover development, and to review and comment on the agency's Self Assessment document. The CPSE facilitation program is provided through both on-site activity and regularly scheduled Web conferencing for process

guidance and the maintenance of the model.

To briefly explain the Technical Advisor Program process work currently available, the following are three program services offered:

**Community-Driven Strategic Planning Facilitation.** Experienced CPSE Technical Advisors facilitate a five year Strategic Plan driven by input from the community's external stakeholders. It includes a CPSE facilitated external stakeholder meeting (or meetings, if the agency requests) which provides necessary structured feedback to the agency identifying community expectations, concerns and priorities.

CPSE Technical Advisors then facilitate an agency three day internal stakeholder work session

## FACILITATION: Process Work

- Instructs and facilitates processes
- Coaches agency work teams
- Guides the quality of work completed
- Agency personnel learn from the experience, while developing skills and abilities for accreditation work in the future

## CONSULTING: Project Work

- Analyzes
- Suggests/recommends based upon the application of specific or generalized models
- Presents a formal report or document upon completion

to place the community feedback into their mission, vision and values, and also into their analysis of organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to determine the organization's critical issues and service gaps. This work then drives solution statements which are transitioned into goals, objectives, critical tasks and performance measures.

This work is performed inline with the latest edition of the Fire and Emergency Services Self Assessment Manual published by CPSE/ CFAI. All work is tied to the accreditation model and typically takes approximately three months to accomplish.

Ken Block, Fire Chief of Edmonton Fire Rescue Services, Edmonton, Alberta, described the experience of his department like this, "An added benefit of the 'facilitation process' was to involve key members of our staff including our local firefighters union executive, to contribute their perspective of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities as well as risks that our service currently faces. This process has been a true 'inward look' as to what our service currently looks like from an operational as well as a planning perspective.

An added bonus of this facilitation was to gather key members from all facets of our community to reflect on their perspective of their fire rescue service. This has served to give us valuable insights as to what the community likes about our service and more importantly it has identified aspects that we can improve upon.

At the conclusion of this project there is no doubt in my mind that Edmonton Fire Rescue Service will have a much more complete understanding as to what services we deliver well to the community and more importantly where we need to target our resources to better serve our community."

Although most of our discussion has centered on the planning process related to the accreditation model, there are those circumstances when an agency may need assistance due to changing circumstances. John L. Donahue, Fire Chief

of the Delaware Fire Department, in Delaware, Ohio, describes the value of facilitated, community based, strategic planning as critical tool in a period of leadership transition. "Our Department had just experienced the retirement of a long-time Fire Chief and the hiring of the first Fire Chief from outside the organization. The Department was celebrating 175 years of service to the community. The community was facing rapid growth and development, with a department that was not expanding or growing to meet the needs. The City and Department had been at odds on how best to provide the needed services to the community. The Customer Driven Strategic Plan developed by CPSE, provided the opportunity for the Community, the City, the local union and Fire Department personnel to begin looking at the issues they faced and develop a plan for the future to overcome those issues.

A consulting firm typically researches problems and provides their recommendations of what should be done based on current trends or what is typically the norm. The facilitation process provided meaningful information based on what the community, the City and the Fire Department felt was best.

At a recent meeting, the Finance Director made a statement about how unusual this has been, funds are expended for studies, but this is one of the first times that a plan is being developed to implement those recommendations.

The CPSE facilitation has been a valuable process for the Department. It is unfortunate that the implementation of the recommendations is taking longer to overcome; however, the long-term impact will have exponential results for the community, the city and the fire department."

**Standards of Cover Facilitation.** Highly experienced CPSE Technical Advisors provide four days of detailed instruction from the latest edition of the CFAI Standards of Cover published by CPSE/ CFAI. Facilitation is provided assisting the agency with such things as

**The Abington Township Fire Department is an all-volunteer force made up of 235 firefighters serving a suburban community of 56,000 citizens.**

**CPSE provided advisors who had technical expertise and the ability to keep our strategic planning process on track. They possessed the skills necessary to gain the respect and cooperation of our diverse membership and to keep them focused on the needs and expectations of our customers — the citizens we serve.**

**For a very reasonable fee, the CPSE's technical advisors delivered a strategic plan to the ATFD that is truly a living document.**

— *David W. Schramm,*  
*Fire Services Administrator,*  
*Abington Township (Pa.)*  
*Fire Department*

the methodology in documenting community hazards and risks, and coaching is provided with design layout and material content with GIS mapping and data analysis. Additionally, a determination is made of the necessary fire station distribution relative to the unique community hazards, risks, population densities and event demand. The concentration of forces is established along with call type critical tasking, the necessary equipment needs, as well as baseline and benchmark emergency response performance measurement.

"One of the foremost challenges facing our department", according to Division Chief Jim Strey, of the Rockford, Illinois Fire Department, "was the expansion of the corporate limits of the city of Rockford and knowledge of the need for additional fire stations. We realized the need for a comprehensive assessment of our fire department and the community at risk to strategically and correctly locate these new facilities.

A review of the options available to us to complete this assessment identified CPSE and the Technical Advisor Program as a facilitation program optimizing the use of our

---

**The decision was made to interact with CPSE personnel for direction on how to make additional progress. We were impressed from the beginning on what they had to offer.**

**Although we have had positive results from consulting firms in the past, we were able to receive information related to the culture of our profession that proved to be practical from an administrator's perspective. There are many examples of this.**

— *Charles A. Teale Sr.*  
Chief, Hartford (Conn.)  
Fire Department

---

**The Novato Fire Protection District was faced with taking on CFAI self-assessment, revising our Standard of Cover and Strategic Plan all at the same time, pursuing our accreditation process. It was important that we established our goals and objectives incorporating both external and internal stakeholder input without bias and done so in a timely manner. Having an external facilitator, particularly one with the CPSE, provided us that possibility.**

**The CPSE facilitation process is very well organized, responsive to our organization's own situation, and extremely efficient.**

**Whether considering the CFAI self-assessment and accreditation process or not, this was one of the most efficient and best business decisions our organization has implemented.**

— *Forrest Craig*  
Division Chief, Novato (Calif.)  
Fire Protection District

---

internal resources to conduct this assessment.

The facilitation process capitalizes the resources within the Rockford Fire Department. An outside consulting firm cannot have the same ownership as our own personnel. Furthermore, CPSE and the accreditation process incorporated the use of external stakeholders in the community to best identify their expectations of the programs and services to be delivered by the Fire Department. This comprehensive process has developed strong and ongoing working relationships with members of the community that we may not have previously enjoyed.

The facilitation of the accreditation process is ongoing and has caused the Rockford Fire Department to continually assess our current operations and to make cost effective changes to our response matrix and allow us to operate more efficiently.

The Rockford Fire Department has embraced the accreditation process throughout our organization. The Technical Advisor Program helped us to set the foundation that will carry the Fire Department forward for generations."

A complete facilitation of all essential standards of cover elements is provided in compliance with all relative accreditation performance indicators, core competencies and criterion. Standards of Cover facilitation typically takes between six to twelve months to complete, depending on the organization.

**Full Self-Assessment Facilitation.** This facilitation work is a complete self assessment facilitation with a team of six to nine technical advisors providing the facilitation of a Strategic Plan, a Standards of Cover document (including Hazards and Risk Assessment), and the necessary instruction, coaching and review of the agency's writing to the CFAI categories, criterion, core competencies and performance indicators necessary of the Self Assessment Manual (SAM). The agency is coached on putting its accreditation team in place. The process includes a detailed review by Technical Advisors of the SAM content and required relative exhibits. The facilitation work closes with a multi-day

mock accreditation review site visit and report. The full self assessment facilitation takes between twelve and eighteen months to complete. It is expected that the agency receiving this facilitation process in its entirety is ready to go into "Candidate" status for accreditation.

Fire Chief Douglas McDonald, Los Alamos Fire Department, Los Alamos, New Mexico, was a member of the original Accreditation Development Group who engineered the first fire service accreditation model. Chief McDonald, currently using the Technical Advisor Program to help facilitate a full self-assessment in his organization, notes that he has cause for celebration and some regret. "The celebration is a genuine department effort and involvement which leads to a greater ownership of the process department wide. The tools used by CPSE are real life and firefighter friendly, not some academic exercise or theoretical mind game.

The regret is one of perhaps not immediately taking full advantage of the talents and expertise of the CPSE technical advisors to the fullest extent, even though CPSE has made the offer numerous times throughout the process .

Once we figured out the CPSE Technical Advisor's were genuinely willing and ready to help us succeed, knew their system to the fullest, were one of us (fire folks) and thus had a good feel for our system without a huge learning deficit curve, the gains were certainly greater from our perspective. I thank (CPSE) you for this valuable process and recommend departments seriously consider taking advantage of this CPSE Technical Advisor program."

Technical Advisor Program Facilitation has been provided to all types and sizes of Fire Rescue services across the United States and Canada. Municipal city, township and county, as well as special districts have utilized our services. Whether metro sized population bases or small rural communities, our experience has been that our programs have had a positive impact on improving their organizations.

---

*Richard Fagan is the Technical Advisor Program manager.*