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2013 Volunteer Chief of the Year Freddy L. Johnson Sr.

Lisa Allegretti Williams | Fire Chief

Oct. 4, 2013

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With backgrounds in fire, law enforcement and the military, 2013 Volunteer Chief of the Year Freddy Johnson Sr. knows the importance of a dynamic approach.

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Beyond benchmarking

Under Johnson's leadership, the Stoney Point Volunteer Fire Department became only the third department in North Carolina and the first volunteer agency in the U.S. to become accredited by the Commission on Fire Accreditation International.

"Members are proud of their departments: We all think we're the best, that we do things better than the next department over," Johnson said. "I wanted to take that a step farther and prove that."

To achieve accredited status, Stoney Point had to address more than 260 national standards. It took the department four and a half years to complete the process. It involved modernizing the two-station department substantially. Johnson oversaw the remodeling of Station No. 13 and the replacement of an aging fire station with a new, larger and modern Station No. 19 to address fire station facility distribution within the fire district.

Johnson also modernized the department's equipment and fleet, securing new turnout gear, specialized equipment and fire engines.

"We are a much better department today," Johnson said. "We are a professional department and provide a profession service."

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Johnson also has earned the Chief Fire Officer designation from the Commission on Professional Credentialing.

“Chief Johnson’s achievements set him above his peers, and establish his example as a beacon for others to follow who wish to change their organization, community, and lives like those who are privileged to come in contact with him,” said Paul Brooks, executive director of the Center for Public Safety Excellence, the organization that nominated Johnson for the Chief of the Year award.

Johnson believes the work Stoney Point did for accreditation in helping the department achieve another goal — an ISO rating of Class 3. Stoney Point is the only department in North Carolina with that rating. In fact, according to ISO, only 6% of fire districts in the U.S., including those protected by fully paid departments, are rated a Class 3 or better.

When Johnson first started with the department, it wasn’t ISO rated. In his time, it has gone from a Class 7 to a 5 and now to a 3.

“ISO just made fundamental changes to FPRS that made it a 21st-century performance-based system,” Johnson said. “Accreditation prepares departments for that.”

Stoney Point has an average of 10 members on duty at a time, which Johnson said creates an end result similar to having paid personnel in the station. The department doesn’t require members to live within the fire district, but they must spend one night every five to seven days at the fire station, which offsets any negatives of living outside the district. All members are required to receive their certifications to meet ISO training hours. Johnson credits his “proactive” training officer, and said the department provides training seven days a week.

But success meant changing more than Stoney Point personnel.

“We had to go to outside resources like the county dispatch center and force change on them because the way we were dispatching, we weren’t meeting [response time] requirements,” Johnson said. “We don’t need to keep someone on the phone 3.5 minutes before we dispatch.”

Accreditation “brought about fundamental changes in the way we operate — and change in itself is a challenge,” Johnson said. That challenge led to losing more than 100 members in the process.

Fortunately, the department currently has a waiting list for membership. Johnson credits the lack of residency requirements and department’s reputation in the community for this surplus.

“Our community supports us because they see the benefits from the department just in the insurance savings from ISO,” he said.

“I learned on the job to be honest,” Johnson said. “We strive to be the best we can be. We always improve. I listened to my people about how good we are. It provided a leadership challenge for me.”

County initiatives

Johnson is president and a long-standing member of the Cumberland County Fire Chiefs Association, which brings together all county fire, law, EMS and government agencies, as well as Department of Defense emergency service agencies.

“Cumberland county law enforcement is onboard with us,” he said. “We meet on a monthly basis to come up with a solution that serves everyone. My deputy and assistant chiefs [including Johnson’s sons, Freddy Jr. and Sean] also are law enforcement. Local municipal chiefs attend as well. We’re all there for that common goal.”

One common goal was interoperable communications. In 2006, Johnson authored a \$1.1 million grant to purchase a state-of-the art 800 MHz radio system for all Cumberland County fire departments in order to join the North Carolina State Voice Interoperability

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Plan for Emergency Responders (VIPER). Johnson served as a Homeland Security Fire Service Grant Peer Review member during the 2008 process and shared his knowledge of the process with his peers, Bladen, Hoke, Robeson and Sampson counties, to achieve those same goals on a regional basis. The sheriff's department came to the system soon after.

"Chief Johnson has been a catalyst for numerous initiatives within Cumberland County that have significantly improved and enhanced fire, rescue and EMS capability," said Larry Townsend, vice president of the board of directors for the Stoney Point Fire District. "These initiatives have been emulated by Cumberland's neighboring counties, as Chief Johnson's efforts clearly set the example for them to follow. He sets the true azimuth for other departments and emergency organizations to follow."

As president of the chiefs association, Johnson spearheaded efforts to help low-tax-base volunteer departments in the county secure additional funds. In 2009, Johnson served as chairman of a public safety task force commissioned to address Cumberland County emergency services' shortcomings.

The task force recommended, among other things, a review process for implementing a special sales tax — not a property tax — geared toward funding all Cumberland County emergency services.

Johnson assessed the need for a more robust heavy-rescue response for motor-vehicle accidents and technical rescue incidents within Cumberland County, and identified an operational void that diminished rescue capability. The association implemented an EMS first responder and heavy-rescue response to serve the district and assist neighboring departments. This initiative ensured that all such incidents received sufficiently trained and certified rescue technicians and also ensured that state certified heavy rescue trucks would be integrated into the response.

"His dedication and commitment to the fire service exceeds outstanding," Townsend said. "His approach to the community needs does not restrict his focus solely to his department. He sees the solution for all Cumberland County fire departments and EMS, not just his own. And these solutions produce results that are far-reaching outside our county."

"Chief Johnson is the model volunteer fire chief — bright, resourceful and driven, he envisions the need, crafts the solution and then initiates the change," Townsend continued. "He is the energy of his department and, more importantly, the energy of the Cumberland County Fire Chiefs Association. He creates organizational synergy and his enthusiasm is contagious. These personal facets are uncommonly seen in the volunteer communities."

In 2012, Johnson was appointed by the North Carolina Commissioner of Insurance to the statewide office of the North Carolina Fire and Rescue Commission.

Johnson also is the recipient of the North Carolina Order of the Long Leaf Pine, which is the most prestigious award presented by the governor to a citizen for exemplary service to the state.

"There is no better volunteer fire chief in North Carolina than Freddy L. Johnson Sr.," wrote state Sen. Wesley Meredith.

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