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Panelists: Budget crisis may be over, but long-term effects remain to be seen

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The economy is showing signs of improvement, but fire departments now are starting to see the adverse effects of cuts made during the recession, according to panelists during a session on economic recovery hosted by the CFSI, earlier this month.

According to IAFC Executive Director Mark Light, 45% of fire departments across the country were forced to cut budgets during the economic downturn; another 25%

relied more heavily on federal grants to fund staffing and services. At the same time, demands for service grew higher than pre-recession levels.

The departments that relied on grants may find their options limited in the future, as FEMA funding is threatened every year. This is, in part, because many legislators believe that public safety is a local concern, not a federal one, according to Kevin O'Connor, the IAFF's assistant to the general president for governmental affairs.

The economic downturn has provided legislators an opportunity to "right-size" fire departments to pre-9/11 assistance levels, he said.

Part of the problem is legislators who don't understand the fire service, according to panel moderator Bill Jenaway, chief of the King of Prussia (Pa.) Fire Department. Many representatives who sat on the Congressional Fire Services Caucus have lost their seats at greater rates than new members have joined.

Jenaway, who also serves as an elected official, said he consistently has heard three things

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from legislators:

- Cut. Cut budgets, cut service and it will save money
- If you can't cut, demonstrate why you can't cut.
- Consolidate and share services. This will help you cut.

"Most successful fire departments outline infrastructure issues for officials, and why they need to be dealt with in the way you want to deal with them," he said.

O'Connor believes that fire service advocates should encourage legislators to read NFPA's annual fire-department needs assessment.

"Push it in the face of every elected official at every opportunity," he said. "Government's fundamental responsibility, at all levels, is public safety."

Elected officials make decisions based on the aggregate, not just with fire departments in mind. Therefore, it's important for the fire-service to speak with one voice to legislators, federal and local.

NVFC Chairman Phil Stittleburg would take it one step further, suggesting that fire departments coordinate with law enforcement for budget presentations, "instead of being in conflict."

The impact on volunteers

Stittleburg said budget cuts have been felt as acutely — if not as publicly — in the volunteer sector. Fire-service volunteerism declined 8.5% between 2008 and 2011. And while there's "no empirical evidence between that decline and the economy, there is common sense," he said.

This decline primarily is due to what Stittleburg calls a decrease in discretionary time. Residents who worked one job had to take second jobs to pay the bills, and many single-income families had to become dual-income households.

"It's tough to volunteer if your biggest concern is how to make your next mortgage payment," he said.

The question facing departments now isn't how to recruit more volunteers; it's how to use the time that volunteers offer most effectively. Taping into the public for help with non-operational activities — for example, asking a retired school teacher to conduct public education — frees up volunteer firefighters for operations and training.

The volunteer sector still finds there is a major gap between capabilities and national standards. This is particularly true in rural areas, where there are fewer people to foot the bill for services.

"Sometimes we have to say 'no,'" Stittleburg said. "We don't want to create impression that we can provide a service that we can't."

Fire leadership must demonstrate to their communities the value added by volunteer fire departments, not in terms of costs but savings.

"When we aren't fielding a team that's properly equipped and trained, we've increased our potential for injury, decreased our effectiveness — the saves that should have been made aren't going to be made — and increased the cost of operation down the road," Stittleburg said. "We've simply kicked the can down the road — at some point, the bill comes due."

There are two ways to demonstrate value, according to Jenaway: statistical modeling and anecdotal stories. But thanks to cuts made during the recession, data might be hard to come by.

"You need data to make decisions, but fire department cut a lot of those [support]

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positions during the recession to keep firefighters on the front line,” Light said.

That leaves anecdotes, which still are a powerful tool, Jenaway said.

“Nothing hits home more to an elected official than a vignette of a save in their hometown — that’s where they live and where they shop,” he said.

Purchasing power and delay dilemmas

Another common cost-saving measure was to delay apparatus purchases. Most departments can’t catch up on the replacements that should have been made during the recession, and city officials are questioning the need to replace vehicles at the earlier timeframes.

“If there were no problems, [departments] just established a new replacement cycle,” Light said.

Light said more departments should look into the purchasing power of group purchasing organizations, or GPOs. Cost savings can be significant — “six-digit big,” Light said — when a rig can be produced in volume. In fact, Jenaway said departments in Pennsylvania have saved as much as 17% on apparatus through group purchasing.

Stittleburg suggested that fire departments not involved with a GPO look closer to home for apparatus savings.

“Take a better look at mutual-aid systems so as to not duplicate purchases,” he said.



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