



Presentation Title: Fire Code Officer,
Positive Impacts with Code Enforcement

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I. Formative Evaluation – Planning

Following the economic downturn of 2008-2010, the Vancouver Fire Department (VFD) Fire Marshal's Office (FMO) laid off approximately half of its workforce as part of a city-wide effort to balance the on-going financial structural deficit associated with the overall budget. These workforce reductions, combined with the retirements of experienced staff and the inexperience of new hires, negatively affected the continuity, performance, and consistency of the department's fire and life safety inspection program. This grim reality of "doing less with less" with the critical lines of business inadvertently fostered a creative environment for leadership to problem solve. Some of the goals were to create a fire code enforcement program that was cost neutral to the city budget, eliminate inspection backlog, remove fire protection system annual test report review, and establish a routine inspection frequency for building occupancy types.

II. Process Evaluation - Implementation

VFD leadership resolved to invent a new type of employee position (i.e. revenue dependent employee), digitize the code enforcement process, invest in new software technology, and go paperless with official correspondence and invoicing to maximize fire code enforcement program performance. Thorough and complete inspections would be conducted by geographical grid rather than by occupancy type. A current and accurate building occupancy portfolio for the service delivery area was created. VFD leadership conducted an analysis within the city of all geographical grids and determined the approximate date range of the last known fire inspection completion date within each grid. Map page of grids containing buildings not inspected within 10 years were priority.

VFD leadership collaborated with organized labor and ultimately created a brand new position called Fire Code Officer (FCO). The Fire Code Officer position is dedicated solely to fire code enforcement activities such as fire inspections, fire operational permits, special inspections, complaints investigation, fireworks patrols, and other related fire code consulting work. The FCO revenue is generated from the fire inspection fee schedule and is cost neutral to the city budget (at a 90% recovery rate). The FCO revenue is examined and monitored annually and is part of the condition of employment. In January 2014, the department piloted two temporary FCO positions for 24 months, which ultimately led to the success of adding six regularly staffed FCO positions to the city's budget. Once the entire city has been inspected and an accurate inventory can be calculated, future staff needs will be determined.

As part of the FCO program creation, all historical building/structural files, records, fire protection systems plans and fire protection systems testing/maintenance reports, fire inspection notices, fire operational permits and other official correspondence were digitized. This important milestone provided immediate field access for all VFD records and business community/contractor records.

The VFD purchased a new records management system (CivicGov) that aligned better with the Vancouver FMO lines of business. This web-based system dramatically increased staff efficacy, allowed staff to utilize handheld electronic devices, and reduced and/or eliminated FMO staff errors. The web-portal for the business community and fire protection contractors allowed them to access their building fire records; submit fire protection system inspection, testing and maintenance reports on-line; apply for and receive fire operational permits; and pay fees on-line. The immediate feedback has been positive from the stakeholders.

III. Impact Evaluation – Short-Term Results

The frequency model was established and the accurate database has improved efficacy.

In 2014, the backlog was 10,600 inspections waiting and teams conducted 40 False Alarm inspections and no initial inspections. In 2015, there were 1,996 initial inspections. By 2017, the backlog was reduced to 5,176 inspections waiting, 1,166 False Alarm Inspections, and 2,399 Initial Inspections. In 2014, 250 hazards were noted and 217 were abated. In 2017, 24,950 hazards were noted and 24,769 hazards abated.

IV. Outcome Evaluation – Long-Term Results

The process of inspections has been greatly improved and the backlog of inspections are projected to be eliminated by 2020. Six budget-neutral Fire Code Officers work for VFD.

Recommendations for others:

Having a positive relationship with the Fire Chief, City Manager's Office, City Finance/Budget Office and organized labor is paramount. Another vital factor is staff training with the International Fire Code that includes state amendments and any local ordinance regulations. Investing in tailored code training is essential. It allows the department to prioritize training needs and increase the continuity, performance, and consistency of the department's fire code enforcement program. The last recommendation is having a progressive commitment from all the stakeholders, business community, fire protection contractors, executive leadership, city staff and fire staff so the program is continuously evaluated and adjusted if merited.

Conclusions:

Success was found in using a geographic priority rather than occupancy type priority for inspections, creating a budget-neutral inspector positions and constantly re-evaluating the total number of occupancies against staffing level, obtaining data for commercial occupancies, and projecting a frequency strategy has led to a more-effective building inspection process.