



CRR Radio – Karl Ristow, CPSE Accreditation Program Manager

- Intro: Welcome to CRR radio from the Vision 20/20 project.
- Ed Comeau: On today's episode, we're going to be talking about the role of CRR in Fire Department Accreditation. Karl, could you take a minute, introduce yourself?
- Karl Ristow: Sure, absolutely I'm Karl Ristow, the program director for the commission on Fire Accreditation International. We're one of two programs to a commissions that fall under the Center for Public Safety Excellence, and the other one being the Commission On Professional Credentialing.
- So, they handle professional credentialing for the individual and essentially CFAI, the commission on fire accreditation and national handles accreditation or credentialing, if you will, for the agency. So, important process to self assess to seek quality improvement.
- Ed Comeau: For full disclosure, over the past year and a half, I've been working with CPSC helping with their communications. And in this position, I've become more familiar with the role that CRR plays in accreditation, which is why I asked Karl to join us on today's podcast. So, how about we dive into it, Karl? Can you talk about the intersection of CRR and accreditation?
- Karl Ristow: Well, it's always been there. It's whether an agency will recognize it. Then where it's really starting to kickoff is with the ninth edition; there was emphasis placed on transparency more with local government to go ahead and communicate the gaps in service delivery that many of us in the fire service I've experienced over the years.
- Not in a staffing on the firetrucks and on a fire stations, and with the transparency of that, the response times are starting to be recognized too. Say that it isn't just about adding firetrucks, fire stations, and fire engines, and firefighters. It's about something else because we can't get there fast enough.
- So now, it's driving the question to the agencies, to fire departments, is what else can we do to mitigate? And CRR is obviously the the bridge to that because risk reduction is the only answer to putting fire trucks, fire stations, and firefighters on every street corner, and you still can't get there fast enough.
- The other piece that's really made this aware, and it's the civilian fire departments are seeing it more and more is their interaction with the Department of Defense. And when they go out on site visits and they noticed that a fire department in the department defense maybe runs one or two structure fires and a five to seven year period. And there's no data, there's not a lot of data.



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And how do they do that? What exactly is going on? And when you look at the Department of Defense structure, you see very much so, they have put a lot of effort into CRR because their mission drives it. They cannot afford to lose. So I think those two things have been a catalyst to start promoting this more. We've got to do something different. It isn't about response.

Ed Comeau: And maybe you should take a minute here to kind of go through the process. 'Cause you mentioned the ninth edition and some of our listeners may not be familiar with exactly how a department goes through accreditation. So can you kind of give us an overview on how that all works?

Karl Ristow: Yeah, absolutely. So, the the process is essentially a a fire department is going to self-assess itself, but before it can do that there's a document that has to be created, where an agency goes ahead and does a risk assessment of its community. So, they have to understand what the risks are. This is a totally risk based model. We should be responding based on risk, not based on how we've always done it.

And so, the agency will conduct a comprehensive risk assessment. I kind of key it and way I verbalize it to agencies when I teach the process in the program, that's the in-depthness of what one's going to do. It's research. And they're going to walk away with a risk assessment that's going to identify risk categories and risk criterion that are going to allow them to then mold into what critical tasks need to be done to mitigate the risk. Which then, equates to the people that are going to need to respond in any capacity.

Whether it's for inspections, whether it's for response, whether it's for a whatever it needs to be done to mitigate the risk. And that morphs into a document called a Standard of Cover. Those two documents start creating data for an organization to then walk into, and they'll see gaps actually in their capabilities with those documents to then draw on strategic planning.

And they'll create a strategic plan. While many have strategic plans, this strategic plan will, obviously, one would expect to see gaps in their capabilities because you don't grow fire stations, and fire trucks, and firefighters, and extra inspectors, and those kinds of things you don't grow those overnight.

So, that's going to take a budgeting mechanism and long range planning and that's what a strategic plan will do. Once an agency has those two documents, complete, they'll then conduct a self assessment against 252 performance indicators, of which about 86 of them are core competencies. And at a minimum, an agency has to meet all of the core competencies that they're responsible for.



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And I say that that way because some people don't have airports, and if they don't have an airport, then there's obviously those two core competencies that they're not going to have to address in category five and deal with those particular issues. So, they're going to create three documents at the end of this all.

They're going to create a Community Risk Assessment Standard Of Cover, a strategic plan, and then they're going to do an a self-assessment of their entire organization from governance all the way to category 10, which happens to be external relationships, dealing with mutual aid, automatic aid agreements.

But everything in-between finance to strategic planning, to risk assessment to dealing with the water supply, dealing with 911, all those aspects of a fire department will be self assessed by the agency. They'll tell us what they're doing will come in and verify and validate. And if we can verify and validate successfully or recommendation is made, an agency is a potentially accredited by the commission for a five year period.

Ed Comeau: You didn't mention in your introduction there, is you used to be a DOD fire chief yourself. So, how have you CRR morph overtime? Both in the military world and the civilian world. And how has it become more integrated into the accreditation process?

Karl Ristow: One is just, to be full disclosure, I retired out of the Air Force in 1995 as a fire officer. I didn't become fire chief until I was in the civilian world a couple of years after that. So, I've seen both sides of the park kind of is helped me understand, or at least I can see where the gaps are. I think in the U.S. fire service as compared to some of the DOD. But the DOD approach, obviously, nearly every structure built now and for very long time is sprinkler.

All of them have detection systems. Some of the very important ones will have foam systems or in back in the day when you could do it, a halon systems, and they take a lot of effort. Their safety programs are bar none, probably some of the finest in the world of repetition reminding. I remember my early days as a young airman. We literally had training classes on how to properly lift; thus reducing back injuries, those kinds of things.

And they're repetitive. It's not like it happens once. It happens a lot. And then, they have a lot of what civilian part of it's called, they have a lot of ordinances and statutes that they have to follow. And it has to be followed a certain way. There are technical orders that say, "You do it this way and this is the only way you're going to do it," because that prevents a negative event.



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So all the processes of CRR play on a military base. Do they still have issues? Yes. They prevent them by continuing the review process, doing the after actions, investigations, and those kinds of things. But if you look at their error rates and their mishap rates, overall in a given period of time, you find that compared to any civilian organization and probably nearly the world bar none, they're probably top in the line.

Ed Comeau: So in the civilian world, have you seen more agencies adopting CRR, embracing it because of the accreditation model or even just because it's the right thing to do?

Karl Ristow: I think both. I think that one is Vision 20/20 is making a difference. I think the conversations are getting out there and I think that agencies as they begin to look at response. And I think that also, we're getting- while we're a transparent organization, in other words, fire departments have to fall under local government rule for the most part, then they have to follow freedom of Information Act.

But people are beginning to see that just because you add a fire station and a firetruck and a bunch of firefighters, it doesn't necessarily mean that the response times going down, and the dangerous still there.

So I think between the transparency of the process, and what the local fire departments are doing now, and reporting more, coupled with what the fire departments are seeing- and they're starting to recognize because of good research from NIST and UL and the U.S. Fire Administration, and many other areas.

I think it's becoming to realize is, we can't get there fast enough. No matter what we do. We have to do something different and morph into that somehow, some way. Either by evolution or revolution, the fire service is going to have to change the mindset of we're just not responding to a firetruck to fix it.

Ed Comeau: Some of the documents in the process, our department doesn't have to be going through accreditation to be using these tools or to adopt this mindset, do they? I mean it can, it can be any fire department that wants to improve their operations.

Karl Ristow: Oh, absolutely. You know, one of the programs we're working on right now is a volunteer program, strictly for the volunteers, to see how we can help them get a risk assessment for the community and a Standard of Cover developed. The importance of that document alone, just for them to measure data and and have the ability to speak about the risks in their community, would bar none help their communities overall, even if they don't walk through the process.



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And I tell a lot of agencies, if you can't, I get it. You can't either afford it, you don't have the staffing, those kinds of things to go through it. That's okay. At the end of the day, it's still okay, but looking at yourself internally and just having a Risk Assessment Standard of Cover is an ability to now look at, and will show you that your response is not making a difference.

The outcomes are no different with or without that new engine company. And although it is a touchy feely and certainly the locals feel better, and it promotes safety, but if you look at the outcomes, there are very few differences, if any. And that's an unknown too, as you know, Ed. We don't measure outcomes very much in the fire service.

Ed Comeau: And that kind of leads to my next question 'cause you were touched upon it. Data. Data's pretty important, isn't it?

Karl Ristow: It's very important actually. You'll be surprised with this. The word or the phrase that has typically come to mind over the last probably 10, 15 years is data driven decision making. So, I was at a consortium meeting recently and there was a whole bunch of Beta data junkies in there. And they were laughing at my comment and they said, "You know, we don't look at it a data driven anymore. We call it data assisted. And that's because the data should not be the sole source of the decision. It should be used to assist in the decision."

And it kind of resonated with me to say, "Yeah, you're right." Because of the chief complaints that I received as Fire Chief, and probably others do, is the fact that well, data isn't everything. And while data isn't the "end all, be all," it is certainly lets you look at past performance and gives you predictability of future performance in many areas, not just time to response.

But it gives you to look at past performance to predict future performance, to be able to try to do something different.

Ed Comeau: That's interesting. I haven't heard that before. Data assisted. It sounds like you're kind of tying in a person's intuition because for example, you could probably walk in any fire station and they can tell you where they're at risk community is, just because they know they run there every day. But that would also be supported by the data is that's the sort of thing you're alluding to there?

Karl Ristow: Yeah. 'Cause communities in my mind are not different. Every community is the same in the sense of they have governance of some type. They have boundaries. They have roads, they have cars. All these things are the same no matter where you go. Now, they do have uniqueness. They have uniqueness.



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They may have a large lake in the middle of the city, they may have a refinery, they may have an airport. Those are uniqueness that bring unique risks to a community that a lot of communities don't have. So, I think in the sense of using data assisted, because one rubber stamp does not work for all, which is in my career.

The last 38 years, seen more than not, and I'm guilty of it, is to say, "Well, the neighbor just got a technical rescue team. I should have one." Well, if the risks don't show that I need one because I don't have high rise or high angle rescue type buildings or risks, then maybe I don't need one. I just need to call the neighbor over to help me out.

Ed Comeau: What do you see for the future of CRR and accreditations? Are there changes coming down the road?

Karl Ristow: I think one of the major things with CRR to progress it further is, the fire service needs to consent, and this needs to be an annual review every two, three year review, however you want to do it, where it's a living document on outcomes.

First, we need to define them. We need to measure them ,and we need to start tracking them through mechanisms. And there's a lot of work that has to go just to get that there. But at the end of it all, we're not tracking outcomes very well. We're not in [agreeance] of what they are and how important they are.

So, I think that's one step. Another step is, and I've gotten this through some communications with going out and visiting with consortiums over the last month and a half as we begin to work towards the 10th edition, the update to the ninth.

A couple of things that resonated from those. One would be they jump on of, "Hey, Karl, can you put in performance indicators, addressing cancer with firefighters and PTSD?" And those guys say, "Yes. We can. Certainly." However, in a quality improvement environment, how do you know what you don't know for the next one?

And every one of them say, "Oh yeah, I get what you mean. We want to go down range. We want to look at it from 30,000, rather than pigeon hole us on today's problem."

Now moving that forward to an organization overall, or I should say city overall, an agency's a governing body. The question that is popped up is when we're looking at community para medicine, when we're looking at a hostile environments, because we're getting more involved in that with the fire service, what's the next one and how did we know?



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How did the fire departments that have become safe havens for newborns, how did that go on? Who identified it as a risk? And then, how did the community decide that "Hey, the fire department can help," or when we got involved.

So, in doing a risk assessment, we're theorizing is, what if we layered the fire department's risk assessment over the law enforcement risk assessment over the community health risk assessment over anybody else's in the community risk assessment to go ahead and see what the next hostile type thing?

What is the next a safe haven, what is the next something we can do to help our community in reducing risk? And having an open mind that we see it maybe or to start thinking about it before it happens, and instead of being reactive, we would be proactive.

Ed Comeau: So, what you're saying is that CRR, it's multidisciplinary across all the agencies and components of the city?

Karl Ristow: 100%. it's a community risk reduction. You have to engage the community. Fire department can't do it all, nor should they. Law enforcement can't do it all and nor should they. And so, it's going to have to take a team event, and I think they'll have to come together and figure out what the community wants, what they expect and then, and of course, they have to have good information, right?

They have to know what's at risk. That's why we have jobs for the technical experts to tell them what we see as risks based on all of our knowledge and experience and education. And then, we move forward.

Ed Comeau: We've been having a great conversation with Karl Ristow, who's the accreditation program manager for The Center for Public Safety Excellence and Accreditation. And Karl, really appreciate taking the time to chat with us today.

Karl Ristow: Hey, I really appreciate the time, any opportunity, Ed. This is a, this is always a passionate area for me and I enjoy it.

Ed Comeau: Well, we're in our third season of CRR Radio and you can find all of our past episodes at [www.strategicfire.org/CRRradio](http://www.strategicfire.org/CRRradio) and on Apple podcast, where you can also subscribe and get each episode as it comes out.

CRR Radio is edited by Rich Palmer and is a production of The Vision 20/20 Project.

My name is Ed Comeau. Thanks for listening and we'll see you next time.



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Outro: Thanks for joining us on CRR Radio from the Vision 20/20 project. For more information on community risk reduction, please visit us at [www.strategicfire.org](http://www.strategicfire.org).