

Answering the calls



The Oshkosh Fire Department and its public safety partners key on city priorities

These stories are part of a series focused on the Oshkosh Fire Department, the services it provides and community issues it is working on

By Samantha Strong, Herald contributor



Samantha Strong

Fall calls keep Fire Department busy

Organizations work on preventive programs

By Samantha Strong
Herald contributor

When envisioning a firefighter, the element that most commonly comes to mind is, well, fire. But in Oshkosh and at other fire departments across the state they have been increasingly responding to a different type of call — falls.

Most fall calls are from Oshkosh residents ages 65 and older, and three of four adults hospitalized for a fall either die or require long-term care, according to Finding Balance Together, a Fox Valley organization dedicated to fall awareness and prevention.

Oshkosh Fire Chief Mike Stanley said that as the city's population continues to age, the department expects to see these calls become more frequent.

He said the department receives between 1,500 and 1,700 calls a year to help with falls in all ranges of severity.

Even though Wisconsinites encounter a lot of snow and ice, the most common place for falls is in the home, according to Kathi Hegranes, injury prevention and outreach specialist at ThedaCare and working with Finding Balance Together.

“What we typically find at our trauma center with a traumatic fall is brain injury or broken bones,” Hegranes said. “However, we also typically find that a series of insignificant falls lead up to the significant one they were admitted for.”

Hegranes and Stanley agree that prevention is key to controlling this community epidemic, and it can begin as simply as a medication review from a health care provider or pharmacist, strength and balance exercises, an updated hearing and eye exam, and most importantly, a reduction of clutter in the home.

“We consider this a silent epidemic,” Hegranes said. “Most people believe it's a natural part of aging but it's not. Some also believe speaking up will lead to them not living in their home anymore. That's just not true. We don't want you to leave your home any more than you do.”

Stanley said fall awareness and prevention can help someone stay in their home longer by warding off severe medical issues.



Mike Stanley

“If you’re injured from a fall you start to lose mobility, which can lead to muscle degeneration,” Stanley said. “If you’re injured severely and need to stay in bed, you’re more likely to get pneumonia, which can lead to death. A fall can lead to some serious problems.”

On top of the obvious medical risks, Stanley said fall calls take a toll on a fire department’s resources and budget.

“Falls put an additional strain on our emergency services, in particular our emergency medical services, as well as hospital and health care systems,” he said. “They can ruin a person or even multiple generations financially because of the health care and medical bills, or even more severely, funeral costs.”

Erin Roberts, public health nurse for Winnebago County, said 55 percent of falls take place inside the home.

Items that most commonly contribute to them include throw rugs, extension cords, stacks of books or newspapers, even a furry friend.

Across the board, Wisconsin has seen a slight increase in falls among those 65 and older.

The Centers for Disease Control report the state ranks No. 2 in fall-related deaths — more than twice the national rate.

And Winnebago County ranks slightly higher than average compared with other counties in the state, Roberts said, whose job duties include home assessments of seniors who receive medical attention after a fall in the home.

During the assessment, Roberts discusses what happened in past falls, health history and risks, and works with patients to assess the future risk and take preventive actions such as adding grab bars and railings around the home.

“It’s really important for people to know they shouldn’t be afraid to talk to their doctor if they’ve fallen,” Roberts said. “Even if they aren’t hurt, people should know this is a huge problem that’s preventable, and it’s not a natural part of aging.”



Roberts and Hegrans both mentioned tai chi classes at the Seniors Center and YMCA, as well as the Stepping On program through the county’s Health Department, among the resources for ages 65 and older.

While the data shows falls are happening in the Oshkosh community, there hasn’t been much investigation into why.

Jennifer Skolaski is a consultant for the Fall Prevention for an Aging Community project, a community effort funded by the Basic Needs Giving Partnership to cre-

ate an action plan to ensure older adults, regardless of income, can access prevention services.

As part of the project a series of public listening sessions are being held to learn directly from residents 65 and older most affected.

Four more sessions are set for Friday, Monday and Tuesday at different locations “We know what research says, but we also know that the number of falls in the Oshkosh area have continued to rise over the years,” Skolaski said. “Why is this? What as a community can we do to help reduce the risks of falling? We want to ask older adults who are at risk of falling and those who have fallen, as well as service providers that work with older adults on a daily basis and can share what they see.”

For those unable to attend the sessions Skolaski said there will be a survey emailed by the city or they can email seniors@canpl.com.

She said the project is expected to be completed in spring and the committee will construct an action plan in the following months.

Fire Department adds positions to pace growth

Staffing study identifies older, growing population

By Samantha Strong
Herald contributor

The Oshkosh Fire Department is gaining four additional firefighters under the city’s recently approved budget for 2020, largely due to the city’s rapid growth and increase in population density.

Matrix Consulting Group was contracted by the city’s Common Council to analyze the department’s current staffing, deployment and operations to evaluate, among other things, the department’s response capabilities and operation readiness.

The study identified the need for four additional positions to help staff an aerial apparatus being moved to Station 15 downtown while also adding a management analyst to examine response times, performance measures, budget efficiencies and overall keep the department on track with the community’s changing needs.

According to the Matrix study, the number of adults ages 60 and older increased 1.7 percent. It also noted, based on past census data, the population is shifting to an older demographic within Oshkosh and the shift will likely continue, placing a strain on emergency services —medical services in particular.

In 2018, more than 7,000 of the department’s 8,684 calls were calls for emergency medical service. While the budget increases will add to the general tax rate, City Manager Mark Rohloff said the positions are necessary to implement the council’s strategic plans for making public health and safety a top priority,

as well as the city's growing need for emergency medical and response services.

"The volume of calls and the aging population presents challenges we will be facing," Rohloff said. "We know statistically our call volume will increase and how we address that is going to be crucial because we provide both fire and EMS services."

Oshkosh was recently named one of the top 30 cities for retirement by USA Today, largely due to the number and quality of assisted-living facilities.

"We're an attractive place for an aging population, which certainly presents some additional responsibilities," Rohloff said. "As we grow, we may reach a point where response times would suffer if we don't have the resources we need. This reinforces the need for a data analyst because we can keep track of metrics and the data will tell us when it's time to prepare for future needs from a financial standpoint."

The overwhelming majority of the Fire Department's budget is dedicated to personnel (95 percent), which Fire Chief Mike Stanley said represents the fact that they "are in the people business."

Stanley said one of the main reasons he wanted to join the department in 2018 was its motto: "Be Nice."

While it may seem simple, Stanley said it perfectly embodies the work he expects from his team.

"When we interact with somebody, it's most likely not because they're having a good day," Stanley said. "We may not be able to solve all of their problems but just being nice goes such a long way. No job is too small and if you need our services, we'll be there."

By asking firefighters to keep this mindset with every task they complete, Stanley said he is hoping to continue the great relationship between the department and community, especially as it moves forward in expanding its staff.

In addition to fire and emergency medical services, the department also has a dive rescue team, is equipped to handle hazardous materials and is well versed in responding to large-event incidents as Oshkosh lives up to its "Event City" title.

The department has six stations, four fire engines and two more with ladders, three paramedic ambulances and a heavy rescue vehicle providing emergency services to Oshkosh and surrounding area.

There are also four additional paramedic ambulances, three airport crash trucks, a hazardous materials unit and a rescue boat.

The department has been operating with only one mechanic to service its vehicles, which is why the study suggested moving vehicle maintenance work to the Public Works Department.

Stanley said the mechanic was recently relocated to the city's central garage to improve efficiency.



Mark Rohloff

The majority of calls the department responds to are medical in nature, and the department serves neighboring communities such as Omro and Winneconne, explaining why the department's call volume is much higher than larger cities such as Appleton.

The Matrix study recommended moving an engine with tall ladders from its current location to downtown Station 16 due to the number of tall buildings in the central city.



Stanley said in order to be effective, there is a national standard that should be met for the number of firefighters needed to be on scene in relation to population density and call volume.

“One of our apparatuses only has two people, which is well against industry recommendations so we’re looking to add those four firefighters so we can increase daily staffing, which not only makes our firefighters safer, but the community safer too,” he said.

The request for more personnel is also in line with the council’s strategic plan for 2020, as it named public health and safety among its top priorities for the 2019-2020 biennial budget.

Council member Matt Mugerauer elaborated that the public health and safety component of the plan centers around providing appropriate response to emergencies, implementing strategies to reduce risk and strengthening relationships within the community.

“In my opinion, at its most basic level, the government’s job is to provide most essential services, least of which is public safety,” Mugerauer said. “We have a duty to ensure Oshkosh is a safe community to live, work and play in.”

When all is said and done, Stanley said he wants the community to know it is in good hands with the group of firefighters serving Oshkosh and surrounding communities.

“I want the community to know how hard our folks work and how committed they are to making a difference,” he said. “Sometimes they struggle with limited resources, but we’re still able to deliver great service and get the job done. Sometimes we have to get creative with solutions to help but our folks are always there to help, on duty and off-duty.”

Civic recruitment efforts plant seeds early

Fire officials work on youth alliances

By Samantha Strong
Herald contributor

To combat ongoing talent shortages and dwindling employee retention in many professions across the country, the Oshkosh Fire Department is beginning career discussions with local youth as early as elementary school.

“Predictably, we’re going to have to continue to hire and turnover is an issue, so we really need to garden and nurture and cultivate a talent pipeline,” Fire Chief Mike Stanley said. “We’re figuring out how we start reaching people at a younger age and expose them to a career in firefighting to show them that this type of career is attainable for them.”

Lindsay Fenlon, executive director of Big Brothers Big Sisters, said about a year ago she and Stanley realized they both had needs that could be met by working together. Stanley is working to create a more diverse crew of firefighters and Fenlon needed more volunteer mentors.

“We started brainstorming about what it would look like if we had a mentoring program that focused on building up the future of civic employees in fields including firefighting,” Fenlon said. “From there, we identified that middle school girls would be a great population to target for a program centered on exploring civic engagement careers — and the Hero program was born.”

She said the program empowers girls to connect with other female role models while also exploring career opportunities in historically male-dominated fields.

Stanley said only about 3 percent of firefighters across the nation are female, and within the Oshkosh Fire Department that number drops to about 1 percent.

“It’s a great win for youth development and female empowerment,” Fenlon said.



Big Brothers Big Sisters is working with the Oshkosh Fire Department to find volunteer mentors who will focus on civic service opportunities.

Other organizations Stanley and the department have been working with over the last year and a half include the Boys and Girls Club, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of America, Oshkosh Area School District and UW Oshkosh.

While this is a way to cultivate talent over the course of years, the Fire Department is already facing a shortage of qualified applicants.

Of those it does hire, retention continues to be a hurdle. Dani Hoeper, human resources generalist for the city, said the majority of applicants for city positions are from Wisconsin and specifically the Fox Valley and surrounding communities.

Stanley said this is also the case for fire department applicants, but when trying to create a crew more representative of the community, retention remains an issue.

He said applicants think the wide range of calls for service is appealing when considering departments, as well as the new equipment, but partially attributes the dip in recruitment and retention to the economy.

“My opinion is when the economy is good, people go out of the public sector,” Stanley said. “When the economy dips, they look for stability like there is with public sector jobs with benefits.”

Stanley also said the stringent prerequisites, education certifications, and need for clean backgrounds and employment history create other hurdles when hiring qualified applicants.

He said programs that generate interest in the profession at an earlier age can help future candidates when making educational, behavioral and recreational decisions.

“Staff equals service, and if we reduce staff we also have to downsize the services we provide,” he said.

Another retention hurdle Stanley noted is that many firefighters and emergency medical responders deal with burnout, depression, suicidal thoughts and anxiety — all concerns that he wants his crew to pay attention to.

Cancer rates among firefighters after they leave the profession is rising as well, according to Stanley.

“The thing that causes me to lay awake at night that I want to pass on to them is to take care of yourselves and take care of each other,” he said. “It’s an inherently dangerous profession, but it’s the hidden dangers that we’re starting to shed light on in this business, the issues surrounding mental health, PTSD and others. I want them to have long, happy, healthy, safe careers and retirements.”

Stanley said he’s working hard to make sure Oshkosh youth know that firefighting is a great profession and attainable for anyone — as long as they have two core characteristics.

“I want you to have a servant’s heart — you have to want to take care of people — and you have to be a problem solver and think critically,” he said. “If you come with those two things, we can teach you the rest.”

Fire team works on, off clock for residents

By Samantha Strong
HERALD CONTRIBUTOR

The Oshkosh Fire Department's motto is two simple words: Be kind.

Fire Chief Mike Stanley expects his team to live out this motto on the job, but the department also tries to live it in their everyday lives through volunteer work, fundraising and community outreach.

Some of the fundraisers Fire Department staff participate in, organize or facilitate include the annual Guns 'n' Hoses hockey game, a holiday food and toy drive, Stuff the Shelter fundraiser that gathers supplies for the Day by Day Warming Shelter, and the Fill the Boot campaign that raises funds for the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

Firefighters and other department staff are not required to participate in extracurricular activities, but many choose to do so because of their deep connection to the community.

"We love that people appreciate us, but we are normal people who enjoy helping people," Anthony Olson, Oshkosh firefighter, said. "(The fundraisers take up) a couple of months each year, but it's always worth it to see how many smiles we can put on children's faces along with the recipients of our charity that gets chosen each year (for the Guns 'n' Hoses fundraiser)."

Guns 'n' Hoses was established 12 years ago to bring together first responders for a good cause. The event typically raises \$3,000 to \$5,000 each year for local charities that provide services to Oshkosh. Olson thinks it's important for the department to have a strong presence in the community because it shows their dedication to making Oshkosh a better place to live.

"Our mission is to always provide care with compassion, empathy and knowledge," Olson said. "These community activities showcase those things and we just love being social with our neighbors."

Another well-known and popular fundraiser organized by the department's team is the annual toy drive that concludes Thursday in Station 14's neighborhood. And this isn't just any toy drive effort, according to organizer and firefighter Eric Shea. This one involves Santa and a fire engine.

"We really go all out for this toy drive," Shea said. "We send the fire truck out and sound the lights and sirens to get people's attention and have Santa on the front of an antique engine that's decked out with lights, music and decorations."

Fire crews and Salvation Army volunteers follow behind collecting toys, food and cash donations for those in need during the holiday season.

"It's amazing to see the kids light up when they see Santa," Shea said. "It brings a tear to my eye. You're out there, the snow's falling and the younger kids don't really know what it's for, but they don't care because they saw Santa."



Firefighters let children try on some of their equipment at an Oshkosh school event.

Fire Lt. Matt Sommerfeldt, a 13-year department veteran who is president of the Oshkosh Firefighters Charitable Foundation that formed about a decade ago, said many firefighters are involved in the foundation and even donate their own funds to the cause.

One of its initiatives is giving gift cards to victims of house fires to help get them back on their feet. Another is the annual holiday food and toy drive. The foundation also funds two scholarships for Oshkosh North and West students going into the police or firefighting field.

“I think it’s important to give back to the community that we serve, but these events also get us out there and explain to people what we do,” Sommerfeldt said. “All of us like to give back and it makes us feel good. We typically see people on their worst days so we try to make it better.”

When asked how he felt about his team and its community outreach, Stanley said he couldn’t be prouder.

“Oshkosh and the surrounding communities have such a high caliber of people protecting them and the things they care about,” Stanley said. “I get phone calls and emails and notes in the mail about the level of skill our firefighters have and the service they provide. I’m so proud of the work we do, on and off duty.”