

# Alexandria Fire Department

## *Organizational Assessment Addendum Report*



## Overview

This addendum chronicles the events, feedback, and actions taken post-release of the draft *Organizational Assessment Report* (OAR) distributed to all department members on Monday, March 9. During the week that followed, informal and formal feedback was solicited to measure the content and accuracy of the report through a series of meetings with city officials, department leaders, labor groups, and select individuals and workgroups. In addition, six (6) people were directly interviewed. Altogether, over sixty (60) people participated.

It is important to note that Covid-19 issues began to emerge during that week and substantially eclipsed the department's focus shortly thereafter. As Covid-19 emerged, the OAR discussions subsided to await another day, hopefully soon. The following record is essential to the reintroduction of these matters and to continue constructive actions to address them.

## Summary of Feedback Sessions

Responses ranged from "the report was spot on accurate" to "that has not been my experience." A handful of individuals commented that the report appeared to provide a forum for a few disgruntled voices resulting in an unbalanced negative picture. They expressed concern that this created a dominant tone within the report. In contrast, others sharply asserted that the report cracked a wall of denial that had inhibited the department from taking an honest look at itself. By week's end, the overwhelming consensus was that the report was a reasonable, balanced narrative of department issues.

In the cover memo of the draft report, department members were encouraged to ask questions and offer comments. It was reported that other employees also encouraged members to respond. One person's thoughtful inquiry is worth highlighting since it may be representative of others. It was noted that the report contains confusing or contradictory statements from participants. As a result, the inquirer asked, "How does one figure out what is a true issue?" In response to this question, pages 14 and 15 of the report explain, "Much was said, so great care has been taken to characterize the multitude of voices and topics discussed in a concise, accurate manner. It is important to note that topics that appear in one section may be found in another and offer opposing points of view. This is true when summarizing what the AFD does well and what it needs to improve." Opposing points of view occurred throughout the report, possibly even by the same person.

There are other reasons for apparent conflicting statements. Foremost, people can have differing perspectives about the same event or set of facts. Also, the process engaged 141 employees, representing a significant cross-section of the organization, who expressed disparate opinions of the department's various concerns. For example, a vast majority of participants reported that operations, which serves the public was a strength. In contrast, many reported on the EMS/suppression conflict, a significant aspect of operations. In addition, during the feedback sessions, some participants felt that the EMS/suppression conflict was concerning only to a few disgruntled medics. However, out of forty-two (42) direct interviews with uniformed line staff, only 6 – 7 were medics. There were another sixty-nine (69) uniformed line staff who participated in the online survey, but the breakdown of their position identity is unknown. Bottom line: the input on this issue was widespread, inclusive of medic and veteran suppression employees. And, as a result, a contradicting opinion of operations was revealed.

The inquirer provided another example of a conflicting point of view. They stated that “We have great leaders, but we have bad leaders.” In responding, it was noted that participants shared differing examples of leadership as well as a lack of it. For instance, it was reported that some recruits would struggle and then flourish depending on their supervisor, field assignment, or work group. A deeper dive revealed specific leadership and supervisory behaviors and conditions that characterized those healthy or toxic situations. Again, members may have contrary opinions based on their personal experiences.

One issue that emerged during the feedback sessions was an acute concern about mental health and employee assistance services. A few employees came forward to share compelling observations and personal stories about an unresponsive, poorly managed system. They also expressed deep concerns that internal mental health initiatives have been pushed to the side over the past two years as the department struggled with staffing issues. They reported that the tragic loss of a key provider caused significant disruption; that an internal traumatic stress team has lost focus; that timely referrals, which is essential in the post-traumatic stress environment, can lag for days or weeks; and that qualified therapeutic professionals able to understand and treat first responders were nonexistent.

A few participants commented about the amount of information in the report. The comments were not concerning; rather they were more about understanding the totality and complexity of the information. One participant stated that there was so much to comprehend that he was on his third read.

What does success look like?

At the end of each feedback session, participants were asked “What does success look like?” Their responses are paraphrased in Addendum 1.1. Clearly, there is a significant expression of optimism along with defined achievement points. Distilling participant responses down to action words results in a more precise description, as visualized in the word cloud on the cover of the Addendum report. Some editorial license has been taken to clarify the sentiment of select phrases. These are highlighted in parentheses in Addendum 1.1 and listed in Addendum 1.2.

A careful reading of participant’s paraphrased comments indicates success measures that may be taken to encourage a healthy culture, opportunities for all, improved resources, commitment by key leaders (if not everyone), and advocacy to undertake big change. Core ingredients appear to be good people operating within the teams they comprise, using critical human skills and emotions such as positive communication, self-reflection, trust, respect, acceptance, inclusion, and understanding. Collectively, participants want to create an organization of which everyone will be proud and one that will be a destination for future employees. This will require eliminating silos, and improving self-reflection, leadership, and direction.

#### Changes to Draft Report

The vast body of the OAR is unchanged. There is added discussion and a recommendation related to mental health on page 51. There is an addition to the Step Two planning process on page 43 suggesting that a review by a diverse executive group be conducted to meticulously comb through every page and topic of the report to create a three column issues list, related matters, and potential actions. For example, the issue regarding why some recruits struggle and then thrive under the supervision of a particular officer is not singular. It is comprised of a series of connected checkpoints, such as ...

Recruitment

Training (recruit, officer)

Processes (placement, oversight, evaluation)

Policy, standards, and practices

Behavioral goals, attitudes

Communication

To further illustrate the operational and emotional complexity of this example, during one of the feedback sessions there was a robust debate about this topic. A couple of participants commented that “Perhaps the recruit was now thriving because they had found an easy officer.” Others countered that was not so and part of the problem was the lack of quality placement options.

Last Words

On a personal note: This is your report. Whether you agree or disagree with it, everyone has a profound stake in the outcome. You have articulated the best and what can be done better by AFD. You have provided a framework for action, and a vast majority of you are willing to assist individually or organizationally. Fire rescue icon Chief Alan Brunacini warned that “Ego eats brains.” What he meant by this is that we can become our own impediment to progress, becoming trapped in the shadow of our individual way of doing things, and discounting others who do not think the way we do. Change is hard work. Do not be a bystander. As one participant advocated, “Be part of the fix.” Moving forward will require introspection, courageous conversations, respect, collaboration, the reinvigoration of core values - *unity, community, dedication, professionalism, and preparedness* - and mutual accountability. Moreover, it requires the kind of strong informal and formal leadership practices that have been cited in the report by all members of the AFD. As theologian Albert Schweitzer noted, the three most important ways to lead people are ... by example ... by example ... by example. What example are you willing to provide?

Addendum 1.1  
What does success look like?

The following are paraphrased responses to the question asked at the end of the many feedback sessions – What does success look like? Some responses are repetitive.

Look better

Be a destination

Do what I want to do, yet cross trained

Be able to do whatever I want to do (Empowerment)

Having conversations

Listening, heard

Give a good product, good return on our effort

People want to be part of something bigger

Next time report the opposite (Reverse)

Finding incremental improvement

We can make it better for the future

Have a conversation

Change toward the positive

Success is individual perception ... need immediate to short term direction

Be proud of the work we do

Need a big dream; Go big ... Tradition can obstruct ... There are a lot of smart people here ... People want to help patient, community, region ... Look at what we tried to do

Buy-in from people in this room

Look in the mirror ... Influence people below

No longer having conversation about EMS and fire (Unity)

People want to stay here

Put plan out ... Where are we going (Direction)

Having a culture that anyone who comes here can feel comfortable

Be able to take a good hard look at this so that people from the outside want to come in (Self-Reflection, Destination)

Being open; take honest assessment

People proficient, competent

Respect

People want to work here (Destination)

Empathy, understanding

Today is no longer good enough

In five years, people flock to apply here (Destination)

Acceptance of people's lifestyles

Resolution of arguments between medics and suppression

Provide direction

Acceptance of medic role

Getting everyone to one common goal ... everyone on every call

Hire top jobs from within the department (Succession)

Address cultural issues ... people feeling comfortable, working together, operational excellence, respect

Being included

Adequate staffing and technology to do the job

Streamline systems

Understanding job

Pay equity

Finding a way to be included like anyone else

Better lines of communication with other partners

Eliminate silos (De-silo)

Better EAP

Recruit

Trust, integrity, retain

Team integrity

Stop sending negative messages by using certain positions as punishment, i.e., riding the medic unit  
(Positive)

Operating more as a team

Open, constructive conversations

Be about the fix, not just bitching

Mission defined

Team and development of the team

Look out for each other (Support)

Lead yourself ... what's in it for everyone, not just me (Self-initiative)

Embed report in culture (Institutionalize)

No double meanings ... What's the truth

Career opportunities for medics

Seeing something happen (Action)

Respect amongst all ... suppression, medics, peers, all employees

Respect and recognition from the city ... stop treating us like second class workers

Improve mental health support, programs

Don't want to be disposable resource as a goal for something else (Non-disposable)

Respect for what we do ... we're professionals

Equal treatment

Attitude: When telling someone this is where I work and they say 'you lucky bastard.' (Destination)

People who are here want to be here (Pride)

Be a destination

Change

Acceptance by everyone



Addendum 1.2  
 What does success look like?  
 Key Words

The following key words are derived from the paraphrased responses in Addendum 1.1. They include action, subject and feeling words that make up the Word Cloud used as the Addendum cover page.

Better	Destination	Recruit
Destination	Open	Trust
Cross-trained	Honest	Integrity
Empowerment	Assessment	Retain
Conversations	People	Team
Listening	Proficient	Integrity
Heard	Competent	Positive
Product	Respect	Team
Effort	Destination	Open
People	Empathy	Constructive
Bigger	Understanding	Conversations
Reverse	Destination	Fix
Improvement	Acceptance	Mission
Better	Resolution	Team
Future	Medics	Development
Conversation	Suppression	Support
Change	Direction	Lead
Positive	Acceptance	Self-initiative
Success	Goal	Institutionalize
Direction	Succession	Truth
Proud	Comfortable	Opportunities
Dream	Together	Action
Big	Excellence	Respect
Smart	Respect	All
People	Included	Respect
Buy-in	Staffing	Recognition
People	Technology	Improve
Mirror	Streamline	Mental Health
People	Understand	Non-disposable
Influence	Pay	Support
Unity	Equity	Respect
People	Included	Professionals
Stay	Better	Equal
Plan	De-silo	Destination
Direction	Communication	Pride
Culture	Open	Destination
Comfortable	Better	Change
Self-reflection	EAP	Acceptance