

As local government managers, deputies and assistants, we face all kinds of personal and professional challenges. I think that there is no greater challenge, though, than advancing an agenda for our communities that may not be particularly popular, both with our governing bodies and the community as a whole. It is really easy to retreat to the standard politically safe position that an elected board or council sets policy and we are just here to implement that policy. That's a fine, academically correct position, but how many huge problems in any of our localities are solved without major attention and, at times, advocacy from the top appointed officials? Very few. Often that only occurs after some defining experience in our respective communities that shows the problem in a very tangible way.

Recently, I, along with our community, experienced one of those defining moments. Some of you may know that in my spare time, something I've enjoyed since high school is volunteering with the local volunteer fire department. In Bedford County, we still have a relatively strong volunteer fire system, but like so many of your communities, our volunteer rescue squads are struggling, to say the least. In response, our County has hired a number of career Firefighter/EMTs, who presently staff five ambulances, only three of which are staffed 24/7. While there is still some volunteer EMS activity, career staffed ambulances routinely handle in excess of 80% of EMS calls in the county, which has a population of approximately 80,000 people in approximately 800 square miles. This transition has been painful for everyone in the community as we have seen these institutions, once strong pillars of our community, routinely unable to meet the call demand.

At 4:30am on January 17, 2017, my volunteer fire department was dispatched to the report of a house fire in the Town of Bedford. I responded from home and was able to catch the ladder truck on the way to the fire. While we were en route to the scene, the Engine crew ahead of us reported on scene and noted that this was a working house fire with multiple children trapped inside. The Engine crew proceeded to make 3 rescues (one adult and two children), but couldn't find the third child. I will never forget getting out of the ladder truck upon arrival and seeing the fire victims laying in the front yard. For a brief moment, I thought, "Where is EMS?", but the ladder company was assigned to find the missing child, so there wasn't much time to think about it – at least they were out of the burning building.

As assigned, another firefighter and I went to the second floor to search. We were met with the hottest fire conditions and the thickest black smoke I've experienced in 13 years. After searching in zero visibility conditions, my partner's air was running low and we had to leave without finding the child. When I got outside, I quickly changed my air bottle and another firefighter and I began a second attempt to locate the child.

On this second search and rescue effort my partner found the four year old girl and brought her to me and I took her outside. I then looked for EMS to hand her off so that she could be treated.

There were still no EMS crews on scene.

Two of the three career units were tied up on other, non-related EMS calls and the third was responding but, from 25 miles away. The first, second, and third due volunteer rescue

squads who were dispatched that night never responded. Eventually, the remaining career unit arrived along with two non-emergency transport ambulances from the local hospital and they were able to get all of the victims to the appropriate facility. While the first three victims lived, the victim I helped rescue died on the way to the hospital. I learned afterwards that she was no more than 4 or 5 feet away from where we were searching the first time, but all I can say is that we missed her. I wish we didn't, but we did. I also wish that there was sufficient EMS readily available, but there wasn't.

This moment has been difficult for the family, me, and the greater Bedford community. I share this as an example of how a single event can expose to us deficiencies in our communities; deficiencies we sometimes experience very personally and, to be candid, painfully. While we all struggled with the death of a child and a tremendous amount of guilt for not finding her before it was too late, I felt (as any of you would) the added struggle of having to respond objectively as an appointed leader in my community to make the system work so that something this extreme can be avoided in the future. Of course, there will always be house fires and unfortunately some will be fatal. But that day, we exposed EMS system flaws that shouldn't exist and it showed me the importance of focusing on improving service delivery within EMS. While we remain committed to providing an opportunity to volunteer in our community, we must know that we have to build a basic EMS safety net that unfortunately is not yet complete. This is not what a lot of people want to hear.

To say the least, spending money and growing the government payroll is a highly unpopular topic in our community and probably many of your communities. However, we have a professional and moral obligation to advance a policy discussion of what is right, even if it is unpopular. Even something as basic as EMS service is tremendously controversial because it is very expensive and paid units represent to many people a threat to the volunteer community organizations. But our professional obligation is to actively work to advance services in our community and to challenge our elected bodies to discuss them and seek solutions. And when we are smacked in the face with a deficiency that we didn't totally see coming, we have to respond and fight for what is right, even if our stakeholders are initially resistant. As such, in Bedford we are adding career ambulances, and implementing more tracking to help us know when we should be alerted to potential failures of the system. For a variety of reasons, these are neither popular nor simple solutions, but we are doing it because it's right.

We all know public administration a tough way to make a living and with the rhetoric presently playing out, it's not getting any easier for the foreseeable future. It's tough to keep enough people happy to keep our jobs and continue paying the mortgage, much less adding in actively working towards things that aren't politically popular. But, I hope that when I retire, I will be able to look back and be proud of the things that I accomplished for the people that I serve, even if they weren't popular at the time. Yes, it's much better when everyone agrees, but sometimes we have an obligation to push what is right for the community, not what is most politically expedient. I think that is what defines us as professionals and leaders.