

Police, firefighters respond well to the call

By **MORGAN TERRY**
and **DOMINIQUE ANGERAME**
Correspondents

A 911 call is made and firefighters or police officers are dispatched. How quickly they arrive on the scene of an emergency can mean the difference between life and death.

And the response time often is directly linked to police and fire department staffing levels. An informal survey of four municipalities in the region found response times and manpower to be within — and in some cases better than — national and regional averages.

For example, U.S. Department of Justice statistics for 2006 indicate nationally a town of about 50,000 residents employs about 90 police officers, or 1.8 per 1,000. Fairfield, with about 57,000 residents, has a police force of 108 officers, or 1.9 per 1,000 people.

About this project

Journalism students from Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, under the direction of assistant professor Cindy Simoneau, consulting editor for the *Connecticut Post*, studied response times for some of the region's fire and police departments and the impact of staffing on those times.

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Milford, with a population of about 53,000, maintains a police force of 110 officers, or about 2.2 per 1,000, slightly higher than the national average.

Shelton's police force of 54 officers — 1.35 per 1,000 residents — is slightly below the national average for a city of about 40,000.

Bridgeport, meanwhile, with a population of 137,000, has 445 officers,

or about 3.2 per 1,000 residents. That's 56 percent better than the national average for cities in the 100,000 to 249,999 population range.

"We're always looking for more [officers], but 445 is a strong number considering other towns," Bridgeport Police Lt. James Viadero said.

Several of the municipalities contacted for this story calculated

police response times of 2 to 4 minutes, far ahead of the national average.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 57 percent of violent crimes are responded to by police within 10 minutes, and 49 percent of property crimes are acted on between 11 minutes and one hour.

Meanwhile, according to the National Fire Protection Association, the first company with a minimum of four firefighters should arrive at the scene within four minutes of a 911 call.

All four towns surveyed made or bettered that goal.

The U.S. Fire Administration and National Fire Data Center said the longest response time to structure fires is almost 11 minutes. Response times to structure fires in the Northeast are the best, while those in the West are the longest.

The National Fire Protection Association set a six-minute guideline

for responses by municipalities with full-time departments, including: one minute for the dispatcher handling a 911 call to alert firefighters; another minute for a full company of four firefighters to slip into gear and get on the road; and four minutes to drive to the fire.

Perfection is not expected: The NFPA recommends that each of the goals should be achieved 90 percent of the time.

Like most officials contacted, Christopher Tracy, assistant fire chief and head of Fairfield's fire training department, would like more resources.

"Every fire department in the country makes do with what it has," Tracy said. "Every firefighter can remember a time when they wish they had more people."

Below is a closer look at fire and police departments in Bridgeport, Shelton, Fairfield and Milford.

By the numbers

A look at some emergency services statistics for four towns in the region. Emergency call numbers are from 2007.

SHELTON
Population: 40,142
Police officers: 54
Firefighters: 160
volunteers

Emergency calls:
Police, 26,000; Fire, 1,050
Average response times: 3 minutes for fire department; less than 2 minutes for police.

MILFORD
Population: 53,262
Police officers: 110
Firefighters: 112
Emergency calls:
Police, about 25,000; Fire, 7,289
Average response times: between 3 and 4 minutes for fire; Police response time

unavailable.

BRIDGEPORT
Population: 137,912
Police officers: 445
Firefighters: 311
Emergency calls:
Police, more than 200,000; Fire, 10,164
Average response times: 4 minutes for fire; police said because they break down calls into three priority codes, they could not provide an average response time.

FAIRFIELD
Population: 57,829
Police officers: 108
Firefighters: 88
Emergency calls:
Police, 41,000; Fire, 9,200
Average response times: 4 minutes for fire; 3 minutes for police.

Population figures are from 2006 U.S. Census



Christian Abraham/Connecticut Post

Fairfield Fire Department divers bring two rescued kiteboarders in Long Island Sound in this file photo.

BRIDGEPORT

Managing to escape the budget knife

By **MORGAN TERRY**
and **RONALD ATWATER**
Correspondents

With city services under the tax gun and layoffs looming, emergency services officials are breathing a sigh of relief that their departments appear to have been spared.

Deputy Chief Robert Petrucelli of the Bridgeport Fire Department said the number of calls the fire department receives on a yearly basis is typically between 10,000 and 12,000. Bridgeport Police Lt. James Viadero said his department receives more than 200,000 calls a year.

Do they feel they've got enough manpower to cope?

"The fire union contract requires a minimum of four firefighters on every unit," Petrucelli said. "We always staff at the minimum level, therefore we always have the same staffing level." Petrucelli said staffing at minimum levels has been the standard for the department for the past 10 years.

"We are budgeted for a certain number of employees and currently we are short 18 firefighters," Petrucelli said. "But this doesn't affect our response time because we are always staffed at the minimum levels."

Petrucelli said an increase in staffing would not improve response times.

Over the past three years the Bridgeport Fire Department has lost 20 positions because of budget cuts, Petrucelli said.

Petrucelli said Bridgeport employs 311 firefighters in eight fire stations. He also said the average response time to a call is four minutes. "Generally 90 percent of the time we achieve that four-minute goal," he said.

Viadero said an average response time isn't possible to calculate for the Police Department. He said the way they take the calls is different from the Fire Department.

"It's not a stat we even keep," he said. "We operate totally different than the fire department. Each call that comes in is given priority one, two, or three codes. If it is a priority one call, it is something like a robbery or burglary. If it is a priority three call, it's something like a broken window in a car."

Viadero said priority three calls are always answered but the wait time could far exceed that of a priority one call.

"They might have to wait one or two or three hours for a car to get there, but eventually someone will be there," Viadero said.

The Police Department operates with 445 officers — 20 of whom are still in the police

SHELTON

Stability a staple in uncertain times

By **JAMES CASCIATO**
and **SHARIEKA BREEDEN**
Correspondents

Despite budget cuts made by many municipal departments in today's economic climate, the Shelton Police and Fire departments have shown no signs of instability heading into the new fiscal year.

With four stations and an all-volunteer force of 160 certified firefighters, Fire Chief John Milo said Shelton is the largest volunteer department in the Northeast. The Fire Department has continually improved response times over the last five years, giving it an average response time of fewer than three minutes, significantly better than the national average of about five minutes, according to the U.S. Fire Administrations and National Fire Data Center.

The average response time to the 26,000 annual calls to the Police Department is also far better than the national average, according to Chief of Police Joel W. Hurliman.

"The average response time is under two minutes," said Hurliman. "We've been doing a good job of responding to calls."

Hurliman credits the increased efficiency in response time to a system the city uses to prioritize calls that helps officers choose which location they should respond to first.

"False alarms for homes and businesses are probably at the top of the list and moving vehicle violations also get a lot of our attention," said Hurliman. "One thing that has been prevalent in certain areas is vandalism and graffiti."

While the Police Department has streamlined its response system, the Fire Department has also created an efficient method of dealing with the call volume.

Fire Department officials have devised a system that mandates sending two units to any fire call between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. If a fire is confirmed, a third company responds. With every structure fire, an ambulance is sent as well. During the hours of 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. only one company responds to every call. With this system in place, the Fire Department has effectively responded to the 1,050 calls it receives each year, Milo said.

If a fire is called in from the downtown area, four companies are immediately dispatched. According to Milo, the Fire Department

"Every fire department in the country makes do with what it has. Every firefighter can remember a time when they wish they had more people."

Christopher Tracy
Assistant fire chief, Fairfield

MILFORD

No complaints about staffing

By **ERIC MASON**
and **D.J. CASTANO**
Correspondents

Across the nation, police and fire departments are experiencing a shortage in staffing levels, which can affect their response times, but for both departments in Milford it hasn't been a serious issue.

"The minimum standard is four firefighters on an engine," said Louis LaVecchia, chief of the Milford Fire Department. "But we respond with an extra member to give us the full staffing that we need."

The city and Police Chief Keith Mello said that they have had no complaints from residents or town officials regarding staffing levels.

"About four years ago when I became police chief we identified a critical need to hire additional police officers," said Mello. "We identified that need, met with the mayor and at that time they increased staffing by one officer."

According to the National Fire and Protection Association, the average response time to an emergency is nearly five minutes. With the hiring of more police officers and firefighters in Milford, both departments were able to surpass the average. According to Town Clerk Alan Jepson, the town charter does not specify what the minimum staffing numbers must be.

The fire department is in the process of hiring one additional firefighter from more than 200 applicants, according to LaVecchia, they will choose one firefighter because they have the funding in their budget.

"We meet and exceed those standards," said LaVecchia. "We respond to most emergencies in under four minutes. I'd say the number's probably around 98 percent that we respond to under four minutes, and a high percentage — probably in the 80 percentage, we respond to in under three minutes."

Last year the total number of combined calls for Police and Fire departments reached 32,000.

Both departments have dealt with issues concerning staffing levels by having officers work overtime.

Despite a staff of 110 officers, the police department still finds itself having to hold officers to work double shifts. "Many officers sign up for overtime," said Mello. "But several of them are forced to work a double shift."

FAIRFIELD

Making do given the realities

By **DOMINIQUE ANGERAME**
and **COOKIE ZVOUSHE**
Correspondents

While Police Chief David Peck would love to increase the number of police officers in Fairfield, he's also a realist.

"We get the job done with what we have," said Peck, whose department numbers 108 officers. "We could, however, certainly use an additional eight to 10 officers because of the demands. When I started in 1979 there were 100 sworn officers. There hasn't been much of an increase in the past 30 years."

Peck said the demands on the police have changed in the past few years because of the different specialization units, and they are constantly adding more units to best meet the needs of the community.

"Every time I take someone from the forces and move them into a specialized unit there are additional demands on the people left here," said Peck.

Peck said that many of the specialized units depend on the time of year.

"During the school year we have two D.A.R.E. officers, one 'officer friendly' and two officers that are assigned full time to each of the two [public] high schools," said Peck. "This is all these officers are assigned to while school is in session."

During the summer, said Peck, the town utilizes marina guards, bike officers, a dive team and a marine team. The town also has an aviation unit, motorcycle patrol and an emergency response team.

"I wouldn't be so bold as to say we don't need more officers," said Lt. Michael Walsh. "But I don't want to give the impression that public safety is compromised, because it's not."

In July 2007 the town hired consulting firm Blackburn Strategies to conduct a comprehensive study of the department. One of Blackburn's recommendations was the addition of a deputy chief, which came to fruition May 21 when Capt. Gary MacNamara was promoted.

Peck said he is not recommending an increase in officers because of budget constraints. He did say the department would replace two officers who recently retired.

He said he would like more money for overtime. Last year, the police spent more than \$1.2 million on overtime.

The 2007-08 police budget is \$13,239,861, compared to the proposed 2008-09 budget of \$13,921,071.

Fairfield Deputy Fire Chief Arthur Reid is satisfied with the funding his department

Bridgeport

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academy — and 125 civilians, Viadero said. He added that there really is no “hard and fast number” for the required staffing level of the Police Department. “The civil service charter called for 521 but we have never been at 500 before,” Viadero said. “In the 1990s, about 480 officers were [on the force], which was a lot then.”

The Police Department could always use more help, but according to Viadero everything depends on the economy and the budget, and right now the city is in a financial crisis.

“More is better than less,” said Viadero. “We are always addressing the problem where they are moving people around because every year there are always retirements and disability retirements and officers leaving due to injuries.”

Viadero said it's fortunate emergency services haven't suffered any major cutbacks.

“We are always looking for more, but 445 is a strong number considering other towns,” Viadero said. “We are operating within the budget.”

Mayor Bill Finch said the goal from the beginning of the budget process was not to cut fire or police staffing.

“We have done our darndest not to cut emergency services because we want people to feel safe,” Finch said.

The 2007-08 personnel budget for the Bridgeport Police Department was \$29,121,457. The proposed 2008-09 personnel budget is \$27,856,049.

The 2007-08 Fire Department personnel budget was \$17,565,856. The proposed 2008-09 personnel budget is \$18,399,013. The opening of a new emergency operations center is expected in the fall. Finch said all the 911 calls for police and fire will be dispatched from the center.

Another major aspect to emergency services is the num-



Christian Abraham/Staff photographer

Bridgeport police officers investigate the scene after squad cars boxed in a vehicle at the end of a chase earlier this month.

ber of vehicles, the maintenance process and vehicle lifetime.

Petrucci, the fire department deputy chief, said four of Bridgeport's eight fire stations house an engine truck, a ladder truck and rescue vehicles. Three of the stations have only one engine. Two fire stations have what is called a quint — a truck that has a pressurized water pump, a water tank and an aerial ladder.

“We service the companies on a regular basis in our own maintenance shop,” Petrucci said. “Just like ... a car, they get serviced frequently for things

like brakes, tires and exhaust.”

With regular service, the trucks can last as many as 20 years, Petrucci said.

According to the September 2007 *Park City Update*, a bi-monthly newsletter produced by the city of Bridgeport, said the city in 2007 purchased 79 new police cars, including canine cars and prisoner transportation vehicles, totaling \$3 million. Two new fire engines as well as other new fire vehicles were also purchased at a cost of \$1.25 million.

Viadero said Police Chief Bryan T. Norwood, who would

not comment for this story, implemented a plan last fall that allows one car to be on duty for one shift only per day, not running continuously 24 hours.

“The cars are only running eight hours a day now, which is increasing the life of the vehicles from eight to 10 years, where as before they only lasted two-and-a-half to three years,” Viadero said.

Police manpower is allocated so the most officers are on duty during the historically busiest periods.

“Four p.m. to 12 p.m. is the busiest shift, so staffing levels are much higher during those

hours,” Viadero said. “They could go up to 60 or 70 officers. We respond to lots of different kinds of calls considering we have an airport, a train station, major highways and lots of multifamily living,” Petrucci said.

With a population of nearly 138,000, Bridgeport is the largest city in the state, and Fire Chief Brian Rooney said firefighters frequently can be first to arrive at an emergency scene.

“The firefighters are designated first responders for all 911 calls because all the vehicles have basic life support and

we can beat the ambulance,” he said. “Also, the fire houses are strategically placed throughout the city so we can be responders.”

With a 9 percent increase in the city's real estate taxes and more than 90 layoffs looming, Viadero is grateful emergency services has escaped unscathed.

Finch reiterated the importance of emergency funding.

“The social service side of the budget got serious cuts,” Finch said. “We are doing our darndest not to have to make any cuts to emergency services.”

Shelton

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adds six to eight new recruits per station every 18 months. New recruits must go through at least 90 days of training, along with individual station training twice monthly, and citywide training four times a year.

While Shelton's Fire Department has been able to meet its staffing requirements, the police department's issues stem not from budget concerns but more from a lack of open seats in the state's police academies, said Hurliman. “Shelton's police department is not big enough to have our own academy,” Hurliman said. “We use Bridgeport's, New Haven's and Waterbury's. Candidates are sent where there is available space. There is difficulty obtaining seats. If those towns have 40 seats, they may take 30 of them, leaving 10 for any other town.”

The department recently put a new hire into service, bringing to 54 the number of officers on the force. In addition, two more candidates are in training at the academy and two more will enter the academy in July.

Hurliman said that the city's budget for 2008-2009 calls for one more officer than this fiscal year.

The city provides the police staff with assigned vehicles. Hurliman said that even though some of the 36 vehicles may have higher mileage, they are in better shape than they would be in if they were running 24 hours per day.

The patrols are divided into three shifts: midnight to 8 a.m., 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and 4 p.m. to midnight. The second and third shifts each consist of five motorized patrols with 12 officers and three supervisors. The midnight shift has only four motorized patrols.

Over the last several years, the fire department has added four rescue vehicles at a cost of \$340,000 each, according to Milo, the chief. In addition, the fire department recently added a new engine at \$475,000 as well as a ladder truck and a 4x4 brush truck.

“I think the city adequately supports us,” Milo said. “The few times when trucks have broken down and we've needed more funds, the city has taken care of us. The city has never slighted the fire department.”

Despite the financial contributions that Shelton has given



Phil Noel/Staff photographer

Bridgeport firefighters work together to hose down the interior of a house on Hewitt Street.

the fire department, the force continues to work without compensation. Instead, the city of Shelton has given the firefighters a retirement plan that equates to \$15 a month for every year served in the department. There is no set age for retirement.

“The retirement plan is just a reward from the city,” Milo said. “It's just their way of showing their appreciation to the firefighters. We have a responsibility to the town and we're proud of the service we provide.”

Retirement isn't just an important issue for the firefighters. Police Chief Hurliman, a 28-year department veteran, is concerned about staffing when officers retire.

“If you hire two guys on the same day, you have to worry about those two guys leaving you on the same day,” said Hurliman.

Milford

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on and off duty,” said Mello. Officers are often injured, people call out sick, [there are] vacations and training mandates, which have increased significantly.” For the fire department, double shifts and overtime hours are managed differently.

“They do work overtime and their overtime is to cover additional shifts and that's done on a rotating basis,” said LaVecchia.

Mayor James L. Ricketelli Jr. has approved an increase of one additional police officer for this year. However, Mello has been informed of a greater increase in his staff's numbers.

“I have been given an informal commitment that will continue to increase the police department by one officer a year for a five-year period,” said Mello. Ricketelli's office would not confirm that commitment.

If the hiring does come through, the

police department could have as many as 115 or 116 officers by 2013.

LaVecchia said the fire department is in a similar situation.

“We have one vacant position right now, but we'll fill it,” said LaVecchia. “We're currently in the process of running a firefighter test that's pretty exten-

“I have an informal commitment that will continue to increase the Police Department by one officer a year for a five-year period.”

Keith Mello
Milford police chief

sive. We do a written test, a physical fitness test, an oral board and there's an additional physical fitness test at the end. We have about 270 candidates.”

With these vacant positions being filled, both chiefs said the candidates need to be just as experienced as the rest of the staff.

Fairfield

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receives. “The Board of Selectmen is decent at distributing funding,” Reid said.

The 2007-08 fire budget is \$11,281,683 and the '08-09 proposed budget is \$11,888,305.

Christopher Tracy, assistant fire chief, said he is satisfied with the department's staffing. Reid agreed, but both said additional staff is always beneficial.

“Every fire department in the country makes do with what it has,” said Tracy. “Every firefighter can remember a time when they wish they had more people.”

Tracy said there are 88 firefighters on staff. The fire department is divided into five divisions: administrative, maintenance, suppression, training and prevention.

The administrative division includes Chief Richard Felner, one deputy chief, and an administrative assistant.

The maintenance department consists of two full-time mechanics. The suppression division, said Tracy, is what most citizens are familiar with.

“Suppression is what everyone thinks of, the red trucks, and they are the first to respond,” said Tracy, who also called it the “meat and potatoes” of the organization.

Tracy said prevention includes handling evacuation routes, sprinkler systems and alarms.

Both fire and police have a set number of staff members on duty during various shifts.

Walsh, the police lieutenant, said there are always at least 11 officers on duty during each of the three shifts per day, with the largest number of calls generally during the evening shift, 4 p.m. to midnight. “Between 9 p.m. and 2 a.m. the calls are usually in strong correlation with the flow of alcohol,” said Walsh. “Cars crash, violence occurs.”

The department handled about 41,000 calls for service, according to Peck.

Tracy, the assistant fire chief, said 22 firefighters are on duty at all times, and each works an average of 42 hours per week. He said there are 10-hour day shifts from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and 14-hour night shifts from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m.

Tracy said the fire department is divided into five districts, each consisting of five engine trucks, one rescue truck and one ladder that provide townwide coverage, and one car that is the townwide shift commander.

Peck said the police department's average response time is about three minutes depending on the origination of the call. “I think our response time is phenomenal,” he said.

The fire department, according to Tracy, responds on average in about four minutes, but he agreed that the time depends on geography and call volume. The fire department received more than 9,000 calls for service last year.

Mello said several of his officers have many years of service. “Most of the command staff all have 20 years of experience,” he said. “But it is a young police force,” with the average age 25.

According to LaVecchia, the fire department has seasoned veterans on its staff. “We're highly experienced,” said LaVecchia. “We have one of the highest level training programs of any department anywhere.”

LaVecchia said his department is rated among the best in the nation by ISO, an independent data management and risk analysis company. “This department is an ISO class one. There are only two other class ones in New England and 45 class ones in the country out of 45,000 fire departments.”

LaVecchia credits the success of the two departments to their ability to work together.

“We have an excellent relationship with the police department,” said LaVecchia. “I meet with the chief on a regular basis, we do a lot of joint training together, purchase equipment together and we have an excellent relationship in town here.”