

Transcript

On West Gray, Episode 16, The Norman Fire Department w/Travis King & Matthew Elliot

Runtime: 29 minutes

Tiffany Vrska 0:16

What's up, everybody? Welcome to On West Gray, the monthly podcast about all things local government in the city of Norman. I'm your host, Tiffany Vrska, chief communications officer for the city of Norman, and we appreciate you joining us on West gray. Today in the studio with us, we have Norman fire department officials, Travis King fire chief and Matthew Elliott, fire marshal. Gentlemen, welcome to the show.

Travis King 0:39

Thank you, Tiffany. Thanks for having us.

Tiffany Vrska 0:41

Absolutely. So I think we've had individuals from most major departments here on the show with us. So we're so excited to finally have NFD here with us. How long have each of you been with the Norman Fire Department?

Matthew Elliot 0:55

I've been on for just over 11 years.

Tiffany Vrska 0:58

All right, Chief?

Travis King 0:59

I'm working on my 28th year here with the Norman Fire Department.

Tiffany Vrska 1:03

Okay, you all must love your jobs. It's a pretty impressive tenure.

Travis King 1:08

It is, you know, in the fire service. Most folks when they get on, they tend not to leave. You know, it's something that I feel like firefighters are called to do. The job is also a stable job. It has a good retirement. So most folks, once they get on, you'll see see them do 2025 30 years. Awesome where they retire.

Tiffany Vrska 1:33

Well, I have enjoyed working with all of you guys since I've been on board. And we're gonna jump into kind of what you guys do here. So especially with the approaching of major holidays coming up, I imagine this can be a really busy season for your team. So let's jump into that all the details on your department. So chief, can you tell me a little bit about how the fire department here in Norman is structured? And what divisions it's made up of?

Travis King 1:57

Well, that's a great question. Tiffany. Yeah, a lot of people they think well, when you think of the fire department, you just like a fire engines and, and screaming up and down the street and putting fires on certainly that that is a major component of what we do. But here at norman fire department, we were actually made up of five divisions, we have our suppression division. And that's the folks that are in the fire stations on the different types of apparatus that run to a multitude of different kinds of calls. We have our Prevention Division and fire marshal, we'll get into more details on that. But that's made up of our investigators, our inspectors, plans, reviewers, so those those folks are going out and making sure buildings are safe and making sure that buildings are built properly and investigating fires. We have our Emergency Management Division. I'm also the emergency management director, and I have some staff under me that take care of you know, when we have storms coming and storms with potential tornadoes, you'll hear the storm sirens going off, we manage those storm sirens, we also play a big role in preparing for recovering from major incidents when a tornado does hit our town or a flood or some major disaster that team kicks in and, and coordinates with state and federal agencies to to assist the city of Norman. We also have our administrative division. These folks, you know, really manage the day to day operations of the fire department, they coordinate with other city departments, they're managing payroll, they're managing our budget. So a lot going on inside of the Fire Administration from a day to day basis. And then we also have our training division. So training, obviously an important function inside the fire department. When we hire new recruits, we put them through a training academy, our training chief administers that. And then as far as day to day training, he will administer training, maybe there's new concepts or new challenges that our community is facing, and we need to be ready to deal with that. So the training chief will issue that that training to our company officers and make sure that we're up to date on those kinds of things. So that's kind of a brief overview of what we do and, and the divisions that carry out the mission of the department.

Tiffany Vrska 4:24

Okay, and remind me, Chief how many people comprise your department, how many people serve the Norman Fire Department?

Travis King 4:30

I believe in our last budget, we had 164 approved positions. About 150 of those positions are in the suppression division. So it's the largest division and then the remainder are spread through the other divisions that I talked about whether that's prevention, training, admit administration, or emergency management.

Tiffany Vrska 4:54

Got it. Okay, so you all obviously you respond to a wide range of calls and have a great many risks. one's abilities as you just touched on a bit, can you give us maybe some stats or insight on the types of calls that your team most commonly respond to day to day?

Travis King 5:11

Yeah, that you hit it on the head there a wide range of calls, I tell people anymore in the day we're in, if someone dials 911, most likely you're going to have a fire engine, there are fire apparatus there with firefighters. So whether it's a medical call, and you know, that can range from just about anything, you can imagine heart attack strokes, you know, traumatic events, falls, that kinds of thing. car wrecks. That could be a police matter. Maybe the police department is on some sort of scene where you know, you have a hostage situation we'll be on that scene to on standby in case medical aid or something like that is needed. Obviously, structure fires, grass fires, hazmat incidents, train wrecks, you name it, if 911 is getting called most likely the fire department is going to get involved. We've seen our call volumes go up every year, I can't think of a year that I've been here in my career, where we've had less calls than we had the year before. I believe last year, our total volume call volume was over 20,000 calls and that I look at that statistic more than anything that's going to be the total number of times fire apparatus are leaving those fire stations. So we're getting really busy, our our station stay busy. And certainly, we're we're looking to grow when wherever we can to meet the needs of this community. So yeah, that if you can dream it, we pretty much run on it on it. And the challenge obviously is being prepared and knowing what to do when we go on those calls.

Tiffany Vrska 6:58

Right. And it was very interesting to me when I got to Norman, because we have a very urban part of the community. And then we have kind of a rural part of the community and you all you know, you serve the entire community. Can you speak a little bit to the uniqueness of that?

Travis King 7:15

When I'm out recruiting. That's one of the main things I talk about here in Norman, about half of the total city is rule we cover and this mileage I've heard different stats on this, I've always come down on 197 square miles. So about half of that rule, half of that urban, you know, from a fire department perspective, that creates a unique list of challenges. And I tell our folks, and this is what I tell folks that we're recruiting to our department. here in Norman, you've got to be ready to do basically any facet of firefighting at any time. We take pride in the fact that we're understaffed, we are short, as far as what what really the amount of firefighters you need to cover, a city the size and the types of the call volume that we talked about. So at any time, you know, these in town units, you know, that serve a downtown or campus area, they may be called out to a grass fire. And you won't see that another major fire departments, usually an in town unit is going to be dedicated on structure response, the types of calls you'll see inside of a city, they probably won't go out to a rural type a call that here in Norman, you've got to be ready at any time to do anything. And we really wear that as a badge of honor here in the city of Norman, I look at our department and our firefighters as the finest group of firefighters in the state of Oklahoma. Certainly, we've had been audited in certain things. And, and I think that's reflected, you know, you'd be hard pressed to find a better fire department doing what we do. And so that kind of lets you know, you know, anytime we could have major major grass fires, we could have events, it's just in my career, I can look back and you know, you might have a structure fire that morning, had a few car wrecks in the afternoon and by by later in the afternoon, things are dried out and we're on a major grass fire that going into the evening, sometimes all night and you look back and think Man, that was a long shift, I got to see a lot but you know, as a firefighter, that's the kind of work that's the kind of thing that we like to do. So it's it's a unique area, unique city to be a firefighter in. Right,

Tiffany Vrska 9:27

and I heard you mention and an audit and you all did very, very well. On an audit recently. Was that an EMS audit? Could you remind me a little bit so we can highlight for our listeners? Yeah, so

Travis King 9:40

we're that's something we're very proud of. It's an ISO audit. So what this is, it's a national firm that comes in I believe they audit something like 30,000 fire departments across the nation. What they do is they basically look at your response your deployment to see structure fires. And they do the research the underwriting for multiple insurance companies. And they take that data, and they rate us on a scale of one to 10 on how efficient we are. And that has a direct effect on residential and commercial insurance rates. And so we worked very hard and and fire marshal Eliot played a big role in that our staff work extremely hard gathering data, we've worked in my fire time as fire chief, how we deploy our resources, our assets, we worked very hard in getting automatic aid agreements with our surrounding jurisdictions, other fire departments that are around the city of Norman, working, working with them responding and helping them with fires, and then getting them to come and help us with fires. All that made a huge difference in this audit, and we were able to garner a one, which is the highest you can get in the urban area, and then we have a split rating, they gave us a three in the rural area. And that's one

of the best ratings in the state of Oklahoma, something we're very proud of. And it's a way that we can give back, you know, we certainly respond to a lot of things, you know, you may live your whole life, and you may never call 911, you may not your house may never catch on fire, you may never have a medical need that you need us for. But as I told our staff, we're going to work as hard as we can here. To get folks the best, right? We can because that affects most people, you know, most people are paying insurance that are paying some sort of insurance. And if we can positively affect that, then that's, I feel like part of our mission as well. So yes, that's something we did, it happens every five years or so. And so we're we're always looking to do the best we can in that audit.

Tiffany Vrska 11:55

Yes, so that so the ISO rating, um, number one, and then also the Emergency Medical Services audit that you guys had in June. So the State Department of Health comes down and audits, you. And you guys had outstanding results in record keeping equipment and medications and cleanliness. And so I think that your department is well exceeding any kind of standards, as you said best in the state. And so congratulations to your folks chief, well, I

Travis King 12:26

tell you, what, you hit the nail on the head, our folks, you know, our folks make the difference in our staff here on the EMS side is second to none. You know, from an EMS perspective, I believe we're looked at kind of as the benchmark and how to deliver those types of services, we're constantly looking at ways to be the most efficient that we can, you know, in the rural setting, trying to get on scene as fast as we can to deliver that care, and deliver the highest level of care that we can is certainly a high priority. And to have that kind of review of, of our EMS services and really not even get, I mean, everywhere they looked it was it was as good as it could be. So our and that directly goes to Assistant Chief Jason Smith, and our EMS director, Justin Garrett, these guys are our top shelf and they're the really the best in the business and, and you know, that EMS side of it, it might be interesting for the listeners to know that that's somewhere over sick just over 60% of our call volume 60 to 65%. And so we're doing a lot of work in the EMS field, all of our firefighters to work here, you need to be an EMT basic. So we have the basic level of care on that EMT side. And then we have multiple, intermediate and paramedic level responders. So we we strategically try to place those personnel to deliver that highest care possible to the citizens in Norman. Well,

Tiffany Vrska 14:08

that is wonderful. And I'm sure that our listeners feel that much more safe knowing all of the the training and hard work that goes into each of the positions there the fire department, you bet. So fire prevention, and this is the group of folks here on your staff that really lead the way in educating and sharing knowledge with the general public. So to that end, can you all tell me a little bit about the kind of work that's been done recently in this division? Yeah,

Matthew Elliot 14:34

we've had six positions in prevention. And what we do is we try to go out to the schools and meet with the schools and we'll do education there but we've expanded it not just to the schools but also to Senior Centers. Also to the well, that's recent, that came in, we go there for new ownership classes to talk to them about CO detectors, smoke detectors. In the rural area, talk about how to clear out around your house for any grass fires that keep it away that will less chance of a structure fire. So we've expanded that also expanded our smoke detector program where we will come out, if you own your home, we will come out and if you have a smoke detector problem, we'll check it see if it needs new battery or replace it. So we started looking at these 10 year batteries on these smoke detectors, so we don't have to come out as much. And that's been really helping a lot of how many times we go out and everything. I think we ended up doing 162 Smoke Detector calls in about eight months.

Tiffany Vrska 15:35

Wow. Wow, those are impressive numbers. So I do have to share with you from a communication standpoint, it's a personal favorite of mine, whenever there's a fire truck somewhere with kids, and they're learning and they're so into it or you're at one of the community events it makes for the best B roll and the best photos. I just I love it. I love going to those types of community events. So we thank you for that. No problem.

Matthew Elliot 15:59

We we enjoy it, not just the prevention side, the suppression side, we'll take engines to schools so the kids can see it. Do training on that some education. Track Right, yeah, we'll do touch a truck. But we've we've expanded so much more now that we work with Cleveland County Sheriff's Department on some of their things like we just last year we did it in we're gonna do it this year as a shop with a badge where you could go out and we run couple of trucks, we go get some money that they've got had donated to him, we buy presents and everything. And then we present them. We've done some stuff with JD McCarty where we go through their fishing day and go out and help them fish and everything. So it's, it's, we just try to expand it as we can where we can. And it's been it's been great. I mean, we've had such great responses from the from the public and the citizens. So that's

Tiffany Vrska 16:44

awesome. And now that we are approaching Thanksgiving and Christmas, from fire prevention standpoint, what do you think that folks should be aware of or keep in mind in terms of fire safety,

Matthew Elliot 16:55

there's a lot going on with the holidays. But then also with the weather change? Oklahoma, you know, we go from where we can have a 75 degree day, and then it's in the 30s. Yeah, so

Tiffany Vrska 17:07

your allergies, they just are everywhere, right? So,

Matthew Elliot 17:11

so what we run into a lot, right now what we're really pushing is heaters, portable heaters. Sometimes you have to use them, but we need to be careful with them, they need to follow the manufacturer's instructions, they need to keep them three feet, at least away from the heating element from any combustibles anything that catch fire and needs to be on a hard surface. It's best to have one that if it tips over it shuts off or as a thermostat. But with those thermostats, as I mentioned earlier, the temperature change you'll have people that will have a Hadrian on the night, it's running on that thermostat. And in the morning, it's still running and you turn around and mid afternoon it's hot and the thermostat set it off and is turned off. So they move it and now they moved, moved that heater closer to something and then it'll drop the temperature again and that heater comes back on. So really the best thing for those heaters is unplugging when you're not using them. I even suggest not even having them plugged in at night when you're asleep. Just unplug heat up the room before you go to bed. Plug it in, plug it back in the morning when you're up. And that's a good safety safe way to do that. Don't put them on extension cords that we've seen that and that overloads extension cords. And that extension cord is not just for those heaters, it's for Christmas lights, it's for the fourth cooker you're putting in on Thanksgiving to heat up something and you'll see extension cords when we just were power strips or overloading we just got to be very careful with that. And so with the holidays, you look at Thanksgiving, the big one, that's one of the major Thanksgiving itself cooking is the fires that day is the major that's three times more likely to have a fire on that day like it. And that can range from just a simple cooking or for popular for a while was the oil fryers for turkeys, they only suggest using those anymore, they suggest using an electric or an infrared style because they're so dangerous to use. You got to be very careful with them. But uh, yeah, so Thanksgiving is the one that really need to watch the cooking and make sure they're they're right there when they're when they're cooking. And don't leave us hanging, just walk off to go do something else you'll forget and you'll have a fire. And then we move into Christmas where there's a lot of extension cords for Christmas trees. If you use a real Christmas tree, go ahead and get rid of it. As soon as you can, you know, don't let it dry out and make sure that water is on there. They've got water and devices you can set up and fill it up and it will keep feeding water to it so you don't forget. But dry Christmas tree can be a very bad situation for that. candles. Candles are one of the biggest ones where people will they sound so small and simple and you put them on a table but if it gets bumped or moved or you've got kids coming in from out of town and they mess with them, just be very careful with candles or even the lighters that you've used to light that just think that maybe you don't have kids and then all the nieces and nephews come in the house and you put it down where you normally do well they they might have be able to get hold of those. So just be careful with that. And that's in a big thing is you know smoke tectors Make sure they're they're good, make sure the battery is good, make sure they work, test them, SEO, we don't provide SEO, but you can get co detectors, you can get those at Lowe's or Home Depot or hardware store. And you can get that. And those are great to have you have gas fired appliances in the house. And so,

Tiffany Vrska 20:14

okay, so those are some wonderful tips and reminders. And I think as we get closer to the holidays, the fire department always does an excellent job of making sure that that education is out there for folks also. So chief, can you tell me what's next as far as long term projects or initiatives for the Norman Fire Department?

Travis King 20:36

Well, thanks for asking that. Tiffany. Yeah, we're always looking down the road and trying to project like I talked about earlier challenges that may be coming our way and how do we mitigate those, we're very excited the City Council approved recently a public safety study. So I have staff that are committed to that a committee was formed with private citizens, police department members, and then my staff. And they recently chose a firm and that was proved they will be getting started. And they will be looking at the challenges we face the future challenges as far as development that's coming our way. One thing that is coming in as the new term Pike, that will be affecting us in multiple areas of our city, how that's going to affect emergency response. And, and our staffing and deployment needs. So this firm will be looking at all those things and presenting that to the council. So that we can get a budget plan moving forward and, and again, meet the needs, the needs that we have today. And future projected needs. So we're really excited about that. We've got some new fire apparatus, we've got an engine, as a matter of fact, I just was notified that we bought a new engine that's coming in to our city most likely to I know it entered the state today. So it was built in Ohio, we're excited about that, we recently got approved in this budget, a new mid mount aerial device, 100 foot aerial platform, that will be the second one that will we'll be having in service on a full time basis, once it's built and arrived. So we've got a lot of positive things. You know, working with the fire marshal working with all of our division heads, we just look for the most innovative ways to serve our public. And, you know, just just real excited about the future and leading this fire department. As we meet these challenges, you know, the university just joined the SEC conference that's going to kick in next year. We're preparing for those challenges, more fans from other schools entering into our community, six, seven times a year, you know, that already presents a unique challenge game day, sir, in the city of Norman, and we play a big role in that response on a game day. Well, that challenge is even going to be bigger now. The airport is expanding to to receive larger aircraft because of this, and we're so we're we're involved in all of these aspects and preparing for these challenges. And we're just excited to step up. I know, we, our staff, our folks are, we're up for the challenge. And we will, we will meet this will continue to provide the best service possible and, and you know, just want to, you know, I don't get a chance to do this very often, but just to tell the public to tell the citizens in Norman and the surrounding communities, for that matter. Thank you for their support, you know, though, those are the folks we work for. And as every other department is around here, you know, sales tax keeps the wheels moving in the fire department. So, you know, we appreciate those sales tax dollars being spent here in Norman, we appreciate the support of the public. That's the folks we work for. And we just want to continue to provide the best service possible. Absolutely.

Tiffany Vrska 24:12

Well, sounds like you have a lot to look forward to a lot that's on the horizon. And so we're are very excited for your department in the entire city, the public safety study that's going to be carried out we'll be doing lots of public information on that when the time comes. So I have to ask you all before you leave us, how hard is it to learn how to drive a fire truck?

Matthew Elliot 24:39

It's not. It's the first few times it's interesting, especially when you go down Porter it's not too bad.

Travis King 24:47

It's actually easier to drive one when your lights and sirens are on because people are getting out of your way to the station. I remember the first time I drove a firetruck code Three to a call, my foot was shaking so bad on the accelerator, I could I didn't know if I was gonna make it or not, but no, you get those drivers get used to that that is actually a rank a tested for rank so so our folks, you know, it's a very, very challenging to make to promote inside the normal Fire Department is very challenging at any, any position driver is one of those positions and we put those folks through a lot of training to promote you go through a lot of driving training and pump training, you know, those guys have to know how to develop the proper pressures when you're at a structure fire scene how to place that apparatus at certain scenes and, and there's a lot that goes into that. But no, we've got a good group and we have surprisingly few accidents, you know, they do happen, but we we we do a pretty good job there. It's it's fun to do that I miss driving the big car. It's actually pretty fun. Yeah,

Tiffany Vrska 26:04

we visited you all and not too long ago for the Citizens Academy. And it's like you don't even realize how big they actually are until you sit next to them. And there's all of these different tools and equipment and sizes of hose and all of these things. And I'm very impressed that how well your your staff is trained and how educated they are to share knowledge with our our citizens here in Norman. Well, is there anything else that either of you would like to share with our listeners today?

Matthew Elliot 26:34

Only I think of is that, you know, the Norman Fire Department Facebook page will have a lot of information. We talked about the holidays. But we'll try to apply information to that on all throughout the year, all throughout the season, because we'll move into move into the summer with grass fires, we'll move into just different seasons, you know of rain, so we always try to put a public safety announcement on that to as the seasons go. So go check out our Facebook page where and just to find out information about us so

Tiffany Vrska 27:02

okay, that's norman fire department on Facebook chief anything else?

Travis King 27:06

Well, like I said earlier, Tiffany, we just appreciate the support from the public. Our mission is to provide the best services we can and we're laser focused on that and we're going to continue to do that and, and continue to just have a great relationship with the citizens here. We we just I think I can speak for all of our people here. We're just grateful to have our jobs. I feel like it's a it's a calling and, you know, our folks, we just we stay mission focused and we're gonna we're gonna continue to do that. So thanks for having us today. All

Tiffany Vrska 27:38

right, thank you all questions or commentary about on West gray can be sent into public affairs at Norman ok.gov Shoutouts to our producer and editor Mr. Bryce Holland of the city of Norman communications office. Visit Norman ok.gov/news. To enroll for E notifications on traffic advisories upcoming events, local election notices and more from the city of Norman, follow us on social Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube city of Norman. Okay. Until next time, stay engaged. Stay informed and always remember to cast your ballot. I'm Tiffany Vrska. Thank you for joining us On West Gray.

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