

Passport Accountability: A Firefighter's Perspective

By Ron Eilken

In a large city earlier this year, several firefighters were killed in a seemingly routine house fire. Preliminary reports indicated that firefighters were in trouble inside the house and a rescue was then attempted. Apparently when the rescue crew exited the structure, there was some confusion. It was thought that they were the crew that was being searched for and further rescue efforts were discontinued. Later, as the smoke cleared, the bodies of the fallen firefighters were discovered. The sad part of the story is that if most of us were to honestly assess how we account for our personnel and manage our fire scenes, we would have to admit that this could also happen to us. On the one hand, that attitude that this will never happen to us, helps give us the courage to perform our jobs. Unfortunately, this same attitude does not help us to prepare for the worst. When it does happen, we end up with disorganized and delayed rescue efforts, needlessly injured or killed firefighters, and a host of firefighters or officers filled with unanswered questions.

One way to significantly decrease the odds of this type of tragedy from occurring in your department is the adoption of a quality firefighter accountability system, such as the "Passport System". As firefighters, we expect certain levels of performance and responsibility from our fire ground management team in order to ensure our personal safety and hopefully, our safe return home at the end of our shift. If a firefighter doesn't feel confident in the way the scenes are being managed by the department or feels that there is room for improvement, he or she has to take responsibility and begin the push for accountability. An example of this is the MABAS (Mutual Aid Box Alarm System) organization of northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. One firefighter, with the assistance of MABAS officials, pushed for the adoption of Passport for approximately 400 fire departments. Everyone has the ability, even firefighters, to institute change. In addition, unions can be a great source for assistance and, in fact have been involved in the push for the adoption of an accountability system, resulting in increased safety levels.

Let's take a look at firefighter accountability and the Passport Accountability System, which is one of the more popular systems and certainly one of the best to have in place when the worst case scenario happens. It is important to compare how Passport and other systems conform to state and federal standards (OSHA) and recognized industry standards (NFPA), both of which must be considered when adopting an accountability system. In addition to standards, it is also important to recognize that we have become an increasingly litigious society, and although firefighters previously have never been the target of liability suits, the days of limited exposure and immunity are over.

Also important to consider is the purpose of the OSHA Reform Act to bring all states up to OSHA state levels (23 states are currently OSHA states). Those who are not currently a OSHA state should know that OSHA states have specific standards for firefighting and have levied fines against fire departments for lack of adequate accountability. It is interesting to note that the use of the Passport System has at least in one case, resulted in a significant reduction of fines. Many of the standards adopted by OSHA come right from the NFPA. NFPA standards have been introduced in courts of law as evidence of what is a recognized industry practice. In regard to accountability, there are some very specific standards that should be noted: NFPA 1500—Firefighter Health and Safety (Section 6) and NFPA 1561—Incident Management Systems (Section 4).

One of the first things the NFPA standards suggest is a written Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for a personal accountability system. All members must participate in the system and it is to be used at all incidents. It is important that all procedures be in writing if they are to be recognized in a court of law. Even OSHA takes the stance that if its not in writing, it doesn't exist. The Passport training manual, which is available for purchase, includes a model procedure that can be adopted as-is, or modified to meet department needs.

The standards also call for the system to maintain the location, function, and time of entry of each company at the fire scene. This is where many systems fail. A system of names on the apparatus or a cowtag that ends up in a pile will not help a command officer in determining the location or function of different companies as they move about the fire scene. Here the Passport system offers an advantage because it operates along with an incident command system and aids fire ground commanders in managing the function and location of teams of firefighters without hindering operations. Many command officers report that this increased inventory of fire scene personnel has reduced the manpower they used because they are being used more effectively.

The standards also call for the system to have the ability to provide for rapid accounting of all members on the incident scene. In the event of a structural collapse, explosion, or report of downed or missing firefighters, it must be possible to quickly determine who is missing. The lives of firefighters must never be endangered by sending them in to a building to search for firefighters who are not in the building, nor do we want to find out later that a rescue was not attempted because we didn't realize that anyone was missing or know the location to search. This is where knowing the function and location of companies comes into play. A system that sits on a rig or that has individual names tags all clipped on a rig, requires the command officer to go to each rig, or to go through each tag individually to organize names for each tag in order to have a more useable system.

This can be a time and attention-consuming task exactly when it can be least afforded. When asked how long it would take to conduct a roll call on a large fire of perhaps 100 firefighters using their current methods of accountability, most chiefs have said it would probably take from 20 – 30 minutes to account for all the personnel. Several honest chiefs stated that they didn't feel they could even accomplish an accurate roll call using their current method. Imagine the potential on a larger mutual aid type fire where no one has the luxury of knowing who is responding. Even in our own department, with vacations and trades, we can't always count on being sure who is responding. This can be even a bigger problem on each call. With personnel sometimes responding from home, many volunteer chiefs have reported that Passport has greatly improved their control at the fire scene by allowing them to not only account for who is on the scene and whom they are teamed up with, but also insuring that they are following the strategy set by the commanding officer.

Some departments feel they are too small for accountability. However, NFPA requires it on all calls. Also, it is inevitable that every department will eventually have a fire or emergency large enough in magnitude to require outside assistance. Is your department ready to safely manage the additional crews from the other towns and are they sufficiently trained to safely manage your crews should you assist them? Each department is responsible for the safety of all the firefighters responding to their emergencies. Whether a department is full time or volunteer, Passport can help create order out of chaos. Certainly, as a firefighter, it is comforting to know that should an unplanned event or problem develop, an accurate roll call can be completed in a matter of minutes and then help should be on the way.

Let's take a brief look at what the Passport system consists of. The actual passport units identify the apparatus and department, and hold the individual name tags of every member of that particular company or team. The primary passport is kept under the rear brim of the company officer's helmet where it is readily available for collection by a command officer. Just as passports are necessary to gain access to foreign countries when traveling, passports on the fire ground are used to check-in at various positions or locations on the fire ground.

The command officer, or on larger fires the sector or division officers, utilize a status board to hold the passports of companies or teams of firefighters assigned to their jurisdiction. These boards also function as tactical worksheets where any pertinent information such as assignments, locations, or time of entry can be noted. The newest boards also have check boxes as a reminder for the common fireground tasks.

The Passport System is designed with build-in redundancies or "back-ups" in place. A Back-up Passport, which is a duplicate of the Primary Passport is kept with the apparatus. Early-in companies are permitted to function without checking in, however, the Back-up Passport can be collected should a problem develop or if the command officer feels more comfortable having the Passports physically in front of him or her. In any case, as the fire grows in magnitude, the system expands right along with it. A small fire might have only a single officer collecting passports whereas a larger fire may have sector or division officers collecting Passports for companies in their area. In this case, the command officer would only retain the names of the various sector officers while each of them would have the Passports of the companies under their supervision. This allows a command officer to account for as many as 25 companies consisting of over 100 firefighters, and still have only a handful of responsibilities on his status board. This follows right along with the guidelines of span of control.

The Passport System works very well for staging and rehab operations. Arriving crews turn in their Passports to the staging or rehab officer, who holds his or her Passports on the status board until there is an assignment. The officer knows how many and what type of companies are available by simply looking at this status board. As he or she receives requests for additional crews, the boards is consulted to decide who the assignment should be given to.

That crew is then called and their Passports are given back. The status boards make it easy for firefighters to visually identify who is in charge of the various sectors.

A critical part of the Passport system is the use of helmet shields that “Velcro” to the front of the helmet. These shields identify the company officers and members of that particular company or team. This makes it much easier for command officers to identify teams of firefighters in these areas and reduces the potential for misidentification of firefighters. The use of helmet shields also identifies that all firefighters have checked in and are working with a team, and reduces the potential for free-lancing.

Once you have determined that you want to adopt a system like Passport, how do you begin? The first thing is to show your chief how this can be a benefit by increasing safety to firefighters and reducing the department’s potential for litigation by better meeting the current safety standards. A simple presentation using the available training manual and slides would be a good place to start. The use of a flip chart is helpful to list the benefits and stimulate a conversation on why accountability is important.

The next step might be to approach surrounding departments that could potentially respond to larger fires. You might approach the training officers or hold a local chief’s meeting. If you are fortunate enough to be organized by county or some other means, you are already at an advantage in getting started.

Once everyone is in agreement to adopt a system, a written procedure must be developed that outlines how the system is to function at a fire involving all the different jurisdictions. The Passport Manual includes a model procedure that can act as a guide. It is important to train someone from each department so that he or she feels confident in going back and training their own departments. In the case of MABAS, a series of “Train the Trainer” classes were conducted in different regions to facilitate this process. The trainers were shown the slide program from the training manual along with the available video. The training manual also includes a lesson plan that discusses the slides and contains several hand-on simulations that can be done in a classroom setting to begin to familiarize firefighters about how the system works.

Next, it is recommended to place the equipment on the apparatus and get the personnel used to checking in and out each day while not actually requiring the use of the system on the fire ground. Many chiefs report that their firefighters have adapted well to the routine of checking in daily and hold their partners responsible for doing the same. Then, a walk-through of a simulated fire at a building or fire station to better familiarize personnel with the system and how it might function on an actual emergency is suggested. Experience has shown that by allowing each firefighter to be a separate company with their own Passport, they can best see and participate in the overall function of the different positions in the system. It is a good idea to train with neighboring departments; however, don’t expect to do this until your own department is completely familiarized with the system. The training ground is the best place to iron out wrinkles. During this process, weak areas in the incident command system will be noted. This whole process could take a year, but in terms of overall fire ground management and safety, it is well worth it.

Thousands of fire departments throughout the United States have already discovered the benefits of the Passport System in managing their fire scenes and increasing the safety of their firefighters. As in anything, “practice makes perfect”, and fire ground accountability is no different. With a tool like the Passport Accountability System in place, firefighters can be confident that location and status can be determined efficiently and thoroughly.

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