



# Fire Dept. facing critical situation

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A child drowning; a family's home engulfed in flames; a grandmother with chest pains; an injured man trapped in a wrecked car.

When emergencies happen, firefighters want to be on the scene as fast as they can. A quick response can mean the difference between loss of property and life or saving it.

But reaching a scene in under the national standard of four minutes is increasingly difficult for Mesa firefighters. They hit that mark in 61 percent of calls. Nationally, the goal is 90 percent.

Response times, which had remained about the same for years in Mesa, spiked by 27 seconds over the past two years. The average response time is 3 minutes, 56 seconds.

Every second matters. Brain damage sets in when a person is without oxygen for four minutes and a fire doubles in size every two minutes. Flashover, where little can be saved, occurs at eight minutes.

"We know firsthand what a difference that clock makes," said Mesa Fire Capt. Bryan Jeffries, president of the United Mesa Fire Fighters union. "It is hard when you know the potential of how good things can be and people are in pain and suffering because they have to wait."

Mesa has had no recent bond elections benefiting the Fire Department and has not added stations needed to keep up with rapid growth.

Fire stations are placed to handle about 2,000 to 2,500 calls annually or cover a 1.5-mile radius for optimum response times, Mesa fire Deputy Chief Mike Dunn said.

Mesa has the second-highest population of elderly and one of the highest populations of children in the Valley, two groups that generate the bulk of calls and make Mesa's fire engines some of the busiest in the country. And emergency calls, 76 percent of them medical-related, continue to rise, Dunn said.

## Down by 4 stations

Mesa is four fire stations behind and needs to replace five firetrucks to maintain current service levels, Dunn said. As a result, the city's 17 stations cover larger areas or handle a higher volume of fire and emergency calls.

"The real challenge is about maintaining the level and quality of service. We have reached the end of what our resources can provide," Mesa Fire Chief Harry Beck said. "We just can't keep up."

Beck, who has launched a city-wide campaign to educate residents about the department's needs, says services will continue to decline if nothing is done.

And there's no relief on the way.

Councilman Rex Griswold, the fire subcommittee chairman, said the city's reliance on sales tax for revenue doesn't work and only sustains current levels of services.

"With the (current) model, every new person is subsidized by current residents. We are stretching the police and fire further and further for each new resident that comes in," Griswold said. "The Model T is starting to rattle and rock while going at 80 mph on the freeways."

He said educating residents is crucial so they can decide what services they feel are needed and what price they are willing to pay.

"Why make people angry (with a bond), if they already have said no with a property tax," Griswold said, referring to last year's vote.

The department has no money for new stations, Beck said. Even if it did, it takes about two years to build one. The cost, excluding land, is close to \$4.2 million. For a typical station, there is an additional \$1.2million for staffing and \$500,000 for a fire engine.

In addition to the four needed, the city should be building a fire station each year to keep pace with growth, Beck said.

### **Station 203 stretched**

No fire station in Mesa is more stretched than No. 203, built in 1957 at Standage and University Drive in northwest Mesa. It was the 21st busiest in the country in 2005, according to *Firehouse Magazine*. At times, the station has handled up to 18 calls per 24-hour shift.

It gets so busy at times during the night that firefighters at 203 just put a pot of coffee on, stay in their turnouts, a firefighter's protective clothing, and wait for the next call.

In December, a second engine began to operate out of the station. Now, eight firefighters are crammed into the tiny station, with three of them sleeping beside weights in the workout room.

It's not uncommon for both engines to be out on calls simultaneously. The result is a lack of sleep and increased fatigue for firefighters, which can lead to injuries and mistakes.

"It takes a toll," said Mesa fire Captain Frank Damato, who works on Engine 218 at Station 203. "I wake up constantly, even on my days off."

The densely populated area, spotted with apartment complexes, nursing homes and older single-family homes often inhabited by larger and multiple families, drives the city's highest call volumes.

During the busiest times at 203, stations farther away are called in as backup, driving up response times.

Brenda Claar, 50, of Mesa, knows the importance of a fast response. Claar's mother, Nellie Miller, 79, needed medical assistance last week when she had abdominal pain. Ten days earlier, firefighters helped Miller when she had chest pains.

"It probably took them longer to get in their turnouts than getting here. That is why I like living by the station," Claar said. "I think they are excellent."

It's that quality of service, and trust, that Chief Beck doesn't want to lose.

As new people move in and no resources are added, the response times will continue to increase, he said.

Jeffries said the situation is the worst he's seen in his 11-year career, and it's starting to take its toll on morale.

"It didn't happen yesterday," he said. "We have done more with less for a long time and we have always been proud of that, but the pendulum has swung too far."

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