



ENHANCING POLICY ACCESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

STOUGHTON (MA) FIRE DEPARTMENT

Located about 17 miles southwest of Boston, the Stoughton (MA) Fire Department averages about 6,000 runs a year out of two houses. The department's 53 career firefighters protect a population of 27,000.

THE CHALLENGE

Until recently, the Stoughton Fire Department (SFD) policy manual was one big, unwieldy set of Word documents held together in a three-ring binder. When the policies were created in 1999, they were solid, but “more than 85 percent had not been updated since their initial creation,” says SFD Captain Brad Newbury. “As things changed, maybe there would be an email or a memo outlining the change, and we'd print that out and put it in the binder. It was organized, but not up to date and not easy to access.”

That combination created repercussions throughout the department. First, the department's practices didn't always match policy. This was in part due to the policies not being updated, but also because firefighters were often unaware of policy, which in turn made supervisors reluctant to enforce it. “There was no access to the policy manual other than going into the office and

pulling out this large three-ring binder,” Newbury says. “And we had no accountability, no way to show that individual firefighters had read and acknowledged a policy. You're trying to hold someone to a standard, and you can't because you can't prove they've been given the information.”

The effect was especially detrimental on new firefighters—a problem that grew critical as the SFD prepared to go through a hiring spurt. “In my mind we had a real gap, especially with the newer folks coming in,” Newbury says. “We would sit the rookies down and have them go through hundreds of pages of policies. There's no possible way that a new firefighter is going to be able to digest all that.”

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THE SOLUTION

The catalyst for addressing the SFD's policy challenges came from the appointment of Chief Michael Laracy. “We had a brand-new chief, and like many new chiefs, he wanted to set new core values,” Newbury says. “One

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way to implement positive change for the future is through new policies. But the Chief was going to need a solid platform for that.”

Newbury, who has an extensive background in learning management systems and hybrid education, worked with Chief Laracy to research Lexipol’s Massachusetts fire policies and training service and identified that many of the features matched up with problems the department was trying to solve.

“At first we were wondering whether policy management was something we could do ourselves,” he says. “But from my experience I knew it would be more economical if we could find a way to give individuals full access to their policies electronically—as opposed to printing them—and having electronic acknowledgement so we have proof of individual accountability to the policies.”

Lexipol’s online Knowledge Management System provides the SFD with those features and more.

The department can easily issue policies electronically to its members, and then track who has acknowledged the policies and who hasn’t. And when new members join the department, they can be exposed to the policies at a pace that allows them to absorb them. “It’s going from the firehose approach to releasing the policies to them slowly over several weeks,” Newbury says. “This gives us the opportunity to better ‘raise’ the new individuals within the department while also refreshing the senior firefighters on policy.”

Because Lexipol policies are state-specific, they reflect the Massachusetts Comprehensive Fire Safety Code and the state’s General Laws. “We have company officers who don’t have a fire prevention background, so they are not very familiar with the Fire Code,” Newbury says. “Before Lexipol, there wasn’t an easy way for them to find that information and know what they’d be held accountable to. It’s really important for people to understand where the requirements in the policies come from, and Lexipol has incorporated all that.”

The SFD has issued about 60 percent of the policies to its members and is working to get the Daily Training Bulletins up and running. One word of advice Newbury offers other departments: Identify a project manager to lead the implementation. “In a smaller department, things keep coming up—promotions, new hires, changes in positions,” he says. “It really helps to have one person to own the project, who can set deadlines and keep it on track.”

THE RESULTS

Newbury regards Lexipol as a business system that enhances efficiency, just like an electronic shift scheduler. “Business is about processes. When new chiefs come in, they’re often overwhelmed with the enormity of the issues they find,” he says. “And a lot of departments, especially smaller departments, don’t have the systems and processes in place to address those issues. Lexipol helps us with that—it provides us a process for creating and maintaining policy.”

The SFD is already seeing the results. “We recently had our annual state EMS inspection, and the EMS inspector was very, very impressed at how our policies are managed, and that they’re accessible to everyone,” Newbury says. “From a quality assurance standpoint, one of the biggest concerns the inspectors have is that everyone has received and acknowledged the policies, and with Lexipol it’s very easy to do that and demonstrate it.”

Captain Newbury can also see the seeds of cultural change being planted by the transition to Lexipol: “Because Lexipol policies are based on best practices, it’s helping us demonstrate to our personnel that this is the way we should be functioning from a legal standpoint, an organizational excellence standpoint. It gives us the opportunity to reset and get buy-in from the firefighters. I think that’s one of the most powerful aspects of Lexipol—helping bring the department up to industry standards.”

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