

# Alberta's Fire/Search and Rescue Safety Strategy

A Plan for the Office of the Fire Commissioner



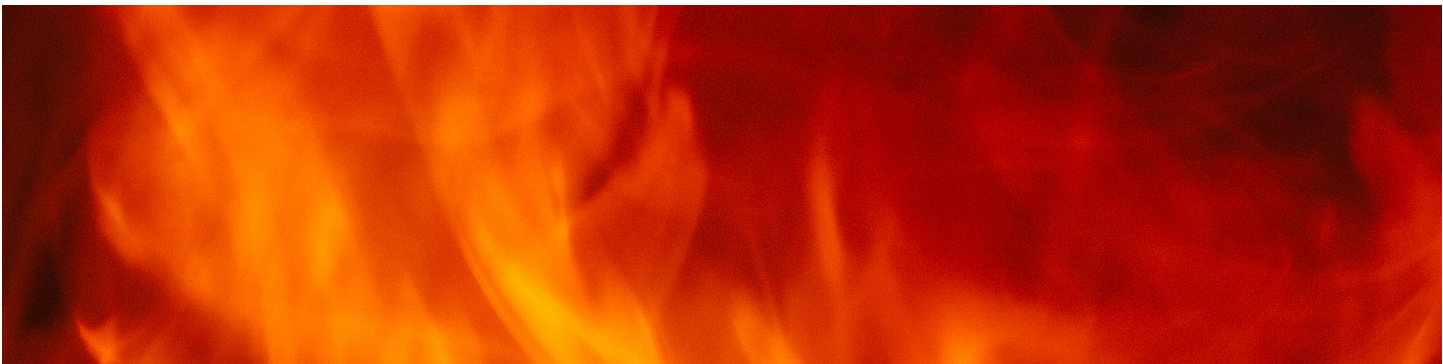
## MANDATE

As the province's fire safety authority, Alberta's Office of the Fire Commissioner (OFC) engages with municipalities, First Nations communities, industry and their fire services. Having competent, sustainable, effective and local fire services throughout the province mitigates the impacts of fires, and enhances the safety of Albertans.

As fire services have evolved to incorporate technical rescue services, the OFC is well-positioned to provide fire service leadership beyond fire suppression activities. Because of the role most fire services play within their communities, the OFC also collaborates with other government departments on issues that involve these fire services, including prevention programs, coordination of occupational supports, emergency management, medical response, dangerous goods response, and issues that affect the sustainability of these services. The OFC is the primary government support for structural fire services.

As the province's search and rescue (SAR) authority, the OFC engages with Search and Rescue Association of Alberta (SAR Alberta), Ground Search and Rescue Council of Canada, other ministries, municipalities and their fire services, law enforcement agencies, emergency medical services and Parks Canada to ensure sustainable and effective SAR services that enhance the safety of Albertans and visitors to the province.

OFC expertise in SAR-related matters has evolved along with the SAR sector itself and the OFC is well positioned to provide leadership and support. OFC collaborates, providing the necessary framework, including the provision of governance under



Section 29 of the *Emergency Management Act*, allowing SAR volunteers to operate effectively, safely and within an appropriate scope that serves Albertans.

## >> OUTCOMES

That OFC provides leadership supporting a high quality, high capacity and sustainable system of fire and SAR services that protect Albertans through an informed, collaborative and community risk-based approach. This document proposes a vision for Alberta's Fire and SAR Safety Strategy and a proposed course of action for the OFC, and includes strategies to align with this vision.

## >> AREAS OF FOCUS

The work of the OFC includes the following areas of focus:

- Data collection, analysis and reporting;
- Training and certification;
- Public safety education and awareness;
- Fire inspections;
- Fire investigations;
- Strategic SAR service support;
- Strategic fire service support; and
- Policy development.

## >> KEY DRIVERS

There are a number of critical drivers that influence the work of the OFC:

**Community Capacity:** A primary role of the OFC is to provide technical expertise and support, and enable the capacity of municipalities with respect to provision of direct delivery within their communities.

**Changes in Population/Demographics in Alberta:** Alberta's population has been growing rapidly, adding pressure to all public services including fire and SAR services. Demographic changes mean that both fire and SAR services must be adaptable and responsive to changing needs. Increasing urbanization, more activity in the Alberta back country, a larger number of elderly with mental cognition challenges, and language and cultural differences all contribute to increased pressures on safety response and awareness services as well as fire and SAR member recruitment.

**Disparity of Fire Safety Outcomes in First Nations Communities Compared to Non-Indigenous Communities:** First Nations communities are more susceptible to fire deaths, injuries and incidents. The OFC collaborates with First Nations communities and agencies to enhance the provision of safety services



to Albertans in these communities. As First Nations communities grow, public education and fire and SAR service capacity within these communities must also grow.

**Aging Infrastructure and Deferred Maintenance:** Alberta has expanded more rapidly than other jurisdictions in Canada. Despite significant new investment, there is also a significant backlog of deferred maintenance in both public and private infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, care homes, hotels, apartment buildings and condominiums.

**New Materials in Buildings and Construction:** New light-weight building materials and materials used for interior furniture and finishes pose a challenge for firefighters. This along with new and emerging technologies such as electric vehicles and alternative power sources all require fire services to develop new and effective response and training strategies.

**Economic Boom/Cycles:** Historically, Alberta's economy cycles from extreme "boom" periods to prolonged "down" cycles. This dynamic has significant implications for both SAR and fire services as it impacts the availability of volunteer staff and the ability of organizations to maintain consistent levels of service.

**Climate Change:** Challenges related to climate change affect fire and SAR safety services in Alberta in significant ways. For example, increased storm intensity and changes to local precipitation and moisture levels that lead to drought or flood conditions, increasing the need for both fire and SAR resources.



## IDENTIFIED GAPS AND RISKS

There are a number of gaps and risks that will be addressed by a provincial fire/search and rescue safety strategy.

### **Clear Roles and Expectations**

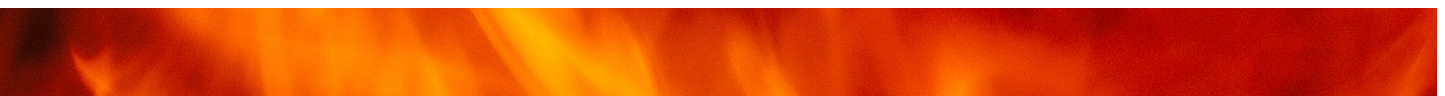
Success within the system requires a clearly articulated system of roles and responsibilities, as well as accountabilities. Blurred accountabilities between municipalities, fire services, tasking agencies, SAR teams, building owners, residents and the OFC do not contribute toward enhancing overall safety.

### **Stakeholder Engagement and Communications**

There are no clear lines of communication due in part to the clarity of roles issue. The OFC will need to collaborate with all system stakeholders to improve system communication and remove existing information silos.

### **Safety System Data and Intelligence**

The data collection and analysis function of the OFC should



be enhanced to enable the PSD to provide better risk management support to municipalities and First Nations communities. Better, more complete information will help the OFC to identify and quantify emerging risks in communities. This, in turn, would promote evidence-based decision making that would allow communities to align the risks their fire and SAR services will be expected to respond to with the tools and training they will need to effectively respond.

Current OFC data collection systems are outdated and do not easily allow for thorough data analysis or the identification and sharing of useful information with fire and SAR services.

### **Data and Investigations**

Currently, investigations are required for all fires resulting in damage or property loss, and a fire report must be submitted to the Fire Commissioner. While it is critical to ensure that the OFC and key stakeholders have a strong data foundation to understand fire origin and cause, it may not be critical that every fire be investigated. Simple reporting may be sufficient in many cases.

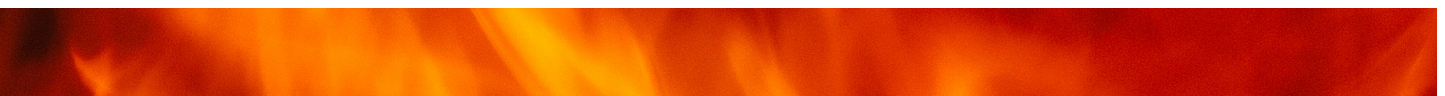
A discussion including key fire service partners should be undertaken to determine when a thorough investigation will add informational value to the safety system. In other words, it is important to identify the clear circumstances under which investigations would occur as well as reporting requirements.

Conversely, there are no investigation requirements around other public safety system failures where a fire was not involved. It seems as equally important to understand what is creating the demand for emergency fire services or SAR services and use that information to guide education and awareness, and to develop risk management policies and strategies.

It is also important to explore alternative approaches to investigation, such as enabling accredited municipalities to assist outside of their jurisdictions and/or promoting partnership with other investigative entities. Because this is a highly specialized area requiring technical expertise, significant field experience and a critical mass of knowledge, a more integrated approach is essential.

### **Community Risk Assessment**

The OFC is unable to provide information, statistics and analysis to communities to support effective local risk management activities. While they may be aware of their particular emergency event history, many communities lack the capacity to analyze data. Neither would they be aware of the risks or capacity of neighbouring communities at a level significant enough to aid their policy and strategic development.



### **Safety Code System Oversight**

There is a non-standard approach to maintenance of fire safety within public buildings. Quality management plans differ from one municipality to the next and no standard plan exists in non-accredited communities. There is a need to ensure an effective and sustainable system of inspections throughout the province to address emerging risks and to enhance the safety of Albertans within the built environment. Two judicial reviews of fires causing death have called on government to ensure a greater number of fire inspections of public buildings.

### **Community Risk in Publicly Accessible Buildings**

A growing backlog of deferred maintenance in publicly accessible buildings, particularly in rural areas, and blurred accountability for maintaining fire safety in the built environment also create a growing risk. This has been recently highlighted in Project Watch, a police-led investigation that shed light on poor living conditions in Edmonton motels that are housing residents on government-funded social assistance.

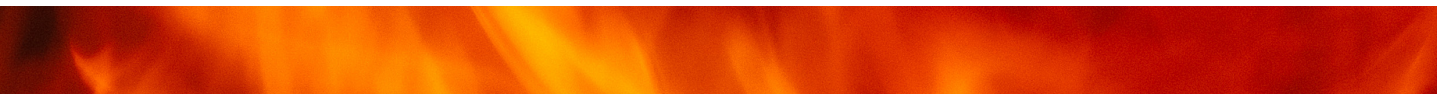
### **Access to Fire Training**

There has been a focus on a fixed training site for fire in the province. Large centres such as Edmonton and Calgary possess their own training sites, but the majority of firefighters have been reliant on a single facility. While blended learning programs using the internet and local facilities have been deployed, many fire volunteers are unable to take the time necessary to travel and train in a single location. There are training delivery options available throughout Alberta, including at municipal, public and private institutions. There is a need for the OFC to explore enhanced opportunities to allow for a wide array of training access points and to align training and accreditation need with demand.

### **SAR Sustainability**

The government relies upon a system of volunteers who work collaboratively with municipalities, policing and emergency response systems to conduct a wide variety of SAR emergency responses. Because SAR is a system built around volunteers coming from a wide variety of backgrounds, and it is not typically operated by municipalities, there are added governance challenges for OFC. To allow the SAR system to respond quickly and effectively when required, OFC must enhance the system through strong leadership, co-ordination and partnership with SAR Alberta.

The SAR system requires greater attention given that SAR training systems are not as coordinated as those of other emergency response sectors.





## STRATEGIES FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

To help address the identified gaps and risks, the OFC will apply the following strategies.

### **Strategy 1: Shift from Delivery-Based to Leadership-Based**

As the province grows and the fire/SAR response demands grow with it, it will be essential to have a central authority for fire- and SAR-related safety issues to lead and oversee the system as it changes and evolves.

#### **For Example:**

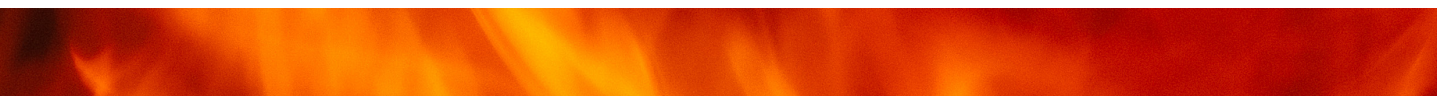
- The OFC will shift focus to clearly establish it as the fire and SAR authority. During relevant provincial emergencies, the OFC will be responsible for identifying and deploying fire and SAR resources. The OFC will also be accountable to Albertans for the success of those deployments.
- The OFC will be responsible and accountable for mandating any required fire bans outside of Alberta's forest protection area, either regionally or provincially. This will be done in collaboration with impacted government ministries and municipalities, and will be based on evidentiary requirements.
- The OFC will continue to be responsible for data collection using fire investigations, and fire service and SAR reporting in the province; however, the overall emphasis will be on leading co-ordination of the fire/SAR systems and shaping these systems to meet the evolving needs of Albertans.
- The OFC will work with the fire service and SAR service, the Alberta Fire Chiefs Association, SAR Alberta, and other agencies to develop sustainability strategies.
- The OFC will work with partner ministries to re-affirm the role of the OFC in public safety as it relates to common-use facilities, and buildings occupied by at-risk individuals.

### **Strategy 2: Move towards Improved Accountability**

The OFC will clearly define its roles and responsibilities within the provincial safety system and set clear and tangible goals, for which it will be accountable. The OFC will also encourage greater accountability of other members within the system.

#### **For Example:**

- The quality management plan system now in place under the *Safety Codes Act* will be modified to define minimum Alberta Fire Code inspection levels to better engage municipalities in the safety system. The OFC will engage with



non-accredited municipalities to define minimum levels of Alberta Fire Code inspection and compliance services required. A fiscal regime will be established that enables sustainability of Alberta Fire Code compliance.

- The OFC will work with Safety Codes Council (SCC) to use quality management plans to drive an inspection regime based on assessment of risks, ensuring a minimum standard in the province is met.

### **Strategy 3: Develop a More Strategic Role**

The OFC will move toward becoming a centre of policy and strategic planning for the fire/SAR safety system, using data and analysis to make informed decisions that enhance service to Albertans.

#### **For Example:**

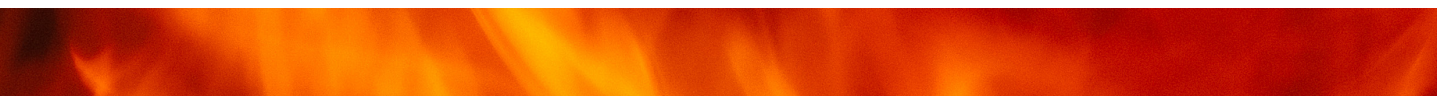
- The OFC will develop a plan for including SAR training and certification in the current OFC training and certification quality assurance program.
- The OFC will facilitate the training and deployment models for SAR service providers in collaboration with SAR Alberta to ensure SAR personnel work safely and that they are effectively located.
- The OFC will support firefighter and SAR recruitment and retention initiatives to help ensure local fire and SAR services are sustainable.

### **Strategy 4: Focus on a Proactive System**

The OFC will anticipate the needs of fire and SAR service members and identify risks to Albertans with a focus on addressing these issues before major problems arise.

#### **For Example:**

- A greater emphasis on data analysis will allow the OFC to provide advice on service and risk mitigation levels and deliver appropriate prevention messaging.
- Investigating to determine the circumstance and cause of a fire/SAR event is important, and OFC will continue to gather this data and use it to prevent similar events from happening again.
- Review of existing fire investigation policies will seek areas for improvement, including a review of the need to broaden investigations to include safety system failures generally, and the need to reduce fire investigations to those events where useful information may be obtained. The OFC will, however, continue to maintain a reporting system for all events.
- Training gaps will be identified and training grants will be targeted based upon need and system capacity enhancement to assist local volunteer fire and SAR groups to



acquire the skills they need to respond effectively.

- OFC will work with First Nations to understand their unique challenges and work collaboratively to improve their fire safety outcomes. To achieve this, the OFC will focus on implementation of Project Zero, a public-education initiative that aims to reduce fire injuries and fatalities to zero in First Nations communities.

#### **Strategy 5: Foster More Strategic Communications**

While communications regarding past/ongoing fire/SAR events will always provide information and cannot be eliminated, more emphasis will be placed on strategic communications.

##### **For Example:**

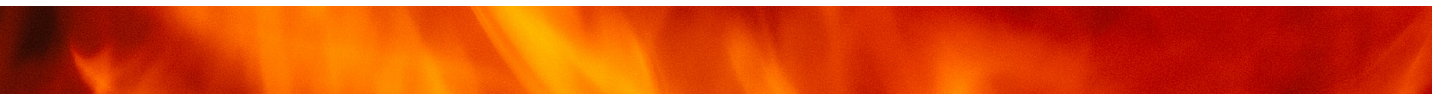
- The OFC will focus on its role in getting safety messages to the public as an effective means of fire/SAR prevention and preparedness.
- The OFC will establish a broader network of stakeholder engagement to ensure that OFC work is informed by a greater representation of provincial and inter-provincial stakeholders.

#### **Strategy 6: Become Systems-Focused**

There will be less focus placed on individual emergency events/activities in a community, and more focus on the larger system, which would ultimately support local delivery of services during crisis.

##### **For Example:**

- The OFC will maintain quality assurance programs that ensure people working in the fire and SAR systems are competent and well-trained, and that their physical and mental health is a priority consideration.
- By collaborating with all partners including the municipal and policing sectors, the OFC will pursue a more integrated approach to all safety system investigations that will focus on sharing valuable data and leveraging expertise from a multi-disciplinary standpoint within the safety system.
- The OFC will build system capacity and effectiveness province-wide by broadening the number of access points to certified SAR and fire service training.
- The OFC will work with the SCC to establish a sustainable system of fire and life safety inspections that account for the entire spectrum of the built environment, leveraging assets of the SCC and partnering with resources at the community level.





### **Strategy 7: Develop Unified Data Systems focused on Outcomes and Analytics**

The OFC will seek out data that helps identify fire/SAR event correlations with social, environmental, demographic factors and others that add value, enabling effective emergency response and better prevention and awareness. Information will be gathered and shared to help inform policy and strategic decision making at provincial and local levels.

#### **For Example:**

- The OFC will develop a system of analysis and reporting to enable the OFC and local governments to effectively identify risks, and develop mechanisms for managing and mitigating those risks with the appropriate partners.
- The OFC will develop a data collection strategy to ensure information is collected and can be shared across the safety system, including fire and SAR services, as well as with municipalities and governments.
- The OFC will develop a plan to monitor investigations and the collection of required documentation in the province that includes a strategy for sharing the data with appropriate partners that would benefit from the knowledge.
- The OFC will identify and collect appropriate incident data to be used for driving public education campaigns, co-ordinating the fire and SAR systems and developing future code changes.
- The OFC will conduct thorough data analysis to identify trends in fire and SAR safety related matters and share this knowledge with fire and SAR service partners to enhance the targeting of public education and awareness programs to higher-risk areas.



## **REVISED ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF THE OFC**

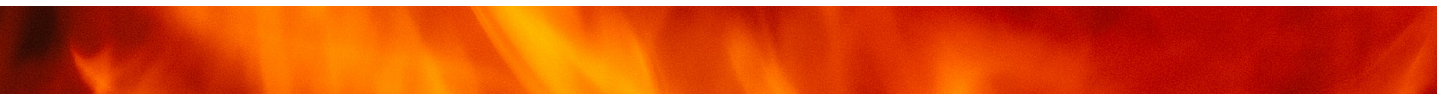
To facilitate the implementation of these strategies, the OFC will encompass the following roles and functions.

### **Data Analysis and Reporting**

The OFC collects, analyzes and reports data from other government departments, municipalities, tasking agencies, and fire and SAR services partners, and shares this data to support effective government and community risk management.

### **Training and Certification**

The OFC oversees and administers provincial certifications to ensure the quality and effectiveness of fire and SAR training programs provided by public and private entities across the province.



### **Public Safety Education and Awareness**

The OFC partners with fire, SAR, industry and school educators to deliver safety messages to the general public and targeted audiences.

### **Fire Code Inspections**

The OFC will work with the SCC to ensure there is a system in place for fire inspections in non-accredited areas and to ensure to the extent possible that the fire safety features within the built environment across Alberta are maintained throughout a building's life cycle.

### **Safety System Investigations**

The OFC will lead and assist in emergency event investigations/examinations across the province to capture information important to the safety system and to contribute expertise in cases where information could be learned from fatalities, large losses, multiple injuries, criminal activity or arsons.

### **Fire and SAR Support**

The OFC provides leadership, effective collaboration, co-ordination, monitoring, financial and physical supports through grants, data research and sharing, mentorship, mediation, professional guidance and referrals.

### **Policy Development**

The OFC works in consultation with Albertans, other government ministries, industry and members of the fire and SAR services to develop provincial policy and strategic direction guiding fire and SAR services, the development of safety regulation and the enforcement of Fire Code compliance.



## **CONCLUSION**

Going forward, the OFC will move away from transactional, operational duties already provided by fire and SAR services in the field, and instead work on system quality and co-ordination, public education and other proactive fire/SAR prevention roles. The OFC will gather and analyze fire and SAR data for Alberta, and use its expertise to help develop better, more effective safety systems, training, and public education programs in both the fire and SAR sectors.

