

Montgomery County

FIRE & EMS STUDY

In consultation with the Virginia Department of Fire Programs, Virginia Department of Health's Office of Emergency Medical Services, and the Virginia Department of Forestry



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Christiansburg Volunteer Fire Department – ISO Class 4

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Longshop-McCoy Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department – ISO Class 9/10

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Riner Volunteer Rescue Squad

Virginia Tech Rescue Squad

¹Department names as provided by Montgomery County. Please note names on Montgomery County website do not match the above - <https://montva.com/departments/fire-emt>

²The ISO fire rating is a score provided to fire departments and insurance companies by the Insurance Services Office. While it mainly focuses on the local fire departments and water supply, there are other factors that contribute to an area's score. Also referred to as a fire score or Public Protection Classification (PPC), ISO is a score from one to 10 that indicates how well-protected your community is by the fire department.
<https://www.bankrate.com/insurance/homeowners-insurance/iso-fire-ratings/#:~:text=An%20ISO%20fire%20rating%20is,contribute%20to%20an%20area's%20score.>

Executive Summary

This report documents the findings and recommendations for the Montgomery County Fire and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Study. The information contained is not to be construed as legal advice or as binding recommendations. This report is intended to provide guidance for the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors and its fire and rescue stakeholders to build on what is working well, while observing opportunities for improvement. Strategic focus in these areas will enhance the overall quality and coordination of fire-rescue service delivery to residents of Montgomery County.

The study was requested by the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors in order to analyze several areas of responsibility within the County's fire and rescue services. The Study Committee was comprised of representatives from the Virginia Fire Services Board, the Virginia Department of Fire Programs, the Virginia Department of Forestry and the Virginia Office of Emergency Medical Services.

The findings and recommendations are organized into five working themes to include:

- Centralized Authority for Fire and Rescue Services
- Communication
- Training
- Budget and Administration
- Delivery of Services

These working themes provide a central focus for prioritizing the study's recommendations. They serve as a guide for the Study Committee to identify and evaluate measures that ultimately will improve the quality and coordination of fire and rescue services within Montgomery County. Below is a high-level summary of the findings and recommendations, which will be discussed further in the report.

Theme 1: Organizational and Operational Development

- Centralized Authority for Fire and Rescue Services: Establish clear lines of Authority between all volunteer agencies and Montgomery County, who should examine the feasibility of hiring a career Chief / Director of Fire / EMS / Rescue Services as the central position responsible for the coordination and authority for all Fire and Rescue issues within the county.
 - Montgomery County shall establish and simplify EMS Operations by using one single Operations Medical Director (OMD) for its EMS agencies.
 - All Montgomery County Fire and EMS agencies shall be formally adopted and recognized by a county government ordinance.
- Strategic Planning: The Montgomery County Board of Supervisors and County Administration should adopt and implement a data-driven strategic plan for its fire and rescue services to increase performance levels and achieve lower cost of service delivery.
 - The County should develop a unified vision and mission statement for the County of Montgomery Fire/EMS System.

- The strategic plan should further create a system of measurable goals and objectives. The performance measurement's factors will strengthen the strategic plan.
- Accountability Practices: Montgomery County should establish system wide Standard Operating Guidelines in an effort to create guidance and accountability during emergency incidents. This guidance is aimed at ensuring that operations are safe and effective.
 - A Standard Operating Guidelines Committee shall be established through the Fire Rescue Commission to implement the aforementioned SOG's.

Theme 2: Communications

- Levels of Interdepartmental Communications: The County should host a strategic communication session with a professional mediator to resolve existing challenges and barriers amongst the following entities; Fire and EMS Departments, Fire Rescue Commission along with Montgomery County Administration and its Board of Supervisors.
- Standardized Records Management System: It is recommended all Fire and EMS agencies in conjunction with the Montgomery County 911 Communications System become unified under a single Records Management System (RMS). This will assist in data collection and data-driven information with Montgomery County.

Theme 3: Training

- Coordinated Training Program: Departments in collaboration with the Board of Supervisors and County Administration should work to improve the current training program to address comprehensive training needs of the entire County.
- Consideration should be given to establish a Chief of Training position to coordinate regional training courses while managing the use of the current training center.
 - Recommendation to provide a training subscription service to allow virtual and tracking of personnel training.
 - Consideration should be given to establish a firefighter and EMS training program within the county school system.
 - Consideration should be given to collaborate with local universities to establish a successful volunteer firefighter fire station live in program.

Theme 4: Budget and Administration

- Financial Accountability: Montgomery County Government should require annual or biannual financial audits or Agreed Upon Procedures (AUP) to be completed and submitted to the Financial and Management Services Division or County Administration from the fire and EMS service providers.
- Capital Improvement Plan: Develop a capital improvement plan to address facility upgrades as well as current and future construction needs. Establish a planned replacement of equipment and apparatus with an established scale and rotational basis
- Standardization and Central Purchasing: The County should develop a centralized purchasing option to establish facility and equipment standardization and reduce operational expenses.

Theme 5: Delivery of Services

- *Personnel:* Montgomery County should identify needs for additional fire and rescue personnel to meet service demands. Montgomery County could benefit from personnel in a Training Division to coordinate training needs for the Fire/EMS system. This would assist with personnel turnover due to number of students in the Montgomery County Fire/EMS system.
- *Recruitment and Retention:* Montgomery County should adopt a countywide recruitment and retention plan and consider creating a Recruitment and Retention Position.

Operations and Staffing: Montgomery County should establish minimum staffing standards for apparatus response.

Methodology

For each task of the work plan, the Study Committee identified objectives, performed specific activities, and delivered project products. The following is an overview of the study process.

Phase 1: Initiate Project

Objectives: Initiation of Study

To initiate the study, the Study Committee began by gaining a comprehensive understanding of the project's background, goals, and expectations. This was carried out by identifying in detail the specific objectives for the review, and assessing how well the work plan would accomplish the objectives. In addition, the Study Committee set out to establish a mutually agreed project work plan, timeline, deliverables, and monitoring procedures that would support the accomplishment of all project objectives. The final study initiation step consisted of collecting and reviewing existing operational data and information on agreements along with relevant policies and procedures. Many of these review materials are included in the appendix of this study.

As part of Phase I, the Study Committee met with Montgomery County leadership to establish working relationships, make logistical arrangements, and determine communication lines. During these meetings, the Study Committee discussed the objectives of the project and identified policy issues and concerns central to the study.

The meetings also allowed the Study Committee to obtain pertinent reports and background materials relevant to the review, such as current and historical staffing data, as well as a description of the current service delivery system and organization.

Based on this course of action, the Study Committee concluded this section of the study with a revised project work plan/timeline deliverable.

Phase II: Obtain Stakeholder Input

Objectives: Conduct Leadership Interviews & Capture Input from the Departments

The second phase of the study consisted of leadership interviews and department evaluations.

The expectations were as follows:

- Identify expected service levels;
- Identify opinions of department officials concerning the operations and performance of the department;
- Identify issues and concerns of officials regarding fire and rescue services;
- Identify perceived gaps in existing service levels and new priorities in mission; and,
- Identify strengths and weaknesses as perceived by departmental personnel.

Each goal was realized with the support of Montgomery County's study committee and participating locality Fire Chiefs. They assisted in finalizing the interview list and establishing a schedule that was reasonable, but more importantly convenient for the interviewees. All interviews were conducted during an allotted timeframe and a considerable amount of information was collected. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with all.

The Study Committee received descriptions of staffing and deployment responses in meeting service demands at targeted service levels. The discussions also provided a snapshot of personnel management contentions as well as concerns regarding service delivery. It is also important to note that the Study Committee visited all fire and rescue stations that were staffed throughout Montgomery County in an effort to support their research of the organizational functioning.

The deliverable for this section of the study work plan consisted of a thorough evaluation of the site visit data and the development of working themes to capture the team's assessment.

Phase III: Prepare Analyses and Develop Core Strategies

Objectives: Evaluate Current Trends and Prepare a Report

The third phase of the study work plan involved further investigation and understanding of the organizational structures, operations, limitations, achievements, and opportunities for improvement within the volunteer and career system. The activities that supported this process consisted of additional requests for information not already obtained in Phase I and II of the work plan. Data requests, made in this phase of the study, attempt to address any issues that emerged from the interviews, and further evaluate implications of the operational issues cited. Data obtained during the study process also assists the Study Committee in identifying issues influencing the current levels of service.

After receiving and critically evaluating information from the interviews and all supporting materials, the Study Committee began identifying the necessary critical action steps to achieve exceptional organizational functioning and uniform service levels throughout Montgomery County.

Each action step was selected to identify the changes in policies, facilities, apparatus, and equipment to ensure that the County would be capable of providing fire-rescue services at the desired level going forward.

The deliverables achieved in Phase III involved drafting a report that evaluated current trends in services, recommended action steps for improvement, and the assignment of responsibility.

Phase IV: Prepare Final Report

Objectives: Prepare and Present Final Report

The final phase of the study involved documenting the results of all previous tasks into a written report with critical components, such as an executive summary, methodology, background, and findings and recommendations. In the event technical corrections are needed, the Study Committee may revise the draft report, as needed, to assist in the preparation and issuance of the final report.

The deliverables for the final phase of the work plan consisted of 1) a draft report; 2) VFSB approval (via motion); and 3) the final report.

County Demographic Information

Montgomery County is located on the county seat of Christiansburg, in the state of Virginia. It is found in the Valley and Ridge area of Virginia, placing it at 2,133 feet above sea level. The County was formed in 1776³. The U.S. Census cites during the 2010 census, that Montgomery had 94,392 residents and 99,721 residents as of April 2020⁴. This shows a population increase of 5.6% over the past 10 years in the County. The median household income in 2019 was \$57,977 with a median value of owner-occupied housing from 2015 to 2019 of \$227,100. In 2019, 55.4% of the population owned a house.

The average commute time for employed residents was around 18.9 minutes. The total employed population in the County in 2019 was 45,828, with the median age of residents being 29. Interstate 81 divides the northern and southern parts of the County. Montgomery County is located about 40 miles from Roanoke and 96 miles from Lynchburg. Richmond, Virginia is 216 miles via Interstate 81 South to Interstate 64 East. Montgomery County itself covers 387.01 mi².

Blacksburg is the largest town in Montgomery County covering 19.77 miles. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, Blacksburg has a population of 44,826, experiencing a 5.2% increase since the 2010 census. It is home to the County's largest university, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. It is also home to the New River, which connects Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina, while making up the western boundary of Montgomery County. It is 320 miles long and is estimated to be up to 360 million years old.

Montgomery County has a seven-member Board of Supervisors, with four year terms. The County Administrator is appointed by the Board of Supervisors and is responsible for selecting department heads in Montgomery County. The County Administrator fulfills the role of Chief Executive Officer for Montgomery County.

³ <https://www.christiansburg.org/1224/Town-History>

⁴ University of Virginia Weldon Cooper Center, Demographics Research Group. (2020). Virginia Population Estimates. Retrieved from <https://demographics.coopercenter.org/virginia-population-estimates>

Listing of Fire and Rescue Organizations

Blacksburg Volunteer Fire Department
Blacksburg Volunteer Rescue Squad
Christiansburg Volunteer Fire Department
Christiansburg Rescue Squad
Elliston Volunteer Fire Department
Longshop-McCoy Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department
Shawsville Volunteer Rescue Squad
Riner Volunteer Fire Department
Riner Volunteer Rescue Squad
Virginia Tech Rescue Squad

Findings and Recommendations

This section provides a summary of the five working themes for this study report. The summary is based on areas of concern that were repeatedly cited in the face-to-face interviews and observed during the site visit. Following this section is an in-depth examination of each theme, to include findings and recommendations.

Theme 1: Organizational and Operational Development

- Centralized Authority for Fire and Rescue Services
- Strategic Planning
- Accountability Practices
- Emergency Medical Services

Theme 2: Communications

- Levels of Interdepartmental Communications
- Standardized Records Management System

Theme 3: Training

- Coordinated Training Program

Theme 4: Budget and Administration

- Financial Accountability
- Capital Improvement Plan
- Standardization and Central Purchasing

Theme 5: Delivery of Services

- Personnel to include Training position
- Recruitment and Retention
- Operations and Staffing

Montgomery County's fire and rescue service providers and administration should continue utilizing the national consensus standards. The standards were developed by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) with the input and support of fire and emergency services personnel, businesses, industry and other stakeholders, as guidance documents and resources to address several of the findings identified in this report.

Theme 1: Organizational and Operational Development

Montgomery County fire services consist of five (5) volunteer fire departments and six (6) rescue squads that serve the combined population of Montgomery County. Presently, all fire and rescue services are divided and funded separately, including the combined Longshop – McCoy Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department. The Blacksburg and Christiansburg Volunteer Fire Departments do maintain minimal career staffing. The division of safety services in the County makes maintaining the standardization and continuity among services, equipment, and training difficult. Departments have shown notable cooperation and through increased centralization of services will provide more consistency and fulfillment of services. Operating under an umbrella agency would allow for all volunteer EMS members to also be members of the County EMS Agency.

Establishment of clear lines of Authority between all volunteer agencies and Montgomery County, who should examine the feasibility of hiring a career Chief / Director of Fire / EMS / Rescue Services as the central position responsible for the coordination and authority for all Fire and Rescue issues within the county. Montgomery County shall establish and simplify EMS Operations by using one single Operations Medical Director (OMD). All Montgomery County Fire and EMS agencies shall be formally adopted and recognized by county government ordinance.

Strategic Plan

Montgomery County government should adopt and implement a county wide Strategic Plan for its Fire & EMS services, so it is able to improve performance levels utilizing measurable data. A unified vision and mission statement for the County of Montgomery Fire/EMS System is also recommended. The strategic plan should further create a system of measurable goals and objectives. The performance measurement's factors will strengthen the strategic plan.

Accountability Practices

Montgomery County should create countywide Standard Operating Procedures/Standard Operating Guidelines for both Fire & EMS organizations to ensure continuity and level of service across the county. It is suggested that all administrative responsibilities be fulfilled by career staff to allow volunteer staff administrators increased time to answer calls. A Standard Operating Guidelines Committee shall be established through the Fire Rescue Commission to establish the above system wide established SOG's.

Emergency Medical Service

The county should look to organize their county EMS efforts under an umbrella agency to provide a standard of service and uniformity across the county. All six EMS agencies should utilize the Standards of Excellence (SOE) assessment exercises to examine strengths, weaknesses,

opportunities and threats for their respective organizations and utilize it to further evaluate the sustainability of the County's EMS system.

Theme 2: Communications

In order to develop a cohesive Fire-Rescue System Montgomery County, the County Administrator and County Government must foster positive internal and external communication among the County's fire and rescue organizations along with members of the general public. An effective communications process between all of these entities will improve the strategic plan and clearly define expectations for the community.

It is recommended all Fire and EMS agencies in conjunction with the Montgomery County 911 Communications System become unified under a single Records Management System (RMS). This will assist in data collection and data driven information and decision making within Montgomery County.

Theme 3: Training

For the County to continue to improve upon the quality of the fire safety services provided, a set of minimum training standards should be established to hold all volunteer and career personnel to the same tactical training standard. One central training facility for Montgomery County will foster stronger relationships among staff by having all staff train together under the same standards and guidelines. Encouraging strong basic training among all personnel will not only improve performance but also increase cooperation between the County's emergency response agencies.

To improve cooperation between volunteer and career staff, it is suggested that the career staff undergo cross-training. To monitor the training of all personnel, employ a Chief of Training at the Montgomery County Fire Training Center. It is recommended to provide a county wide training subscription service to allow virtual and ease of tracking of personnel training hours. Consideration should be given to establish a firefighter and EMS training program within the county school system at the vocational school. Consideration should be given to collaborate with local universities to establish a successful volunteer firefighter fire station live in program.

One of the secrets of a successful countywide Fire-Rescue System is the full integration of all personnel, regardless of their affiliation, at the tactical level. Tactical equality recognizes all positions, from firefighter through senior fire officer and requires minimum training standards to ensure performance level tactical efficiency is achievable in Montgomery County, if there is performance-based, certifiable training program and the opportunity for all personnel to train together. The approach will facilitate the development of personal and professional relationships. Training and continuity of leadership are closely joined because solid basic training will foster strong and consistent cooperation among the County's emergency response agencies.

Coordinated Training Program

Tactical equality will facilitate the development of personal and professional relationships. Training and continuity of leadership are closely joined because solid basic training will foster strong and consistent cooperation among the county's emergency response agencies.

Theme 4: Budget and Administration

For FY2021, Montgomery County received a total of \$117,116 from the Commonwealth of Virginia's Fire Programs Fund. Montgomery County also received during 2021 approximately \$69,442.88 from the Office of Emergency Medical Services in Four-for-life. Montgomery County fire and rescue services utilize fundraising and letter drives to supplement their operating costs and capital outlays on an annual basis. The County should seek funding through private grants and foundations.

Financial Accountability

Montgomery County should implement an annual financial review of all Fire and EMS agencies with line by line budget reports for all allocated public funds. Montgomery County should prioritize proper allocation of funds to fire and rescue services. Currently, Virginia Tech Rescue receives funding from the school but requires increased financial support from the Town, County and school.

Capital Improvement Plan

The County should establish a planned replacement of all equipment and apparatus and an established scale and rotational basis. This plan shall be based on apparatus age, type, maintenance repairs, and use. It is advised that updates be considered for the Shawsville Rescue building due to the need for an updated facility.

Standardization and Central Purchasing

The County can potentially have cost-savings if there is standardization of future equipment and apparatus purchases. Standardization and Central Purchasing will not be without difficulty, but is necessary for delivering cost-effective and efficient fire and rescue services. Group purchasing is highly required in Montgomery County. If there is resistance among entities involved, it is advised for the Board of Supervisors to consider the renegotiation of any financial support for that particular entity.

Theme 5: Delivery of Services

Recruitment and Retention

Managing the recruitment and retention of fire/EMS service staff is essential to the operation of a fire department and ensures an effect department response. Volunteerism is strong in the County; the organizations are commended for their proactive efforts of recruiting volunteers. However, Montgomery County falls within the current 48% of Commonwealth localities that has felt the impact of declining numbers of men and women volunteering for fire and rescue departments.

Based on the study team's assessment, the County does not appear to lack incentives to retain current volunteers. Incentives include: Montgomery County vehicle decal reimbursement annually for volunteers; VOLSAP, life insurance, gas cards, and supplemental payments. In regards to recruitment, the study team discovered the presence of limited action-oriented recruitment assistance from the County. It is highly encouraged for Montgomery County Government to increase its efforts of helping stations recruit volunteers. With respect to retention, the study team

believes the current incentives in place is commendable. The County must provide increased leadership and participation towards the recruitment of volunteers. County Government and the Fire Rescue Commission should encourage emergency services leaders to contribute to other aspects of the community.

Recommendations:

1. Montgomery County should create a countywide recruitment and retention program.
 - a. The recruitment and retention program should take into consideration the needs of current volunteers and identify motivational factors to keep this population engaged and committed to the fire and rescue service. It is therefore encouraged for the county to improve on its current incentive based recruitment and retention program.
 - b. The county should set annual recruitment and retention goals and concentrate its efforts and resources to achieving these benchmarks. This should be included in the strategic plan.
 - c. Opportunities to partner with the county's school system to create a high school fire and EMS training should be explored.⁵
 - d. Consideration should be given to collaborate with local universities to establish a successful volunteer firefighter fire station live-in program.⁶ Consideration should also be given to the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) and their fire science program.⁷
2. The Fire Rescue Commission and County Government must identify additional fire and rescue personnel needs continuously.
 - a. Through improvement of fire and rescue incident data analysis and strategic planning, Montgomery County will be able to determine fire and rescue personnel needs, equipment needs and deployment. Utilizing RMS response data, career staffing can be allocated to areas of greater need.
3. The County Government and Fire Rescue Commission should collaboratively find low-cost methods to enhance public-education efforts such as open houses and creating Public Service Announcements (PSAs).
 - a. Improve the visibility of the Montgomery County fire and rescue services in the community.

⁵ Ref high school fire & EMS program: <https://chantillyacademy.fcps.edu/academics/firefighting>

⁶ Ref live-in program: <https://www.auburnalabama.org/public-safety/student-programs/student-firefighter/>

⁷ <https://www.nvcc.edu/courses/summarydetail.aspx?prefix=FST>

- b. Word-of-mouth recruiting is effective; therefore, each volunteer should be encouraged to inform their respective community network about Montgomery fire and rescue services' training and educational opportunities.
 - c. Increasing the virtual presence of Montgomery County fire and rescue services through updating website, Facebook, and other social media platforms to expand the reach and impact, targeting a variety of populations in the County.
- 4. In addition, Montgomery County's fire and rescue organizations should take advantage of pre-existing recruitment and retention information. Resources may be downloaded at the following locations:
 - a. Emergency Medical Services (EMS)
 - i. Recruitment & Retention
 - ii. Leadership & Management
 - b. National Volunteer Fire Council
 - c. 2004 Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission Report on Review of EMS in Virginia.

Operations and Staffing

Montgomery County fire and rescue services are open to career staffing to make up for shortages in coverage. Fire and rescue services are mostly covered by volunteer personnel in each station. All stations require more personnel to meet the service requirements of their civilian needs. Recommendation of hiring a Career / Director of Fire / EMS / Rescue Services. All stations have enough personnel to cover night hours of operation however day coverage is minimal and more personnel is required. Despite staffing shortages, Montgomery fire departments and rescue stations should be applauded for their coverage and quick response times. Shawsville, Riner, and Christiansburg Rescue Squad Departments have helped cover calls for one another, filling in day and night time gaps in coverage.

Recommendations:

- 1. Montgomery County must consider establishing minimum staffing standards for Fire / EMS response. Use "NFPA 1720⁸, Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations and Special Operations to the Public by Volunteer Fire Departments" as a useful professional guideline.
- 2. Montgomery County should explore the possibility of establishing one Countywide Fire/EMS Agency; individual stations may retain their original names.
- 3. Montgomery County should consider providing Chiefs with a salary.
 - a. Employing more career staff could create more consistency in day and night time coverage.

⁸ Ref NFPA 1720: [https://www.iafc.org/topics-and-tools/resources/resource/nfpa-1710-and-1720-instruction-aid-\(abstract\)#:~:text=Both%20NFPA%201720%20and%201710,with%20career%2C%20or%20paid%2C%20firefighters](https://www.iafc.org/topics-and-tools/resources/resource/nfpa-1710-and-1720-instruction-aid-(abstract)#:~:text=Both%20NFPA%201720%20and%201710,with%20career%2C%20or%20paid%2C%20firefighters)