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Riverside Fire Department Comprehensive Master Plan and Resource Assessment Identifies Increasing Workload and Additional Needs

Department needs 84 more firefighters and two new, several improved, stations

RIVERSIDE, Calif. – The Riverside Fire Department answers an emergency call every 11 minutes, straining the system and driving up response times. The department needs 84 more firefighters, two new fire stations and several refurbished ones to respond properly to a year-round fire season.

That's the conclusion of a new master plan and resource assessment designed to help RFD cut more than a minute off response times and raise to industry standards its ratio of firefighters to residents. The study warns that a growing imbalance between demand and capacity could overwhelm firefighters.

"We have an extraordinarily talented and very devoted department," Fire Chief Steve McKinster said. "But the trend lines are impossible to ignore, and we must take seriously the challenges we are facing."

The study, completed by AP Triton of Wyoming, calls for cutting response times from the current 7 minutes and 18 seconds to 6 minutes. Response times are critical because arriving quickly saves lives, reduces fire spread and improves medical outcomes for injured people.

AP Triton recommends hiring 84 firefighters to achieve a ratio of approximately 0.95 firefighters per 1,000 residents. The city's existing ratio of 0.69 firefighters per 1,000 residents is lower than the staffing levels of agencies in Corona, Anaheim, Los Angeles, Long Beach, Pasadena and Glendale.

RFD now has 225 firefighters, the same as seven years ago, while service demand has increased by approximately 72 percent since the last new fire station was constructed in 2007 and by approximately 26 percent since the last staffing increase in 2018.

At the same time, RFD is dealing with the impact of increased population growth and more wildfire exposure. Updated state mapping added more than 13,000 Riverside parcels into high-risk fire areas, reflecting exposure to wildfire incidents, evacuations, and multiple real-time emergency responses.

“We know that wildfire season is year-round now,” Mayor Patricia Lock Dawson said. “We no longer have significant fires a few months of the year, they now come at any time.”

AP Triton projects that annual call volume will continue to rise to 71,000 calls by 2035 and 83,000 calls by 2040. The study concluded that, without investments in staffing and resources, RFD will suffer from reduced unit availability, extended response times, and increased frequency and duration of system overload conditions.

The department already is operating in an overload condition 26 percent of the time, with critical overload occurring 2 percent of the time. As call volume grows to an estimated 71,000 calls by 2035, overload conditions are projected to increase to 40 percent, and critical overload would double to 4 percent. By 2040, at approximately 83,000 calls per year, the system is projected to be overloaded more than half the time (54 percent), with critical overload occurring 6 percent of the time.

“We owe it to our residents and business community to take a hard look at this data and determine a path forward,” Mayor Pro Tem Steven Robillard said. “We have an excellent fire department, and we need to ensure it has the personnel and tools to remain that way.”