



Highland Falls Fire Department
2023
Fire Chief's Report



Highland Falls Fire Department
2023 Year in Review

January 1, 2024

2023 was an extremely challenging year for the Highland Falls Fire Department. It was the busiest year in the 101-year history of the department. This was primarily due to the tragic storm on July 9, 2023. In the first hour of receiving calls that afternoon the department received more calls for service than we did in the first 6 months of the year. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that outside assistance with the exception of an engine crew from West Point was unable to reach us during the height of the incident. The members who responded that afternoon left their own homes to flood so they could help others at times risking their lives. While the damage was devastating the department and the outside assistance, we received from 6 other Orange County departments allowed us to pump out hundreds of homes in the first 24 hours of the incident. The department plans on honoring those involved in the rescue that day at Weyant Green including the Engine crew from the West Point Fire Department.

While the storm in July was the defining event of the year it was just one of the accomplishments of the department last year. The department responded to a much higher number of structure fires this year including 4 serious fires (2 in Highland Falls, and 2 in Fort Montgomery). The two serious fires in the Village this year were both second alarm fires requiring the response of multiple departments. In both situations the coordinated efforts of the departments resulted in keeping damage to a minimum and saving a great deal of property. In both cases the department was able to staff both engines something that was not always possible in the past few years due to staffing. Minimizing the damage by professional timely response minimized the damage to the occupant's personal belongings at the first fire and limited damage to an essential village business in the second case allowing them to open mere weeks after the fire.

The Highland Falls Fire Department like most of the American Fire Service has struggled with recruiting new members over the past few years and I identified it as the most pressing issue when I took over as chief in January. The department was able to recruit 11 new members over the course of the year a number higher than any year in recent history. While recruiting a large number is an accomplishment getting them trained especially up to the interior firefighter qualification is an equally difficult task. Three of the new members came fully trained which was a benefit and three more have completed the requisite in house training and Firefighter 1 at the Orange County Fire Training Center. We hope to continue these gains in 2024.

There are still more challenges facing the department as we enter 2024 which include qualifying more drivers, replacing our aging apparatus fleet, upgrading the current firehouse to accommodate modern fire apparatus, and training for the evolving types of fires and emergencies we face.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Erik W. Smith".

Erik W. Smith
Chief of Department



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2023 Total Responses 263

Previous 5 Years

Year	Total Responses
2022	101
2021	99
2020	121
2019	88
2018	106

Previous highest yearly response total 243 in 2005.

Of the total 260 responses in 2023 13 were for structure fires this is much higher than normal. While most structure fires are minor and confined to the area of origin (kitchen, electrical, furnace) a number of those we responded to in 2023 were serious. Here are some of the more notable fires we responded to in 2023.

Date	Description of the Incident
January 15	A Working Fire at Bear Mountain Pizza in Fort Montgomery. Highland Falls responded with a total of 14 members and assisted.
January 31	A kitchen fire in a village apartment complex resulted in a burn injury to an elderly resident.
June 3	HFFD responded mutual aid to a reported house fire in Fort Montgomery with people trapped. Luckily the majority of the fire was on the outside of the house. EMS treated one of the elderly residents for smoke inhalation.
June 23	A daytime fire in a 2-family home in the village required a second alarm. The fire that started in a bathroom on the first floor extended to the second floor. Both Highland Falls and Fort Montgomery were able to staff 2 engines each for a weekday daytime fire. A coordinated effort by Highland Falls, Fort Montgomery, and West Point saved the home and saved most of the possessions of the 2 families.
August 6	A fire in a restaurant on Main Street which extended to the second-floor apartment required 2 alarms and 4 departments to extinguish. Asst. Chief Kelly coordinated efforts of the departments to quickly extinguish the fire and minimize damage. The actions saved much of the business and allowed them to open weeks later.



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Highland Falls Fire Department Operations During the July 9 Storm.

140 Calls in the first 24 hours.

39 In the first hour. 8 were for people trapped/water rescues.

161 Calls that week.

HFFD Unit Citation

The following HFFD and WPFD members will be awarded a Unit Citation for their actions at water rescues on July 9, 2023

HFFD Members

Chief Erik Smith

Asst. Chief Patrick Kelly

Deputy Chief John Rush

Ex-Chief Kevin D'Onofrio

Firefighter Harvey Green

Firefighter Emily Green

Firefighter Clarissa Marvin

Firefighter Alexander Melo Perez

Firefighter Klarissa Sisco (first day responding to calls)

Firefighter William Solan

Firefighter Anthony Stevens

West Point Fire Department

Asst. Chief Ken Canfield

Capt Steven Calamari

Firefighter Kevin Kukkonen

Firefighter Ryan Smith

Firefighter Hannah Nyberg (former HFFD member)

Other assisting departments

Late Sunday July 9, 2023

Arlington Fire District/Lagrange Fire District (Dutchess) Swift Water Rescue Team

Departments who volunteered and came to Highland Falls on Monday July 10, 2024 to assist with pump outs.

Pine Bush Fire Department

Cronomer Valley Fire Department

New Windsor Fire Department

Good Will Fire Department

Dan Leghorn Engine Company Orange Lake Fire District

Salisbury Mills Fire Company



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Goals for 2024

In 2023 our goals in order were to

1. Recruit Members
2. Qualify additional drivers
3. Begin the process to replace our aging apparatus.

For 2024 our goals are

1. Order new fire apparatus.
2. Qualify additional drivers
3. Recruit and retain new members

Order New Fire Apparatus

As noted above this has risen to the top priority for the department. The HFFD must order a new rescue engine in the first half of 2024. The current Squad (Rescue Engine) will be 29 years old this spring. It has served the Village extremely well over that time but its reliability as a front-line mission critical emergency response vehicle can no longer be guaranteed. Last year electronic issues caused it to fail its pump test. After costly repairs it was able to pass that test. More recently repairs were made to replace 2 valves to pump outlets but a leak is still present in piping to a pump discharge that feeds fire hose. The ability to fix this leak which would require replacement of the piping from the pump to the rear of the engine will be costly if it's even possible due to the location of the pipe. There are a number of issues that make the process of replacing this rig a challenge.

1. The constraints of the firehouse. The Highland Falls Firehouse was built in the early 1950's and unfortunately was probably undersized from the beginning. The current height of the apparatus doors and ceiling inside the firehouse is a serious limitation. The most pressing need is to replace the rescue engine which must carry a great deal of equipment. Many departments have separate engine, ladder, and rescue trucks. The HFFD does not. Our rescue engine carries equipment for firefighting including what would be on a ladder truck and a rescue truck. It simply can not be a small truck so the current door height will not accommodate a modern rescue engine. For example, Fort Montgomery recently replaced their rescue and engine with a modern rescue engine. That apparatus is too tall to fit in our firehouse. The Highland Falls Volunteer Fire Department Inc. which is the volunteer firefighter's organization owns the firehouse. They are working towards that goal but until we have definite dimensions for the improvements it is impossible to place the order.
2. Delivery time. Prior to COVID-19 time from order to delivery of fire apparatus was around 1 year. Supply chain issues and demand has grown that time from 2 to 4 years. The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that municipalities recognizing the long lead times have placed orders in anticipation of the delay further contributing to demand and lengthening wait times. The demand has virtually eliminated stock and demo apparatus and most quality used apparatus is unavailable. The issue here is it will take a long time for new apparatus to arrive and if in the mean time our apparatus must be retired from failure of a pump test or other mechanical issue there will be ability to even have a loaner or purchase a



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used engine to fill in. We only have 2 engines so if one were to go down long term any issue with the other engine would render the Highland Falls Fire Department out of service.

3. Cost. The cost of new apparatus has risen sharply and continues to do so. The demand as outlined above has caused significant price increases. Engines which cost \$600,000 prior to COVID are now easily costing \$1,000,000. Further price increases are expected for the foreseeable future.

Order 2 Engines

While I believe the priority should be to order the replacement rescue engine in the next six months, I am strongly advocating ordering 2 replacement engines at the same time putting the priority on delivery of the rescue engine first. The other engine is a 2001 and it will be 23 years old this year and will be in need of replacement by the time of delivery. It makes a lot of practical sense to replace both together for a few reasons.

1. Cost. We can anticipate up to a \$100,000 discount by ordering both rigs together.
2. Operations. From an operations sense having both engines from the same manufacturer will make training drivers and firefighter easier. Both rigs will not be identical because of their different missions but for the most part we anticipate being able to order both rigs with the same chassis, pump, pump controls, and driver controls. Having both apparatus from the same manufacturer will also be a benefit when it comes to maintenance and preventative maintenance.
3. Referendum and Financing. Due to the cost of modern fire apparatus, it's anticipated that the purchase of the engines will require financing and a permissive referendum. Financing the apparatus separately will duplicate the overhead costs associated with each.

Qualify additional drivers

While this was a goal in 2023, we made little progress. It continues to be an issue and in a number of cases during the year the HFFD was unable to respond an engine to a call due to lack of a driver. In a few other instances engines were only able to respond because a chief drove. In the past fire departments were flush with members experienced in driving large vehicles and the transition to driving fire apparats was natural. Today this is no longer the case and learning to drive large fire apparatus through our tight village streets is a real challenge for many of our driver candidates. Also, to be qualified to drive our engines you must be able to operate the pumps which is a critical fire ground task. This problem has been made more difficult with the restrictions placed on the fire department limiting us to only using the hydrant at the sewer plant. One new driver was qualified and he's been able to help out tremendously. Firefighter Matthew Troy rejoined the department late in the year. He had previously been a driver but had been gone for 10 years. Matt worked very hard studying a lot on his own to master the pumping process to get requalified.

Late this year the Governor released a plan to offer training stipends to volunteer firefighters who complete specific fire training classes. As part of that plan they authorized municipalities to offer training stipends for class other than those covered in the NYS plan. I will be proposing that the Village offer a stipend to volunteers who complete the NYS Pump Operator class and subsequently complete the department's task book to be cleared as Engine Company Driver/Operator's.



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Recruit and retain new members

As stated earlier in this report the department brought in 11 new members in 2023. This has helped greatly but all too often we still have calls with less-than-optimal response from volunteers. We need to recruit, retain, and train additional members to address this issue. New members who will respond to calls around the clock are needed by the department. A new state law provides up to a \$2000 stipend paid by NYS for firefighters who complete Firefighter 1. We certainly hope that this will incentivize more members to get this training and help us recruit more. The stipend allows us to not authorize the stipend unless they are participating which we plan on requiring.

2024 Training

Training is a cornerstone in the HFFD. We train multiple times a month and hold weekly training for our new members. Most of this training is focused on firefighting skills and the other types of calls we frequently respond to. In 2024 we will be training on a couple other subjects we see as emerging threats to our department.

Swift Water Rescue

Swift Water Rescue is a highly specialized skill that requires a great deal of training and above average swimming skills. The HFFD is currently not well equipped and not trained in this discipline. In 2024 we will conduct more training on these skills with some additional equipment acquisition. The main focus will be on shore-based techniques to effect rescue.

Low Angle Rope Rescue

With the planned opening of hiking trails on the Scenic Hudson property in the village this year the department must anticipate calls for injured hikers just like area departments with hiking trails have experienced. With some additional equipment the department will train on removing injured hikers.

