

BOARD OF VISITORS SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING
National Fire Incident Reporting System Update
Nov. 2, 2021, at 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.
Zoom Meeting

Opening Remarks

Chief Kevin Quinn thanked everyone for joining this meeting. He stated that he had originally asked Mr. Richard Patrick to provide an update to the Board of Visitors subcommittee about the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS). The subcommittee consists of Dr. Mark Rivero and Chief Quinn. Chief John Butler is the chairman of the Board of Visitors, and he joined the meeting as well. Under the Federal Advisory Committee Act rules, this was an informational session only, and there would be no action taken. Mr. Jim Heeschen was asked to introduce himself.

National Fire Data Center Overview

Mr. Heeschen introduced himself to the group. He is the acting branch chief of the National Fire Data Center (NFDC). He gave a brief update on NFIRS as well as a few other things within the National Fire Program (NFP) and other respected branches. Mr. Heeschen started with a brief rundown of some ideas of what is going on within the NFP division and how they go together with NFIRS. The Prevention and Information (P&I) Branch is working on a data visualization project to help prevent civilian fatalities. They are figuring out how to integrate NFIRS data into that project.

There is a U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) podcast that is set to kick off in January 2022. They have ongoing improvements to the website and social media outreach from the P&I branch. The Emergency Response Support Branch is becoming more research oriented; they are performing an emergency medical services (EMS) needs assessment with the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). It is a study of fire and EMS response to electrical vehicle fires. They are updating the EMS medical director's handbook and web-based training program with the IAFC continuation of a long-term roadway safety operations partnership and a study of response to civil unrest by fire and EMS. There are a lot of things going on within the division. Mr. Heeschen stated that that was just some bonus information.

National Fire Incident Reporting System Update

The NFDC manages the NFIRS, which collects, analyzes, publicizes, disseminates and marks the information related to the nation's fire problem. The participation is rather striking, given that it is a voluntary system. They collect over 29 million all-hazards incidents and all types of incidents from over 24,000 fire departments. The USFA also works with 250 third-party, private-sector vendors who develop programs for the NFIRS data specification. They also work with numerous federal partners as well as nongovernmental organizations and many other organizations across the country and internationally. More information about NFIRS can be

found at <https://www.usfa.fema.gov/nfirs/>. Mr. Heeschen stated that his presentation was distributed with the meeting invitation.

In October 2020, they implemented the NFIRS modernization that is called eNFIRS. This modernized the architecture of the NFIRS and all NFIRS domains. It also resolved many security requirements, and releases are now easier to deliver but still follow the FEMA change management process. All of the system components were moved to a virtual environment. It created a single sign-on portal so that people — regardless of what their interaction with NFIRS is going to be, whether it is inputting data or developing reports — will be able to go into the system through a single portal. This modernization also enforces the 2015 NFIRS 5.0 specification. This specification has been in effect since 2015, but there were parts of it that were not enforced until this release. It has caused some interesting issues. They did give people a heads-up back in 2019 — a full year in advance — that they were going to be enforcing these data specifications and additional aspects of the specification. They are still here in 2021 trying to close out the 2020 calendar year data, and there are some issues that they are having to deal with from a number of fire departments. An example is that they are enforcing a 2-character street type abbreviation, whereas previously they had been able to put a 3-character abbreviation in. That has caused some issues of getting that data or getting those records included in the system for the 2020 data year. The new system also includes a bulk import utility, so there is a separate page now for fire departments to upload the bulk of their incidents. These are all things that were put into place in 2020, and they continue to revise it. They are at revision 5 under this modernization and are preparing for the sixth one. That is just part of their normal business process in maintaining the system.

Some things that have not changed include the upload process and the ability to update an incident at any time until it is released to the public domain, the ability for users to access “real-time” data for specific types of reports as well as form-based incident reports, and the ability for users also to access “near real-time” data from the data warehouse. The data warehouse is where they are developing custom reports so that fire departments are able to access. All fire departments and state program managers are able to request access to the data warehouse and can access all of their data within 24 hours of it being submitted, as well as all released data from any fire department across the country. The data warehouse information is refreshed nightly every 24 hours.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, they implemented the first-ever national-level special study code within the NFIRS. They included an additional question which asked whether this incident was COVID-19 related, and the reporting department could select “yes COVID-19 suspected,” “COVID-19 confirmed,” “no COVID-19 involved” or “unknown.” Since inception, they have collected more than 11.4 million incidents in which the reporting department included 1 of those 4 codes. There is additional information about this special study at <https://www.usfa.fema.gov/nfirs/covid-19-dashboard.html>. This is updated every 2 weeks.

Mr. Heeschen showed a slide with a chart with a summary of the NFIRS COVID-19 special study code that is being used. About 5% of the incidents that include the code are COVID-19 suspected or COVID-19 confirmed. COVID-19 was not a factor in 64%. Chief Butler asked if COVID-19 suspected was one of the choices. Mr. Heeschen replied that it is. Next, Mr.

Heeschen showed a slide with the breakout of the types of incidents for which they receive a code. With rescue and EMS, it parallels closely with the distribution that is seen on the overall data set, which he said is encouraging. During 2021, they had 47 states participating, over 7,500 fire departments and about 580,000 responses to confirmed or suspected incidents.

Within the NFDC, not only do they manage the NFIRS system, but they also conduct statistical analysis. The statistical reports explore aspects of the fire problems that affect Americans in their daily lives. They are primarily based on data collected through the NFIRS, but they also include other relevant data sources depending on the nature of the study. They use National Center for Health Statistics death certificate data. They combine a lot of their statistics with census denominator data. The result is quite robust and thoroughly researched and vetted. They can combine that information into a trend analysis on their website. The people at P&I — their sister branch — have done a great job of making a lot of these statistics readily available through the website. Chief Quinn asked if a lot of the information was viewed through pictorials. Mr. Heeschen replied that what is on the slides are at-a-glance material. Each of the topical reports is a deep dive and includes solid technical research that is not accessible to many people. They develop an “at-a-glance” — that is, the graphics that are seen on the slides. That is what they can distribute to the people. If someone wanted to do a deeper dive and see where the numbers came from, then they could go through the topical reports. More statistical reports are available at <https://www.usfa.fema.gov/data/statistics/reports>. Mr. Heeschen stated that the links are all on his presentation, and he did verify them all because they do change. They are embarking on an NFIRS needs assessment specifically to give them direction on how to improve the NFIRS so it can better serve the fire service and the American people. There will be more on that through the next year or 2. Mr. Heeschen stated that was all he had and asked if there were any comments or questions.

Wrap-Up

Chief Quinn stated that they were just trying to get some updated information. He appreciated that Mr. Heeschen shared the information, the slides and the links. They can certainly go and get more information as they need it. Chief Butler stated that this was a really good update. He thanked everyone who contributed to the meeting. Mr. Heeschen stated that his contact information is on the slides and that if anyone has any further comments or questions to feel free to reach out. Chief Quinn thanked everyone for setting up the meeting. Everyone thanked everyone, and the meeting was adjourned.

Attendees:

Chief Kevin Quinn
Dr. Mark Rivero
Chief John Butler
Mr. Jim Heeschen
Ms. Michelle Spielman