

Staff Report



Community Services Department

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REPORT TO: Committee of the Whole

DATE OF MEETING: December 11, 2023

SUBMITTED BY: Robert Gilmore, Fire Chief, 519-741-2200 ext. 5501

PREPARED BY: Helena Foulds, Manager, Service Improvement & Coordination, 519-741-2200 ext. 7193

WARD(S) INVOLVED: All

DATE OF REPORT: December 8, 2023

REPORT NO.: CSD-2023-549

SUBJECT: Minimum Staffing Level for Fire Suppression

RECOMMENDATION:

That staff be directed to increase the minimum fire suppression staffing level from 35 to 37 firefighters; and,

That staff conduct a suppression staffing review when Fire Station 8 becomes operational to ensure frontline emergency response vehicles are staffed and in service.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS:

- In 2012, City Council reduced fire suppression minimum staffing levels from 37 to 35.
- This reduced staffing level results in fire apparatus being taken out of service which can impact response times and depth of response.
- In 2021, City Council approved the addition of 20 new firefighters. The addition of these staff allows the KFD to maintain a staff complement of 37 firefighters, which is more appropriate for a municipality of our size.

BACKGROUND:

The minimum staffing requirement refers to the minimum number of suppression firefighters on duty at any given time. The minimum staffing level is set by City Council on the advice and recommendation of the Fire Chief.

During the 2012 budget process, City Council reduced the fire suppression staffing levels from 37 to 35 personnel. The purpose of reducing staff levels was to decrease the Fire Department's annual operating budget, which is comprised mostly of staff related costs (salaries and wages, benefits, overtime, and lieu day payout). This cost savings measure was part of a larger effort across all areas of the municipality.

In 2021, staff conducted a suppression response time and staffing review. The review indicated that Kitchener had the second lowest number of suppression firefighters per 1,000 residents compared to other Ontario municipalities and that response times to medical or fire rescue calls

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took longer than the industry standard almost half of the time (43%). In response to this review, City Council approved a plan to increase fire suppression staff by 20 new firefighters and open a new fire station in the downtown. Hiring of the 20 additional firefighters will be complete in 2024.

In 1991, the Kitchener Fire Department had a minimum staffing level of 34 firefighters and five stations. Kitchener's population has increased just over 50% since 1991; however, the KFD continues to operate with a minimum staffing level of 35 firefighters (only one more than back in 1991) and seven fire stations. The current minimum staffing level does not align with the growth of the City over that time period.

REPORT:

Implications of keeping a minimum staffing requirement of 35

Although the minimum staffing level is 35, the Fire Department requires 37 firefighters to keep all frontline trucks and apparatus in full service. When staffing levels are at 35, the aerial located at Station 1 (Fire Headquarters) is taken out of service. When this happens response times can increase because firefighters and equipment need to travel farther than they would if all units were operational or responding from their home-base station.

Benefits of increasing the minimum staffing requirement to 37

Prior to the addition of 20 new suppression staff (approved in 2021), the Fire Department frequently operated with 35 firefighters and incurred high overtime expenses. As of November 2023, 16 out of 20 suppression staff have been hired and the KFD is operating at a minimum of 37 staff with reduced overtime costs.

The Fire Chief recommends restoring the minimum staffing level to 37 to ensure all fire emergency apparatus and fire stations are operational. A minimum staff level of 37 ensures the KFD is fully equipped to keep the community safe.

In addition to the staffing level increase, a review should be conducted to determine the appropriate minimum staffing level that will be needed once Station 8 becomes operational to ensure all emergency vehicles are staffed and in service.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

This report supports the delivery of core services.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

City Council approved 20 additional firefighters in 2021. 16 out of 20 have been hired and the remaining four firefighters will be hired in 2024. No additional funding is required to make this service improvement.

Capital Budget – The recommendation has no impact on the Capital Budget.

APPROVED BY: Michael May, DCAO & General Manager, Community Services