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The Impact of Compliance with a Certified Accreditation Standard for Municipal Fire

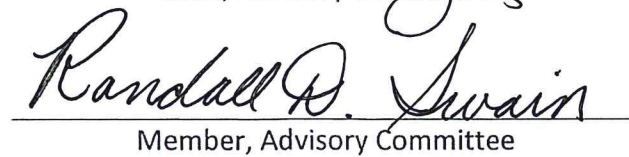
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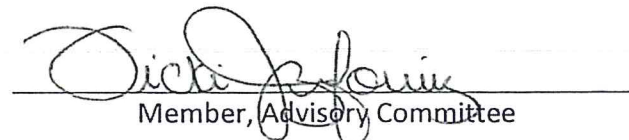
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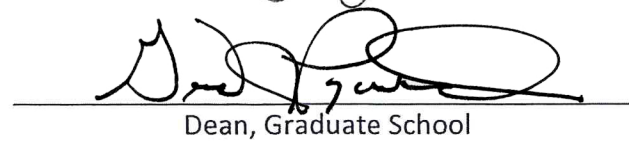
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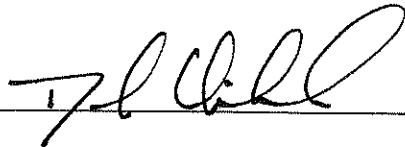
  
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "T. L. Hill", written over a horizontal line.

Date

11/15/16

The Impact of Compliance with a Certified Accreditation Standard for Municipal Fire  
Departments

By

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2007

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Eastern Kentucky University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
MASTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION  
December, 2016

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family  
for their unwavering support.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all of those who have played a role, however big or small, in my pursuit of obtaining my Master of Public Administration degree.

## ABSTRACT

This report was conducted to assist public administrators serving in municipal fire departments in making the complex decision to pursue agency accreditation. The research finds that very little information is available to administrators that details the impacts accreditation has on a municipal fire department. The research conducted in this report aims to fill that gap.

Literature was reviewed that focused on the emergence of accreditation within the fire service. Then, an exploratory qualitative research method was utilized for the framework of this research, and interviews were arranged with members of various fire departments possessing unique relationships and experience with the accreditation process. Their responses were analyzed to reveal themes and patterns that would clarify the impacts of accreditation on municipal fire departments. The results from the research confirmed that accreditation does have various complex impacts on municipal fire departments.



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## Chapter I

### Introduction

In the effort to boost performance, increase credibility, and promote accountability, organizations adopt various strategies aimed towards the achievement of these goals. One popular strategy which effectively achieves all of these goals under one streamlined process is the pursuit of accreditation. Accreditation is the process in which an organization becomes certified for maintaining compliance with a predetermined set of standards and competencies. This makes accreditation a desirable achievement, as it not only helps to improve internal operations, but also helps provide a positive boost to external perceptions of the organization.

While accrediting bodies exist that provide certifications to all types of individuals, agencies, and organizations, the accreditation process is increasingly popular with public organizations. One of the major benefits of accreditation is the implication that an accredited agency has satisfied a certain level of competency, making it a useful tool for public organizations to use in satisfying the public's expectations. Additionally, the general public is often unaware of the various demands and requirements placed on specific public organizations. For these organizations, the accreditation process can be a useful tool in garnering public trust and support.

One such organization that has recently begun to benefit from the accreditation process is the traditional municipal fire department. Over the past several decades, fire departments across the country have been handed more responsibilities despite being

granted limited resources – a common problem faced by many public organizations. To help plead their case for more public support, many fire departments have elected to participate in the accreditation process.

Accreditation for fire departments is still a relatively new process. In 1986, the International Association of Fire Chiefs met with the International City/County Management Association to discuss the growing need to create a standard that provided for a continuous growth and development of fire departments and other emergency services. After ten years of development, the Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI) was formed to grant accreditation to fire departments, emergency service agencies, and individuals who maintained compliance with the Commission's adopted standard.

A fire department's participation in the accreditation process occurs voluntarily – meaning accreditation is not required for a fire department to operate. Departments that elect to participate in the accreditation process enjoy numerous benefits, ranging from an international network of peer support to access a comprehensive, proven source of industry best-practices. Given the many benefits included in the accreditation process, it may seem like a foregone conclusion that the majority of fire departments would choose to participate in this process. However, as of August 2016, only 234 Fire/Rescue agencies have attained CFAI accreditation. To put that number into perspective, there are almost 30,000 operating fire departments in the United States alone.

Even though the accreditation process is still relatively new for fire departments and other emergency service-oriented agencies, these numbers suggest that fire departments may have concerns about the value of the accreditation process.

Currently, there is very little research regarding the specific positive and negative impacts that participation in the accreditation process has on municipal fire departments. This lack of research makes it difficult to conclude whether or not agency accreditation is a worthwhile endeavor that truly serves to better the organization, or a complex, capital-intensive administrative task that siphons away from the already limited resources of a municipal fire department.

In response to this lack of available research, this paper aims to fill the gap of information regarding the impact of voluntary compliance with a certified accreditation standard for municipal fire departments. These departments are faced with the complex task of deciding whether the benefits of accreditation are worth the allocation of a considerable portion of their financial and personnel resources. It is the hope of the author that municipal fire departments will be aided in this task by the research provided within this paper.

While the research conducted is limited in scope to municipal fire departments, the implications should still be significant to administrators spanning various other public organizations. As mentioned previously, the allocation of limited resources is a problem shared almost universally amongst public administrators. Any organization that must weigh the benefits of accreditation against the cost of precious or otherwise-limited resources could benefit from this research.

## Chapter II

### Literature Review

Accreditation as it applies to municipal fire departments is a relatively new process. Currently, there is a dearth of substantive information regarding its application in these organizations. For those interested in studying the impacts of fire department accreditation, there simply isn't much information to review. In this chapter of the report, a few examples of the information regarding the impacts of fire department accreditation is provided. This information will help reveal the current perception of the CFAI accreditation process amongst fire department administrators. Additionally, this information highlights the limited availability of studies focused on the effects of accreditation, which further justifies a need for the research presented later in this report.

The first section of this chapter will establish a need for continued research in the field of fire department accreditation. The second section is provided to increase the reader's perspective regarding the potential impacts of accreditation. In order to properly understand the implications that accreditation may have on a municipal fire department, it is useful to look to other similar organizations. This not only gives the reader perspective of accreditation's potential impacts, but also highlights the deficiencies of the current state of research dedicated to fire department accreditation. In this situation it is particularly applicable to compile research on similarly-minded organizations that share familiar functions with municipal fire departments. This

information will be reviewed with a focus on the various impacts resultant from an organization's pursuit of accreditation, specifically on the positive and negative perceptions that those impacts cause.

In total, this chapter is provided to augment the research conducted later within this report. Reviewing a sample of the current state of available literature regarding fire department accreditation should highlight the need for additional, focused research. Further, by examining literature that specifically analyzes accreditation's impact on other public organizations, it empowers the reader to make logical comparisons and perhaps show how fire departments might reasonably be affected by a similar process. Ultimately, reviewing this information should aid the reader in processing the research provided throughout this report.

### **A Sampling of the Available Research of Accreditation in Municipal Fire Departments**

A review of various sources yields very few results regarding the impacts of accreditation on a fire department. The information that does exist varies greatly; several fire service-related periodicals contain articles that summarize the accreditation process. Additionally, a few articles were reviewed that explored certain attitudes and stigmas attached to the pursuit of accreditation. While these articles do not specifically focus on the impacts of accreditation, their inclusion within this review serves two purposes. Primarily, these articles provide a foundation of knowledge regarding accreditation's place in municipal fire departments. In addition, these articles underscore the lack of information that explores anything more than the most superficial impacts brought about by accreditation.

*In Fire Department Accreditation: A New Way of Evaluating Efficiency and Effectiveness of Fire Departments*, Gary West and Dennis Wolf created a brief publication for the University of Tennessee in the service of the Municipal Technical Advisory Service program (2006). Their report is intended to serve as a summary of the accreditation process. They state that accreditation is useful because it provides a tool that fire departments can use to measure performance and efficiency standards (2006, p. 1). After going into more detail on fire department accreditation's brief history, the authors explore several reasons as to why department administrators might consider pursuing the accreditation process.

The authors cite several reasons as to why fire department administrators would choose to gain agency accreditation. Among these reasons include the ability to help deal with change, the provision of a means of organizational evaluation, and accreditation's unique ability to help raise departmental professionalism as a whole (West & Wolf, 2006, p. 2). Additionally, accreditation is viewed as an effective self-assessment tool that helps determine organizational efficiency and the ability to set and achieve goals. For administrators that feel these benefits match up with their departments' needs, their next step is to actively begin the accreditation process.

West and Wolf describe the four major steps of the accreditation process, "the accreditation process includes four major levels: registered agency, applicant agency, accreditation candidate, and accredited department. These levels allow a department to move through the CFAI process to achieve accreditation" (2006, p. 4). The authors then proceed to list a timeframe and cost summary of the process. In total, the process could

last up to three years and costs could initially exceed \$10,000 (p. 4). The process concludes with a team of peer assessors visiting the department and making a final recommendation for the award of accreditation or in some cases, for additional work to be performed. If the team recommends accreditation status, then that department becomes accredited, which last for five years. During those five years, departments must remain compliant with all accreditation standards. After five years, the department must resubmit revised versions of the self-assessment and must once again undergo the peer assessment review.

The publication by West and Wolf is included in this report for several reasons. Primarily, it effectively synthesizes the major points of the accreditation process. The authors also endorse the accreditation process for its effectiveness in providing organizational benefits to fire departments. In addition, their publication provides additional interest to this report because it provides insight to the level of awareness regarding fire department accreditation; this article was published 20 years after the CFAI initiated fire department accreditation efforts, but the authors still felt the need to discuss the benefits broadly, rather than touch on any specific major impacts provided by accreditation. This suggests that a systemic awareness of the process is still relatively low. Also, the lack of a substantial analysis of the impacts of fire department accreditation within this article is a theme that will be observed throughout the other literature regarding the process.

In similar articles, both written for *Fire Engineering* but published several years apart, William R. Purcell (2005) and Michael J. Barakey (2012) discuss how accreditation



not only benefits individual departments, but also fire service as a whole. Both articles explore the benefits of the accreditation process, but similarly to the previously reviewed article they tend to focus on the more superficial aspects of accreditation. Additionally, their inclusion in this report highlights the lack of growth in research conducted on fire department accreditation over the years.

For example, Barakey described the accreditation process as being helpful because it provides the department with a self-assessment process, a community risk analysis, and a strategic plan (Barakey, 2012, p. 163). None of this information builds on the article published seven years earlier, where Purcell pointed to all of the same qualities. While these benefits are doubtlessly helpful to a municipal fire department, there is little substantive information provided by either article to support these claims, nor any information on how these impact other areas of the organization. For instance, Barakey mentions that accreditation requires significant resources to be allocated towards a large administrative task, but makes no mention on how this affects operational concerns of the department.

While on the subject of resource allocation, Barakey's article makes mention that accreditation could cost a department up to \$30,000 every five years (2012, p. 164). In the six years between Wolf and West's study and the publication of this article, the cost of agency accreditation was observed to triple. While Barakey did discuss cost being an important factor in accreditation, there was no mention of the tendency of that cost to increase dramatically over time.

While the scope of these articles was not intended to focus on providing detailed insights into the impacts of accreditation, that does not lessen the need for information on this subject to be made available to fire department administrators. The literature provided within this section represents an accurate portrayal of the total research available on this specific area of study. Because of the lack of information focused on gathering specific impacts of accreditation's impact on municipal fire departments, additional research conducted on similar organizations is gathered and reviewed in the next section.

### **Impacts of Accreditation on Similar Organizations**

As stated in the introduction of this chapter and again in the previous section, there isn't much reliable research to review related to fire department accreditation. To temporarily fill that gap in research, it is useful to look to other similar organizations and review how accreditation has impacted elements of their existence. To observe these impacts, two specific industries were chosen: law enforcement and healthcare. These were selected because they both share similar organizational concerns with fire departments; for example, both of these types of agencies are heavily rooted in providing emergency response, are public-service oriented, and function most effectively when they have the support of the general public.

#### **Law Enforcement and Accreditation**

Several studies were reviewed for this section, with the intent that this information would facilitate a more clearly realized idea of how accreditation could potentially shape a municipal fire department. These studies were devoted to

researching the impacts of accreditation on law enforcement organizations. The results from these studies provided a variety of both expected and surprising consequences of accreditation. This section will identify several of the more prevalent impacts explored in these studies. However, it should be noted that, though the following examples represent many of the most commonly observed influences and effects of law enforcement accreditation, this list is in no way meant to represent a conclusive list of accreditation-related impacts. Instead, this list aims to break down functions of law enforcement agencies that are also common components of municipal fire departments. To facilitate this comparison, two specific elements shared by law enforcement agencies and fire departments were examined for potential similarities to be drawn. Through a lens that focuses on agency operation and administration, information regarding accreditation's impacts was gathered.

In terms of operations, there were several notable impacts on law enforcement agencies brought about by accreditation. For instance, one study showed that law enforcement agencies who pursued accreditation were significantly more likely to receive substantially more field training than nonaccredited departments (McCabe & Fajardo, 2001, p. 130). However, according to the same study, accredited departments were found to participate in roughly the same amount of classroom hours as their nonaccredited counterparts, which are usually tied into state-mandated requirements (McCabe & Fajardo, 2001). Initially, it may seem as though the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA) favors one type of training over another. However, most states only require law enforcement agencies to complete a

minimum amount of classroom training per year. Field training, while encouraged, is often not required to maintain certifications. This suggests that accreditation is a useful tool in keeping agencies up to date with various methods of training, and is uniquely tailored to augment the already established training requirements for law enforcement agencies. Based on this assumption, it's reasonable to conclude that accreditation plays a role in elevating the training requirement levels of an agency. By extension, the operational capacity of the accredited law enforcement agency is improved.

Somewhat counter to the above conclusion, the McCabe and Fajardo (2011) study revealed that despite the improvements provided to training, employees of accredited departments are no more likely to promote or practice life-safety techniques while at work (p. 130). For instance, the results showed that members of accredited fire departments were no more likely to wear their bulletproof vests than employees at nonaccredited agencies. The authors of the study made no assumption as to why these agencies were no more likely to put into practice the life-safety techniques they often train on, but from this information one assumption to be made is that no meaningful improvement stems from accreditation's impact on training.

In terms of impacting administrative functions, the research suggests that law enforcement agencies that elect to undergo the accreditation process experience several impacts related to their budgeting process. A study conducted by Adam Hughes and Manuel P. Teodoro and appearing in *State and Local Government Review* focused on accreditation's impacts to attitude and professionalism in law enforcement organizations (2012). Additionally, their research revealed several interesting insights as

to how the budgeting function of law enforcement agencies were affected by accreditation. Their study reveals that administrators tasked with budgeting concerns perceive no benefit to any major budgeting function of their department resultant from accreditation (Hughes & Teodoro, 2012, p. 43). Similarly, in the McCabe and Fajardo study, the results showed that accredited agencies had similar budgets to nonaccredited agencies of similar demographics (McCabe & Fajardo, 2001, p. 130). Further, their study provided no evidence that accreditation resulted in a salary increase for employees, despite the additional workload it places on employees.

While these articles provide evidence that accreditation does not have any significant impact on the bottom line of agencies who opt-in to the process, they do provide some evidence that accreditation may make it easier to approve specific, hard-to-budget-for items and programs. The McCabe and Fajardo article references a previous study that found accredited agencies were more likely to have special units devoted to drug law enforcement and child abuse prevention (p. 130). While this doesn't negate the findings that accreditation plays little to no role in assisting or increasing an agency's budget, it does suggest that it could be a useful tool in terms of justifying the procurement of items or programs that were previously considered extraneous. In addition to affecting agency administration, this discovery also has implications on the operational impact to the agency.

Another perceived impact to agency administration comes from accreditation's ability to boost the overall sense of professionalism of the department. The research of McCabe & Fajardo reveals somewhat conflicting reports in terms of the impacts of

accreditation on professionalism. They state that CALEA was created in order to help assist in the professionalization of local law enforcement agencies (McCabe & Fajardo, 2001, p. 130). Therefore, it could reasonably be assumed that participation in the process should boost agency professionalism. However, some of the metrics they used to gauge organizational professionalism reveal contradictory results. For instance, CALEA accreditation promotes diversity as a means to improve professionalism. Despite this push towards diversity, the research showed that CALEA-accredited departments are no more likely than nonaccredited departments to actively recruit and retain a diverse workforce (McCabe & Fajardo, 2001, p. 130). Further, the internal demographics of accredited departments often stray considerably from the communities they protect, which is also counter to CALEA's stated objectives (McCabe & Fajardo, 2001).

From the literature gathered on the impacts of accreditation on law enforcement agencies, several conclusions can be made. First, the findings in the literature support the idea that accreditation does impact several key aspects of agency performance. Second, despite the fact that the accreditation process was created to positively impact an agency, the impacts from accreditation do not always produce the desired intent. Several of the reviewed outcomes of agency accreditation are considered to have no impact, and in some cases, agency accreditation was revealed to yield negative impacts.

### **Healthcare and Accreditation**

Healthcare agencies were also reviewed in order to learn from their experiences with accreditation. The same factors used to shape the review of law enforcement

agencies in the previous section were also used in this section. Specifically, several sources that analyzed the impacts of accreditation on healthcare organizations were reviewed based on how they affected an agency's operational and administrative concerns.

Accreditation had several notable impacts on healthcare agencies' administrative functions. For instance, in a study conducted by Virginia Mumford and several other authors, it was determined that accreditation played a significant role in the budgeting procedures of the agency (Mumford, Forde, Greenfield, Reece, & Braithwaite, 2013, p. 618). The authors list several factors of accreditation that impacted the budgeting process, among them were thorough assessments of the process and the provision of quality assurance programs (p. 618). While the authors did state that accreditation does impact the budgeting process, they also note that many organizations already practice the procedures espoused by accreditation. This suggests that accreditation may only produce significant impacts in lesser-developed organizations. It is also interesting to note that the authors express the difficulty in studying the extent that these impacts have on their agency, citing that inherent differences between even the most similar organizations cause a difficulty in conducting accurate comparisons (p. 618).

Another study published in the *International Journal for Quality in Healthcare* conducted a meta-analysis of data already gathered on accreditation's impacts on healthcare organizations. From the analysis, research concluded that administrative aspects of healthcare organizations were positively impacted by providing strategy and

quality assurance, increasing organization, and enabling better decision-making (Greenfield & Braithwaite, 2008, pp. 173-175). Critiques of accreditation's impact on administrative functions included compulsory involvement in a semi-politicized process and the fairly high costs associated with accreditation (Greenfield & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 175). It is important to note that many of these findings are echoed by the impacts noted in law enforcement, and can also be noted to some degree in the limited research available on fire department accreditation.

The literature reviewed on healthcare accreditation also contained insight on the impacts to operational concerns. Once again, similarly to law enforcement accreditation, the information revealed that accreditation had relatively few impacts on operational focuses of health care organizations. The Mumford article states that no relationship was found between accreditation and improved patient safety or quality of care (Mumford, Forde, Greenfield, Reece, & Braithwaite, 2013). This suggests that accreditation is largely focused on improving administrative function within an agency, and has limited impact in terms of affecting operations positively.

The meta-analysis conducted by Greenfield and Braithwaite echoes Mumford's finding of no relationship; the most highly-criticized aspect of healthcare accreditation was found to be the minimal amount of value added to patient care – sentiment that persisted throughout the studies reviewed (2008, p. 175). The only positive effect noted by the authors that directly affected operational concerns was an agency-wide promotion of safety (p. 175). Again it seems that accreditation plays a minimal role in impacting the operational capacity of an organization.



It is also worth noting that the study conducted by Mumford et al. confirmed a gap existed in literature that devoted to studying the impacts of healthcare accreditation (2013, p. 618). As there is a comparative wealth of information available on that subject versus the information available concerning the implications of fire department accreditation, the need for further research is dually confirmed.

## Chapter III

### Research

The research presented in this report was prompted by the lack of information that adequately reviewed the consequences brought about by the pursuit of accreditation, specifically as it relates to municipal fire departments. The literature reviewed in the previous section serves as an effective summary of the type of information available to administrators considering undertaking the fire department accreditation process. While there are several sources available which discuss fire department accreditation, they are primarily focused on examining the goals and objectives that the CFAI sets out to achieve. There is very little information available that explores the meaningful impacts accreditation has on a municipal fire department.

#### **Research Design**

This report aims to augment the current lack of information regarding accreditation's impact on municipal fire departments. An exploratory qualitative research method was used to gather information for this report. This approach offered several benefits that are uniquely suited to this report.

The exploratory nature of this report gives freedom to review research conducted on accreditation's effects on various public organizations, and enables comparisons to be made between similar aspects of operation between these organizations and municipal fire departments. Further, exploratory research lends itself

to aiding in future research; the information provided within this report could potentially be of assistance in guiding additional research on this subject.

The qualitative design of the research conducted within this report was chosen for several reasons. Primarily, a qualitative approach allowed for a somewhat broad look to be taken at the issues being researched. Because very little research has been conducted on the impacts of accreditation on municipal fire departments, a qualitative methodology allows for a 'big picture' look at these impacts. Again, this approach opens up the door for more focused research to be conducted in the future.

## **Methodology**

The data collected for this report was produced from a series of interviews with individuals connected to the accreditation efforts of various municipal fire departments across the United States. Interviews were semi-structured, with interviewees asked a series of predetermined, branching questions.

The interviewees were selected from departments fitting one of three different categories: departments that have considered but declined to participate in the accreditation process; departments that are currently in some stage of preparation for becoming accredited; and departments that are currently accredited.

The questions were designed to branch-off based on which of the above-described categories the interviewee's department occupied. This design was effective in producing responses that revealed unique impacts of each department's relationship with the accreditation process. A copy of these questions is included in the appendix of this report.

The interviews were conducted either in person or via telephone. Interviews were kept structured and brief, with most lasting less than twenty minutes. In total, eight interviewees spanning various ranks of their respective fire departments were selected. Additionally, only candidates with a qualified level of familiarity with the accreditation process were selected. At the end of the interview, the interviewee was asked to share any additional thoughts or feelings regarding the impacts of accreditation that had not been previously addressed.

To maintain compliance with research standards, the identity of the interviewees will be kept private throughout this report. Interviewees will be referred to by their rank only. This provision of privacy was given to all interviewees, and will remain throughout the report. In some instances when useful, additional information such as the accreditation status or size of the department may also be provided.

The responses of interviewees were transcribed by hand. Additional information was also collected, including personal observations made regarding the interviewee's body language, perceived intonations, etc. This information was taken only to supplement the interviewee's responses.

After all scheduled interviews were completed, the data was collected and a thorough analysis was conducted. This analysis was performed to detect patterns, themes, and relationships among the collected responses. The results from this analysis can be found in the Chapter IV of this report.

## **Limitations**

The methods used in compiling this report should be sufficient in providing an exploratory look into the impacts of accreditation on municipal fire departments. However, as with any research, certain limitations affected the information presented within this report.

Primarily, it would have been beneficial, particularly for an exploratory review, to interview several more individuals and draw from their observations of accreditation's impact on their respective departments. However, the timeframe and resources available to the author of this report allowed only for the research provided.

Additionally, the nature of this report did not allow for collaboration. Conducting this report with additional researchers would have provided several benefits. It would allowed for a greater reduction in bias, as the interviews would have been reviewed by multiple analysts. Multiple researchers would have also played a large role in expanding the scope of research. Interviews were arranged from the limited network of the author; additional researchers would have doubtlessly increased this report's penetration into farther-reaching areas.

## Chapter IV

### Results

Described in detail in the previous chapter, a series of interviews was conducted in an effort to yield applicable data that reveals specific impacts on municipal fire departments resultant from compliance with the accreditation process. The research was conducted following the methodology described in the previous chapter. After the interviews were completed, a detailed analysis of the collected data was initiated. This analysis was done in the service of detecting patterns, relationships, and themes that revealed specific impacts accreditation may potentially have on a municipal fire department.

This chapter contains the results from the analysis of data collected from the interviews. This information will be presented in two sections: Impacts to Operations; and, Impacts to Administration. Further, each section will begin in consideration of potential positive impacts, and conclude with potential negative impacts.

#### **Impacts to Operations**

##### **Positive Impacts to Operations**

From the sample of interviews conducted in this research, relatively few beneficial impacts to a municipal fire department's operations were observed. Among the most commonly cited positive impacts to operational aspects of a fire department stemming from accreditation include a focus on standard operating procedures (SOPs)

and standard operating guidelines (SOGs), emphasis on defining roles and responsibilities, and maintaining a defined performance standard.

Perhaps the most prevalent positively-viewed impact on fire department operations was CFAI's focus on providing detailed standard operating procedures and/or guidelines. Despite there being relatively few positive impacts to operations noted in this analysis, it is interesting that CFAI's focus on SOPs and SOGs was among the most specifically cited impacts (positive or negative) overall. Over half of the interviewees questioned for this report noted CFAI's focus on the department's need to provide policies and procedures. A fire captain from an accredited metropolitan department stated that, "[accreditation] made us really put some work into how we delivered official orders to our employees." Another employee, a firefighter from a mid-sized suburban department considering accreditation, cited SOPs as one of only major perks he and his coworkers perceived to be provided by accreditation.

The only other major positive impact revealed in the analysis is accreditation's goal of defining roles and responsibilities among the organization. This finding was somewhat surprising; it would seem that most well-established organizations would have handled this relatively simple task well in advance of a more advanced process like accreditation. However, three individuals mentioned accreditation's impact in clarifying, or potentially clarifying, an employee's role and responsibilities. Individuals from each fire department category (considered but opted out of accreditation, still considering accreditation, or currently accredited) cited this as a major impact, suggesting that this is a more widely-shared concern than perhaps initially realized.

## **Negative Impacts to Operations**

Among the most common responses observed regarding accreditation's impact on fire department operations is the perception that it has relatively small impact on operations at all. Several of the lower ranking members interviewed shared a skeptical view that accreditation was perhaps more of a trophy than it was any real measurement of operational ability. Removing the skepticism from these comments, the theme that accreditation does little to impact the operations of a fire department is a theme that persisted in several other interviews. Several more senior members of municipal fire departments cited a similar sentiment that accreditation is predominantly an administrative tool.

When analyzing the interviews for negative impacts stemming from fire department accreditation, it was also noted that the process can be quite resource-intensive. Not only is the process somewhat costly, it also requires a considerable amount of resources in terms of personnel. Two of the most senior fire department employees interviewed for this report cited this issue. One fire chief of a mid-sized suburban department considering accreditation stated, "It's a goal of ours, but we have to consider that it would take a considerable hit to our manpower to get there." The chief later stated that he would like to devote at least one full-time employee to accreditation compliance, but his staffing level wasn't able to accommodate that at the time.



## **Impacts to Administration**

### **Positive Impacts to Administration**

As stated in the previous section, a widely held belief among interviewees was observed that accreditation exists largely as an administrative tool. These patterns were again noticed when the analysis focused on administrative impacts. Based on the analysis of the data collected for this report, fire department administration was perceived to receive the most positive impacts resultant from accreditation. Various aspects of agency administration were believed to be positively impacted by departments that choose accreditation.

The most prominent sentiment regarding accreditation's positive impact on the administrative functions of a municipal fire department were pointed towards its assistance in organization. Among interviewees from accredited departments as well as departments actively considering accreditation, strong feelings were noted that indicated one of accreditation's most desirable assets was its ability to aid in clarifying and organizing administrative tasks.

Another widely held belief was that accreditation provided a sort of 'cheat-sheet' to its practitioners. This was alluded to in several interviews. Perhaps this perception stems from the detailed self-assessment required by the CFAI. To paraphrase an interviewee, the self-assessment provided in accreditation is a comprehensive list of all the responsibilities an effective fire department should accomplish.

It's also valuable to note that despite several of the interviewees discussing accreditation negatively in terms of affecting operational capabilities of the department, on several occasions, it led to positive discussions of its utility in regards to administration. A nearly universal sentiment was shared by all interviewees that accreditation played a role in increasing efficiency and productivity in administrative concerns.

### **Negative Impacts to Administration**

Even though there was almost universal praise for accreditation's impact on administrative functions, a few concerns existed that could potentially impact a fire department negatively. Most noticeably, the majority of interviewees cited cost as being a severe drawback to the pursuit of accreditation. Of particular note, members of departments that had considered accreditation but decided not to pursue the process cited cost as one of the primary factors in their decision to remain nonaccredited.

Another interesting observation was noted from interviewees from departments that were accredited. These individuals noted that accreditation was a rigorous and tiring process. One fire captain from an accredited department shared that the initial process of receiving accreditation difficult was just the beginning; insuring that the department maintains compliance and remains eligible for reaccreditation is perhaps even more stressful than the original process.

## Chapter V

### Discussion

This report was conducted to be of service not only to members of municipal fire departments, but to all public administrators actively considering how accreditation and its pursuit may potentially affect their organization. While the research directly focused on learning from the experience of individuals familiar with fire department accreditation, their experiences should be useful to various other public organizations.

An analysis of their findings suggests that accreditation impacts various aspects of municipal fire departments in complex ways; the implications stemming from these impacts affect different elements of the organization positively and negatively. Among the impacts noted that positively impact departments were an ability to help organize administrative tasks, to promote a comprehensive system of standing orders and departmental policy, and to provide access to a network of peers dedicated to bettering their departments. Several negative impacts were also noted, including accreditation's costliness, both financially and in terms of personnel resources. Accreditation was also revealed to be perceived as a rigorous, stressful process that can bring about a strain on all members of the department.

These results from the interviews conducted for this report were not unexpected; accreditation, to the extent that it is known by members of municipal fire departments, is a polarizing process that is usually met with some degree of skepticism. In that respect, it was interesting to note the degree of positivity expressed for

accreditations role in aiding agency administration. Perhaps the accreditation model is truly effective at organizing and improving the administrative functions of a fire department, but it is worth noting that many administrators of municipal fire departments have been promoted to their position through the ranks. Many may not possess a formal education, and accreditation may be viewed so positively as an administrative tool because it provides a proven path to successful agency administration.

The lack of positive impacts on fire department operations observed in the analysis was also somewhat surprising. Again, amongst firefighters, accreditation is a polarizing endeavor. Perhaps the small sample size of interviewees contributed to an overall feeling that accreditation has relatively little impact over the operations of a municipal fire department. Otherwise, the results suggest accreditation has relatively low impact on fire department operations

The previously listed findings, as well as others observed within this report, all lend themselves well to further study. Of particular interest would be a study that aimed to provide some frame of measurement to the impacts observed within this report. The exploratory qualitative method that provided the conceptual framework for this report was used effectively to reveal that accreditation has multiple, definable impacts on municipal fire departments that occur consistently throughout departments. However, this approach was limited in that it did not allow for the measurement of the severity of these impacts.

While the framework used for this report has its inherent limitations, the research yielded by this report was sufficient to conclude that compliance with an accreditation standard does in fact impact a municipal fire department. Further, these impacts affect the department in a complex manner; each specific division of the department is affected uniquely. The difficulty in forecasting precisely how the accreditation process will impact a specific organization makes the decision to pursue accreditation difficult for fire department administrators. This report was conducted to make that decision easier for administrators faced with that decision, but further research must continue in order to truly solve the problem.

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APPENDIX A:  
Questions Script

## Questions Script

What are the impacts (or perceived impacts) of accreditation on municipal fire departments?

Everyone:

Has your department elected to participate in the accreditation process? Why or why not?

For departments that have chosen accreditation:

- Do you feel accreditation has impacted your organization positively or negatively? How?
- Name some anticipated outcomes your department had prior to pursuit of accreditation. Have those outcomes been achieved?
- Have there been any unforeseen outcomes/impacts from the accreditation process? Please explain

For departments that have *deliberately* chosen *not* to pursue accreditation:

- You have already explained why you did not choose accreditation. Do you think your organization made the correct choice? Why or why not?
- Would you ever reconsider choosing accreditation or a similar model for accountability?
- Were there any unforeseen impacts from deliberately *not* choosing to pursue accreditation?

For all:

- Do you have any addition feelings regarding the impacts of accreditation that you'd like to share?



APPENDIX B:  
List of Interviewees

# List of Interviewees

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Accredited Status*</b>	<b>Size of Department **</b>	<b>Type of Department</b>
<b>Chief</b>	2	Mid-size	Suburban
<b>Chief</b>	1	Large	Mixed
<b>Chief</b>	3	Small	Suburban
<b>Captain</b>	3	Large	Metropolitan
<b>Training Captain</b>	2	Mid-size	Suburban
<b>Public Information Officer</b>	1	Small	Rural
<b>Firefighter</b>	2	Mid-size	Suburban
<b>Firefighter</b>	2	Mid-size	Suburban

\* Accredited Status:

1. Considered, but decided against pursuing accreditation
2. Actively considering accreditation
3. Accredited

\*\*Size of Department

- Small: .....Fewer than 75 full-time employees  
 Mid-size: .....75-200 full-time employees  
 Large: .....More than 200 full-time employees

The *Accredited Status* and *Size of Department* descriptors used within this report were for the reader's benefit only. They do not reflect any recognized standard.