



Annual Chief's Letter



Hello and thank you for attending the **2024-2025 Annual Meeting** of the Harmony Fire District.

Quote from Malcolm S. Forbes –

“The biggest mistake people make in life is NOT making a living at doing what they most enjoy.”

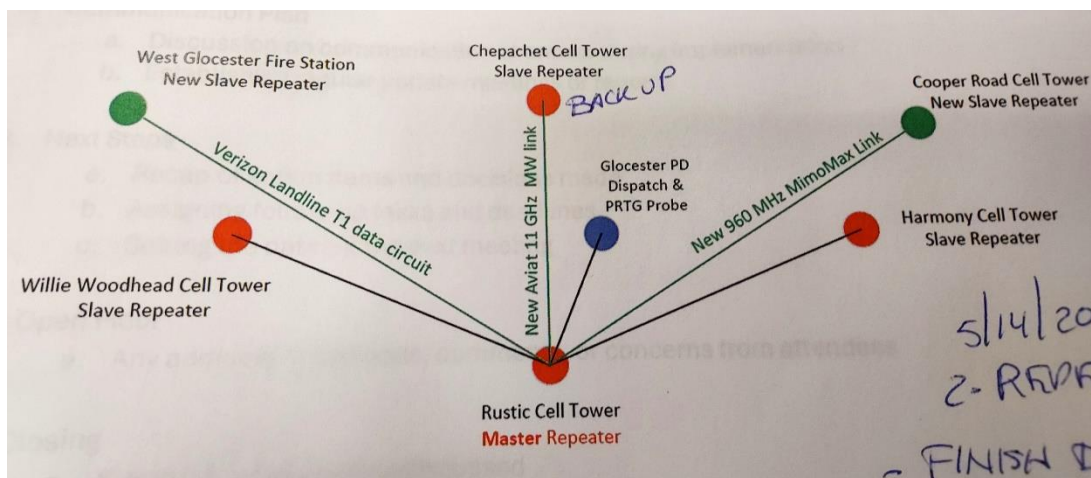
For anyone that doesn't know me, my name is Richard A. Waterman and I'm the Fire Chief here at The Harmony Fire Department. This will be my 7th report for the annual meeting and my last. I'd like to take this time to thank the District Fire Board Commissioners, both the past and present. They've all worked extremely hard over the years to keep your Fire Taxes in check. They continue to strive towards being as fiscally responsible with your hard-earned dollars as you would want them to be. I would like to thank Pauleena Palazio, my Secretary and District Clerk, Pam Fontaine the Tax Collector for all that they've done over this past year they truly make my job easier and more fun. To Michael Rouette the District Treasurer and John Bevilacqua the District's Legal Advisor. To the members and the per-diem employees of this Fire Department, I can't say Thank You enough, they make this the department what it is, professional, dedicated, courteous and caring. The members and the per-diem personnel here want you to be provided with the best service whether it be medical, or fire and they strive for the best. The individuals here at Harmony take pride in what they do and pride in being part of this great fire/EMS family.

Emergency Communication System Upgrades

Since last July this department has continued with its goal. The goal of keeping this department moving forward. In moving forward we've continued to make changes, changes in personnel, changes in training, changes in equipment and changes in history.

One very important and costly upgrade is to the emergency communications radio tower repeater system. We've known for some time that the radio tower system that provides the 3 Fire/EMS Departments in Town with communications during normal day-to-day operations and emergencies has not been working at its best. All 3 Departments have been working with Goosetown Communications to upgrade the system. This project is still being worked on and is scheduled for completion in October of 2024. When it's completed the Town will have a state-of-the-art 6-tower repeater system instead of the current 4 tower system which will provide us with better and more reliable

communications. The total cost of this project is \$393,063.00 divided evenly between the 3 Fire Districts. Of that total bill \$190,983.37 will be paid through the use of the Town's Federal ARPA Funds.



Other recent upgrade in the Gloucester Emergency Dispatch Center (located in GPD) was the purchase and installation of the new Signal Communications TRX50 fire alarm monitoring system. This new system replaces the old Vision 21 system that has been in existence for approximately 15 years. This system monitors all business's fire alarm systems that are connected through the radio master box system. The total cost of this project was \$10,000.00 divided equally through the 3 Districts. The system was installed in April and training has started so that data entry can be performed by numerous qualified individuals.

Upgrades in the Department

Capital Improvement Funds: In August of 2023 the department's very old fire alarm system was replaced with a new state-of-the-art panel, all new devices within the building and the system now has an approved battery back-up.



Capital Improvement Funds: I know there are mixed thoughts about the LED sign board at the east end of the parking lot. The sign board was placed there so that the department could put valuable information on it. Like "Volunteers Needed" or safety tips. The new board was installed and should be in service soon.

Capital Improvement Funds: The department's 800mhz portable radios are approximately 20 years old. Six (6) new Kenwood Multiband portable radios were purchased. There was a problem with programming the radios; 1-the Gloucester Police Chief DePrete will not allow the fire department to monitor the police frequency and the RIEMA has mandated that they are the only ones that can program the radios and not the purchasing company. This created a delay. The radios were purchased and it took 9 months to get them in service.



This past winter the department installed a new ceiling fan in the apparatus bays. This much larger 10ft fan produces more air flow and keeps the warm from gathering at the ceiling height, which will hopefully help with heating the bays more evenly.

At the start of COVID-19 the department had to relocate the Break Room due to its size. The department's Break Room was relocated to the Training Room. This created another problem. The Safety of the members and per-diem crew. Reflective window film was installed to the doors. Anyone inside can see outside but from the outside you can't see inside.

The department's EMS 3rd Party billing company was replaced in January 2023. Comstar Ambulance Billing Service out of Massachusetts came in and in the past year and a half, we've seen a much better company and our billing revenue has increased.

Over the past year the department also changed our payroll company from QuickBooks to DSI Payroll located in Chepachet.

In March of 2023 the department started providing the citizens with 24/7 per-diem rescue services. The 3 Fire Departments along with the Gloucester Emergency Dispatch Center also made changes to the way rescue calls were being dispatched. For any call deemed a life threat, 2 rescues are now dispatched. Harmony's rescue being the only rescue staffed from midnight till 6am Monday - Friday and midnight till 8am Saturday and Sunday it is usually dispatched. Because of these changes our rescue is responding to more calls.

The Time to Make Changes should start today!

More than 80% of the nation's fire departments are made up entirely or mostly of volunteers, according to the National Fire Protection Association. Volunteers comprise 65% of U.S. firefighters overall. *But participation has dwindled, from nearly 900,000 volunteers in 1984 to a low of 677,000 in 2020. Meanwhile, fire departments have responded to more than triple the number of calls over that same period.*

The volunteer Fire/EMS services in this District and in this town are struggling like the majority of volunteer departments in the country with less members handling more calls, the station and the apparatus are getting older, the cost of everything increasing drastically and everyone trying to do more with less. The reality of it all, changes need to be made, some sooner and some will have to wait but the current system is truly just a small band-aid on a much larger problem. The three Fire Districts along with the town will need to work together to be pro-active regarding Fire and EMS services. We all need to work together to provide better service without breaking the bank. This process will not be easy or something that happens overnight, but preliminary drafts on a better system need to begin now. This will require at least one new building, merging three departments into one and hiring full-time personnel, both Fire and EMS. The town should have 1- Fire District with 1- Full-time Chief, 1-full-time Secretary and 1- full-time Assistant Deputy State Fire Marshal. The police and the DPW only have 1- person in charge.

One Public Safety Complex centrally located, should be the starting point. Build a complex that stands the time of not less than 50 years. It will take money and it will take people putting their egos aside and doing what's best for the town. Mansfield figured that out in 2018-19 and built their PSC.

Mansfield, Ma 2019 Public Safety Complex



What you have currently: 3 separate Fire/EMS departments, running 3

separate rescues. Harmony runs Rescue 2 on a schedule of 24/7. Chepachet runs Rescue 1 on a primary shift Monday through Friday from 6am to 6pm. West Glocester runs Rescue 4 Sunday through Saturday from 8am to midnight. All 3 departments rely totally on volunteer members for fire calls. You also have 3 separate Chiefs, Deputy Chiefs and a multitude of officers and members. The Harmony Fire Department is no different than most volunteer fire departments in the United States. Recruitment and Retention for most departments career or volunteer is the number one issue plaguing us all (*that and finances*). The challenges for these departments and Harmony come down to Training Requirements, Time Demands, Increased Call Volume and Finances among others.

Training Requirements: Higher standards for both Fire and EMS means 100's of hours a year to get certified in any field.

Call Time Demands: Over the past 40+ years medical calls have gone from the "Scoop and Haul" mentality in the early 80's to having basically a mobile emergency room in our newer rescues. Our on-scene times for the more severe calls have increased because the EMT's on the rescues can do so much more. This is due to EMT's being more knowledgeable, more procedures being performed on scene prior to transporting the patient to a hospital, more traffic on the roadways, slower and safer driving to the hospital by our EMT's, hospitals being overcrowded in the emergency rooms, more thorough EMS reports being written by the EMT's on the rescue and slower and safer driving when returning from the hospital. The average call transported to the hospital takes 2-2.5 hours.

Increased Call Volume: Both EMS and Fire incidents are on the rise and safety is being held at a higher level so that “Everyone Goes Home” after every call. There are also other factors that come into calls that most people aren’t aware of. Total incident time includes the following: Time call was received by the dispatcher, call is dispatched, members responding to station if a fire incident, apparatus responding to address, apparatus on scene at incident, EMS incidents include transportation to hospital, at hospital and apparatus returning to station, making sure apparatus is ready for the next call. Increased call volume plus increased call time to provide the care needed plus increased training leads to personnel burnout.

Harmony EMS/FIRE Calls:

Calendar Year	Call Numbers		TOTAL	
2017:	EMS 300	FIRE 178	=	478
2018:	EMS 335	FIRE 223	=	558
2019:	EMS 368	FIRE 236	=	604
2020:	EMS 354	FIRE 234	=	588 COVID-19
2021:	EMS 432	FIRE 225	=	657 COVID-19
2022:	EMS 491	FIRE 332	=	823 COVID-19
2023	EMS 553	FIRE 243	=	796

NOTE: If the average medical incident is 2 hours in total time from the when the rescue response to the time that they return to the station 553 EMS incidents equals 1,106 hours in 12 months. With 2 EMT’s on the rescue this equals 2,212-man hours in 1 year just for medical incidents.

Increased Cost: Do you know why Fire Departments are using older apparatus, buying used apparatus or only buying new every 20 or so years, COST. The average Rescue vehicle now costs over \$325,000.00. Engines are over \$600,000.00 and a new ladder truck is well north of \$1,000,000.00. The cost to purchase, run and provide regular maintenance on department vehicles is very expensive. Our fuel, maintenance and insurance over the past few years has increased every year to keep the vehicles on the road to provide you with service. Departments are forced to cut their budgets in other places to try and keep taxes down but then this creates other issues and things are left behind. Our current first line fire truck is a 2004 engine. Our 2nd due engine is a 1994.

Changes in the “Nature of the Business”: Like in a lot of communities the system, especially the Emergency Medical System (EMS) is being abused by the public. Calls for rescues that could be handled without the Fire/EMS department coming to assist are the leading cause of this abuse. The other problem is that less and less people want to volunteer in a Fire/EMS department. In most communities that have volunteer Fire and EMS services those departments have been forced to hire part-time per-diem rescue employees. These employees cover shifts while volunteer members are working their regular job and at times when no volunteers are available. Less volunteers means more part-time employees, which means higher wages. These part-time rescue personnel respond to every call unless they are already on a call or at a hospital with a patient.

Harmony’s current Volunteer Problem: No one wants to be a volunteer. Because of this problem Harmony has been forced over the past 7 years to increase their part-time per-diem rescue staffing. The Harmony Fire Department in the beginning of 2023 was down to 3 in-district EMT’s and 4 EMT’s that live in Greenville. In March of 2023 Harmony really had no choice, we had to increase our rescue coverage. At that time, it came down to protecting the citizens of Harmony. My recommendation to the District Board was to increase the part-time per-diem staffing so that coverage would be 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. On March 14, 2023, Harmony started 24/7 rescue coverage. Rescue coverage and service costs money.

How to keep Per-Diem rescue personnel: Part-time per-diem employees receive no benefit package, they get paid weekly for the hours worked. There is no sick, vacation or compensatory time. To have EMT’s stay here, like any other per-diem program you must make it comparable to other Fire/EMS or private ambulance companies. This means they must be paid equivalent or greater than other providers. Harmony needs to stay closer to the top of the pay scale than the bottom to keep EMT’s.

You will see that the Personnel section of the budget did increase to meet this issue. If you choose not to approve the budget based on this you will force the District to hire full-time employees with a benefit package, same as in career departments, this way your rescue service doesn’t decrease or be eliminated. Please believe me when I say this current system of part-time employees is less expensive for the citizens of the district.

Harmony's Fire Members: When you have a fire emergency who comes? VOLUNTEERS!!! The District of Harmony has only volunteer firefighters. During normal work hours when everyone is not home, most volunteer firefighters are at their regular job. Very few are around during the day. When a fire call comes in during the day prior to normal dinner time its very difficult to get apparatus out with appropriate staffing (3-firefighters on an engine). Most times that engine will be responding with a driver and only a driver. Harmony relies very heavily on out-of-town mutual aid during the days when there's a fire call. The Town having at least 1- on-duty crew to respond with an engine would be a great asset.

Staffing of our Department:

- 1 - Part-time 28 hour/weekly Fire Chief
- 1 - Part-time 18 hour/weekly District Clerk/Chief's Secretary
- 1 - Part-time 18 hour/weekly District Tax Collector

Our Volunteer Membership: *(As of May 9, 2024)*

Total Membership: 31

21- EMT/Firefighter:

- 3- Paramedic only
- 4- EMT Cardiac only, 3 – EMT Cardiac & Firefighter
- 6- EMT Basic only, 5 – EMTB & Firefighter

5 – Firefighter only: CPR Card only, no other EMS

3 – Members, CPR Certified only and working towards getting EMT or FFI

18- of our members also provide the department with part-time employment working on the per-diem rescue shifts.

5- Live in the Harmony District

- 1-** Live in Chepachet
- 4-** Live in Smithfield

Members Accomplishments

Hired by career department/business:

Remains a member:

A. Lema	Cumberland EMS	Yes
N. Maryanov	Cumberland EMS	Yes
J. Medeiros	Smithfield FD	No
J. Arnold	Smithfield FD	Yes
S. Hopkins	Smithfield FD	Yes
S. Tikiryan	Johnston FD	Yes
A. Tibbetts	N. Kingstown	Yes
B. Denault	Little Compton	Yes
M. Kryschuk	RI Dept of Health	Yes
A. Waterman	Roger Williams Hospital	Yes
S. Winn	RI Hospital	Yes
M. Saraiva	RI Hospital	No

In July of 2023 the department had 29 Members and 10 Per-Diem employees.

In May of 2024 the department has 31 Members and 9 Per-Diem employees.

Recognition of members achievements:

Since July 1st, 2023:

- 4 - Members enrolled in the EMT Paramedic program. Lt. Amy Waterman, Lt. Marta Kryschuk
Pvt. Angela Figueroa, FTO Aidian Tibbetts
- 2 - Members enrolled in the EMT Cardiac program. Pvt. Matthew Piccirillo, Pvt. Christopher
Shakespeare.
- 3 - Members enrolled in the EMT Basic program. Lt. Michael Sears, Pvt. Nicandro Pistacchio,
Pvt. Joseph Paiva.

We congratulate all these amazing individuals for their achievements. These members along with other members of the department spend numerous hours working towards their goals while providing the citizens of this District along with surrounding Districts and towns with great assistance and care. The Chief Officers, Line Officers and the Fire District Board greatly appreciate all that these members do, and we thank them.

We would also like to recognize the members that have been here for many years, Deputy Chief Segee who has been a member for 46 years, Captain William Vota, 20 years. Food for thought, the age of our members ranges from 18 to 65. The average age of our firefighters is in the 50's and our EMT's are in the 20's.

Fire Safety and Prevention Public Education:

During the years of Covid the schools stopped the program for safety reasons. In October of 2022 they once again allowed us the opportunity to come into the schools for this great program. The departments of Gloucester are very committed to continue this necessary program.

We are also working with the EMT Program teachers at the high school to assist them with whatever they need to help the students in seeing what their future could be like.

Capital Projects / Grants/ Donations

- **Capital:** To continue the upgrade of the Radio Tower System so as to provide greater and more reliable communications within the town.
- **Grant:** Involved in a regional FEMA AFG Grant. If the grant is awarded numerous departments will be able to purchase new multi-band portable radios.
- **Grant:** The department has put in for a FEMA AFG Grant to purchase a new engine/tanker to replace our current 1994 Freightliner engine. The grant is approximately \$823,000.00 and if awarded the district would have to pay 5% or approximately \$41,150.00.
- **Grant:** The department has put in for a FEMA AFG Grant to purchase a new ECG monitor/defibrillator for rescue 2 to replace our 2017 monitor/defibrillator. The grant is approximately \$53,000.00 and if awarded the district would have to pay 5% or approximately \$2,650.00.
- **Grant:** In this fiscal year the department has received 2- Legislative grants. The funds received were used to purchase new Thermal Imaging Cameras (TIC's). These new TIC's were placed on the SCBA's in both E-21 and E-22.
- **Other donations:** The department received other donations and those funds received were also used to purchase new TIC's. Between the legislative grants and these donations, we were able to purchase a total of 6 new TIC's.
- **Other donations:** The department received other donations during the year and those funds were used to purchase EMS training equipment.

Looking Towards the Future:

As we look towards the future of this department there are things that need to be addressed, we need to keep this department moving forward in a positive and proactive direction to better handle any and all emergencies that come to us. Currently the 3 fire departments in town are working together to provide you with the most reliable fire and EMS protection that you can afford. In saying this we look not only into 2024-25 but beyond five, ten and twenty years.

Somewhere in the very near future the Town of Gloucester is going to need to put life safety 1st. Running three separate Fire/EMS departments is not cost effective or beneficial for the safety of the citizens of Gloucester. The Districts and the Town need to be realistic and logical. The number of volunteer members is dwindling and we need to be proactive when it comes to the safety of our community. We shouldn't be waiting for the catastrophe to start moving towards a paid service (*same as the Police and DPW*). No one should lose their home because there aren't enough firefighters to man apparatus, and no one should lose their life because a rescue doesn't respond in a timely manner. Finances shouldn't be the only deciding factor. If the people of the town made it happen for police and DPW why can't we do the same for the Fire/EMS service. How many lives or homes have to be lost for it to become a priority.

The 2023-2024 Gloucester School Budget is \$10,866,069.00. The 2023-2024 Police Department Budget is \$3,298,607.00. The 2023-2024 DPW Budget is \$2,398,715.00.

Just a note: The discussion of merging the 3 Districts into one has been a discussion now for approximately 20 plus years. Past Chiefs and District Boards have discussed this with no change. What's it going to take before we make the move. Does someone have to die, does a department have to have a massive lawsuit against them or is it all about taxes? Why have paid police and DPW but not Fire and EMS.

In closing, this Fire/EMS Department is your Fire/EMS Department and I urge every one of you that reads this document to not only look at the budget and the numbers but to come in and meet the people. These are the people that you could be calling on for assistance. The members here would be incredibly happy to meet with you and show you your Fire Department. We have department training most Tuesday nights at 7pm and there are rescue crews on duty 24/7.

Thank you to everyone who has helped us get where we are today.

I've been the Chief of this great department since May of 2017. On June 30th, 2024, I will retire after a total of 45 years in the fire service both career and volunteer departments. Both my wife and my health have been telling me for the past few years that it's time. I thank all the members who have been here in my years as Chief and to the current members of this department who I will truly miss. To the past and present District Board members I say Thank you for your time and your support. It's been a fun and interesting time that I will fondly remember.

Thank you to everyone who shows interest in your community,
Respectfully and sincerely,

Richard A. Waterman, *Chief*