A Chief Officer’s Map to Excellence

Designation programs provide opportunities for lifelong learners. | BY THOMAS AURHAMMER, T. MICHAEL BURTON, RICHARD A. MASON & DEBBIE SOBOTKA

As an emergency services professional, you know that lifelong learning and professional development is a must to ensure your success. You can achieve that success by participating in the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) and Chief Medical Officer (CMO) professional designation programs. The credentialing models for designation become the chief officers map along the path to leadership excellence. Many managers highly value the degree of knowledge and efficiency gained by those who pursue professional credentialing. The CFO and CMO programs are not just about climbing the career ladder; the designation is about being a professional. Seeking these professional designations shows that you take what you do seriously with honor, purpose, and dedication. Government leaders (Mayors, City Managers, Business Administrators, etc.) need a means of identifying fire officers who have real-world training and experience in all aspects of the fire service. These programs provide those measures. It also offers a road map for you to follow to tie together your academic work, technical competencies, and other achievements and establish your professional credibility.

While the CFO and CMO designation programs may be a relatively new concept to emergency services, many other professions have utilized these same models to provide credentialing for people in a wide range of professional and occupational fields. People who work in the health care industry, insurance professionals, engineering disciplines, builders, appraisers, administrators, and human resource managers are but a few of the professions who have programs designed to provide professional designations. The U.S. Navy has budgeted for more than 15,000 sailors to become credentialed in their roles for the Navy based upon the civilian credentialing available. They see credentialing as a significant step forward in the professionalism of our Navy workforce. It is deemed the key for career success in the Navy and beyond. Amongst other credentialed services is cosmetology, substance abuse professionals, teachers, and numerous others — it is about time we have a designation process for emergency response leaders on the list of professional credentials.

In today’s climate there are many issues for chief officers to deal with and many may wonder how to fit this portfolio process in with the need to do more for the community, and doing it with fewer resources. With diminishing monetary resources comes the decision process of reducing services, personnel, response apparatus, inspection, public education services, and the list goes on and on. Regarding our services this is even more demanding, as when the economics are in jeopardy it seems the need for our services is greater! How does CFO or CMO fit? It is simple — credibility. You would not hire an architect that was not credentialed, see a physician that was not credentialed, nor would you hire an accountant who was not credentialed, so why would a community settle for a fire chief who is not credentialed — especially when we are in times where everyone needs to make the decisions critical to the community! For years the emergency services has struggled to raise the level of professionalism within our industry. This is the one program that creates that opportunity and provides professional recognition on the same level of other occupations.

Being a Fire Chief in Today’s Society: How Can CFO/CMO Help?

While technical competencies are certainly a large part of what managers are looking for in today’s fire service leaders, a well rounded background in other areas and expertise will help shape the fire officer as a true professional. The CFO and CMO programs specify minimum eligibility requirements, in the form of academic achievements and practical experience. The programs also look at what contributions you have made to the fire service in the way of professional articles, providing instruction, and public speaking. On top of that, professional memberships, community, and civic involvement are assessed.

Ethical behavior in today’s society is a critical benchmark of success. These programs provide a Code of Professional Conduct that all of our decisions can be weighed against. A code of professional conduct is a necessary element of any profession in maintaining the highest standards for those serving within that vocation to embrace. It brings about the accountability, the responsibility and the trust needed to effectively serve our internal and external customers. Attaining CFO and/or CMO helps the individual to expand their breadth versus their depth. In many traditional fire service models and situations, an individual advances professionally by becoming a given subject matter expert.

From my vantage point as a city manager, I feel that fire command personnel should have the Chief Fire Officer or the Chief Medical Officer designation because it demonstrates that the individual is professional, proficient and current in contemporary skills of the fire and emergency medical service. This is an important leadership criteria that I look for in command staff of fire/rescue departments.

— Kurt Bressner, City Manager Boynton Beach, Fla. Commissioner, Commission on Professional Credentialing
The Model and How it Helps Shape the Whole Chief Officer

The model is designed to assist in the professional development of emergency service personnel by providing guidance for career planning through participation in the program. It recognizes lifelong career excellence and achievement. The designations demonstrate that an individual has developed a strategy for continued career improvement and development.

When you earn one, or both, of these prestigious designations you gain distinction and recognition in a growing group of your peers. The CFO and CMO designations also increase your visibility and credibility within your organization and the entire fire and emergency medical services.

The National Professional Development Model supported by the Fire and Emergency Services Higher Education (FESHE) program encourages an efficient path for fire service professional development supported by collaboration between fire-related training, higher education and credentialing. The model shows CFO designation as a credential to consider as you progress in your career as a fire service executive.

Application Components

The application consists of seven components. Your personal and employment information establish your current position and local demographics. The letters of reference provide verification from folks who are familiar with your experience, education, and accomplishments. The next application section deals with professional development, and includes your education, certifications, and training. This section also calls for the applicant to develop a plan of action in the way of professional development goals. Your professional contributions are assessed. These include teaching, public speaking, and both published and unpublished research and professional articles. Your professional memberships and affiliations are credited, as well as your involvement in your community and any civic organizations. The technical competencies section looks at twenty proficiency areas and outlines the knowledge, skills and abilities needed for each one. The final portion of the application is your signed certification statement.

What are the Benefits?

To the agency: Much like accreditation, the value of the CFO and CMO designations create a level of professionalism that can be recognized by city or other governmental leaders, as well as by other public safety agencies and professional that we interact with on a daily basis. The agency gains the most if it sees the designation as an important component of a longer range career mapping tool. When chief officers at all experience levels are exposed to the benefits, the agency can grow along with the individuals. Mid-level officers exposed to the process earlier in their career may be able to build their academic pursuits and elective assignments in a way that best meets both their growth, but the likelihood of credentialing.

To the community: The programs create a higher level of trust between the fire department and the citizens. The designations held by members of the fire department establish the organization’s dedication in being proficient and proactive in delivery of services to the community. In addi-
CREDENTIALING FOR VOLUNTEER CHIEF OFFICERS

A recent study has shown that significant factors contributing to declining memberships in volunteer fire departments are the lack of competent leadership and management-related issues. By following the Commission on Professional Credentialing model for achieving the highly competitive Chief Fire Officer (CFO) designation, volunteer fire departments can be sure that their leaders have the educational and technical competencies necessary to be successful leaders in today’s highly competitive society.

Today’s volunteer fire departments compete with its member’s personal and professional obligations. As the demands for service and responsibilities to our communities increase, today’s chief fire officer must be well prepared to successfully manage the divergent forces that impinge on our volunteer’s time and energy.

Public service and community education have become an additional challenge for volunteer fire departments. A chief fire officer is required to have professional competencies in the areas of business management, human resources, and public administration. By being active in the community, a CFO opens the door to a talent pool of perspective members that will bring the passion to deliver these services as well as bring new and innovative ideas to the department.

In addition to having fireground competencies, to be a successful leader, today’s chief fire officer needs administrative and management abilities in order to successfully run a volunteer fire department. Volunteers want to belong to a well-run organization led by competent leaders. If this is not the case, the members will become disenchanted and take their skills elsewhere. Organizations with incompetent leaders will have difficulty attracting and sustaining new members.

Most importantly, a CFO sets an exemplary standard for others to follow. The CFO designation assures that today’s volunteer fire departments will be led by competent individuals who have the education, training, and necessary experience to provide effective leadership.

— David W. Schramm, CFO, Fire Services Administrator Abington Township (Pa.) Fire Department

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WHAT’S ON THE HORIZON FOR CPC?
The Commission is set to launch the first of its kind chief officer mentoring program this summer. The program is designed to match tenured, experienced mentors with protégés — new fire chiefs, second in command and those appraising the top position. Protégés will be able to rate nearly 80 areas in which they need assistance. The benefits of the mentoring program are many. Matching protégés with experienced senior leaders will expand professional expertise, increase the likelihood for success, help avoid pitfalls and provides learning through real-life examples, builds confidence through achievements and provides counsel and support. A Chief Officer Mentoring Train the Trainer workshop has been developed to help mentors understand their role in the process.

To learn more about the programs offered by CPC, visit www.publicsafetyexcellence.org.

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