

CITY OF TIFFIN, IOWA FIRE DEPARTMENT

Progress Report



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September 2026 Council Progress Report – City of Tiffin, Iowa

Summary

When I began serving as Interim Fire Chief, my initial focus was to provide stability and consistent leadership to the Tiffin Fire Department while evaluating the department’s organizational structure, culture, operational readiness, policies, staffing, training, and long-term needs.

The intent was not to simply maintain the department during a transition period, but to identify areas where we could improve accountability, establish clearer expectations, strengthen our operational capabilities, and better position the department for the future.

Over the last three months, significant work has been completed or initiated toward those goals. This update provides the Council with an overview of that progress and identifies several areas that will require continued attention.

Current Department Status

The department is very inexperienced and has experienced continued turnover over the past several years while call volume continues to increase. The increasing demands of the department will prove to be challenging in the coming years.

Call Volume	2026	2025	2024
Calls YTD	453	426	414
Annual Calls	695 (expected)	664	620
% Growth	4.7%	7.1%	

Staffing Changes	Incoming	Outgoing
2023	3	6
2024	5	1
2025	6	6
2026 (YTD)	3	5

Member Status	
Certified/ Non-probationary	13
Non-certified/Probationary	7
>5 yrs of service	4
2 -5 yrs of service	8
<2 yrs of service	8

% of Calls with 2 or fewer responders	2026 (YTD)
Total	32.8%
Midnight – 6am	57.1%
Overlapping Calls	
34 Times YTD	7.51%

Incident Responses	# of Responses	% of Responses (YTD)
Alec Skubal	149	33%
Allison Pettinger	42	9%
Chris Lenocho	105	23%
Cole Van Brocklin	31	7%
David Handley	76	17%
Erron Hilton	11	2%
Jason Fangman	148	33%
Jessica Fick	27	6%
Jett Skrien	18	4%
Jon Lamb	150	34%

Matthew Fangman	52	12%
Nolan Crawford	61	14%
Robert Gibson	14	3%
Skylar Limkemann	204	46%
Sofia Ramirez	47	11%
Steven Connelly	54	12%
Tom Hartshorn	10	2%
Trevor Jack	43	10%
Ty Wright	52	12%
Tyler Muhlbauer	140	31%
William Erb	159	36%

Organizational Stability and Leadership

One of the first priorities was establishing a clearer organizational structure and defining responsibilities within the department.

Work in this area has included:

- Re-organizing the department's officer roles.
- Removed the Operations Captain position.
- Created a Captain of Apparatus/Equipment.
- Reassigned the Operations Captain to Captain of EMS.
- Reassigned the EMS Captain to Captain of Apparatus/Equipment
- Currently in a 6-month evaluation period of each of these positions (December 2026).
- Established greater command-level (Chief Officers) oversight of department projects, expenditures, grants, equipment, and operational initiatives.

The overall objective has been to move the department toward an organization where responsibilities are clearly assigned and where members understand both who is responsible and what is expected.

Policies and Administrative Systems

Another significant area of focus has been reviewing and developing policies and guidelines. Many of these have not been published yet, due to on-going work towards developing a robust and thorough policy manual.

Work has included development and revisions of policies addressing:

- Personal protective equipment
- Uniforms
- Surveillance Cameras in the station
- Training
- Response guidelines

The purpose of this work is to reduce reliance on informal practices and create consistent expectations that remain in place regardless of who occupies a particular leadership position.

Training and Operational Readiness

Improving training and operational readiness has remained a major priority.

The department has been working towards a more deliberate training program that emphasizes fundamental firefighter skills and encourages everyone to participate. The department had a culture that did not encourage firefighters to conduct additional hands-on training beyond what was put out by the training division. This was evident by there only being one organized optional group training in 2025. Since arriving, this was due to processes in place related to getting the training approved and recorded. Within the first week I changed that expectation and made it clear that our members are encouraged to train on their own or in small groups and removed some of the barriers to allowing that to happen. Since that time, the Training Captain has offered 9 optional trainings to the department and conducted 4 small group or one-on-one training sessions with members seeking additional training.

Other training and operational readiness accomplishments include:

- Reinstating the Training Captain.
- Providing the Training Captain with an overview of what the minimum state requirements are for on-going firefighter and EMS training.
- Mentoring the Training Captain on the development of a training plan for the department.
- Purchased and implemented online EMS training platform to ensure minimum EMS CEU's are offered for EMT certification. Also allows members to complete training on their own time.

Recent and upcoming training:

- Combined emergency vehicles operations and pump operations training in June.
- Conducted wildland fire training in July.
- Presented Fire Behavior and Tactical Considerations of Firefighting in August.
- Basic SCBA confidence in June.
- Member attended International Society of Fire Service Instructors Conference.
- Two members attending Live Fire Trainer Course this fall.
- One member attending EMS World this fall.
- Continued optional trainings in hose deployment, search, extrication planned.

Apparatus, Equipment, and Facilities

The Tiffin FD had received our new fire engine (152) in November of 2025. When I arrived it was still not fully operational, as not all of the equipment was mounted and many compartments had a large amount of equipment just piled inside. This is a large undertaking and had just not been completed. I assisted the newly assigned Captain of Apparatus in going through the engine to finalize the inventory of equipment, mount tools, and get the engine fully operational. This occurred in August. The engine is fully operational and something the Department and City should be proud of.

Authorized and encouraged the re-design of the office space in the station to create a mini day room for members to have a place to sit, relax, take a nap if needed. This supports our members who live out of town and are putting in shift hours at the station. The new furniture will be delivered this week.

Other apparatus, equipment, and facilities initiatives include:

- Upgraded the surveillance/camera system within the fire station with more City oversight.
- Painting lines in the station to make backing apparatus into the bay safer.
- Redesigning the graphics on the current command car and adding a light bar.
- Designed and finalized the new Tahoe upfit for a Chief's vehicle. Initial plan was nearly a \$60,000 upfit. I decided to keep the current Tahoe as the command vehicle, spent \$6500 to add a new graphics package and a light bar, and then upfitted the new Tahoe for approximately \$35,000.
- Working towards moving EMS response from the light rescue to a pick-up.
- Assessing the overall volume of equipment and providing more oversight as to what is purchased vs what is actually needed.
- Meeting and discussing new fire station location and needs.

EMS Program Development

EMS represents a substantial portion of the department's workload and remains an important area of improvement.

Of the department's 664 calls last year, 422 involved EMS, motor vehicle collisions, or citizen assists. That means that approximately 64% of the department's call volume involved incidents where EMT-level, non-structural firefighters could respond. The TFD required all members to obtain Firefighter 1 & 2, HazMat Awareness and Operations, and EMT. We have multiple members who have no interest in being interior structural firefighters, but they want to run EMS calls and support the department in other ways. By our own rules we did not have a place for them on TFD. To increase our recruitment and retention, and ultimately provide more reliable call response to the community, I have tasked the EMS Captain with writing a new ordinance allowing us to have EMS only personnel. Potential benefits include:

- Increasing the number of EMS responders.
- Expanding the pool of potential department members, some of which might start as EMS only and venture into firefighting as well.
- Improve call response reliability.
- Reduce the dependence on the same, relatively small group of Firefighter/EMTs.
- Increase staffing without requiring a longer training process.

Staffing Analysis

The most significant long-term issue being evaluated is staffing.

Tiffin continues to experience substantial population and call-volume growth. The department has transitioned from approximately 300 calls in 2019 to an expected 700 calls this year. Compared to the 665 calls last year, this is another 5% increase while continuing to rely heavily on volunteer staffing.

Most recently I have been evaluating options for introducing part-time firefighter staffing while retaining the paid-per-call volunteer membership model. One model being evaluated would provide two part-time firefighters around the clock using two 12-hour shifts per day.

A second, more incremental model, would staff two part-time firefighters from 6:00pm until 6:00am Monday through Friday and provide two part-time staffed positions Saturday and Sunday for all 24hrs (2- 12hr shifts).

These models are being evaluated based on:

- Number of part-time employees required.
- Minimum and maximum hours per pay period, per employee.
- Estimated annual personnel costs.
- Call-volume patterns.
- Ability to maintain adequate staffing.

- Response reliability and response times.

The intent is not to replace the volunteer/paid-per-call model, but to determine how scheduled staffing can supplement that model as the community and call volume continue to grow.

Prior to implementing any staffing model, we need to figure out a path forward for the training division. Training is the backbone of the fire service, and we cannot hire people that we can't effectively train. Under the current model, we have a volunteer training officer who works a normal M-F job and has the same daily responsibilities of life as the rest of us. It is very clear to me that we don't have the capacity to effectively on-board and train new members and then continue to maintain a high-quality on-going training program, trained regardless of who is in the training officer position. It is nearly an impossible task. The training requirements to maintain operational readiness are high.

My recommendation moving forward is to find a way to hire a part-time training officer, working approximately 15-20hrs per week who could provide consistency and accountability for the department's training program while reducing the administrative burden currently placed on the Fire Marshal position.

This is an area that warrants future discussion as we consider staffing and budgeting.

Mutual Aid

I have met with our mutual aid partners (Oxford, Coralville, North Liberty, and Iowa City) on multiple occasions. Those discussions have centered around our mutual aid box alarm system, sharing of resources, and how to best work together to provide protection to our communities. These meetings have also led to some changes in our operational response model.

One of the biggest changes is that Tiffin FD is joining the rest of the county agencies in the standardized county numbering system. Several years ago, Chief Platz (North Liberty) proposed an idea to move towards a standardized numbering system for all county fire departments and apparatus, that clearly identified each unit by its department, apparatus type, and responding location. The rest of the county agencies (excluding Iowa City) have made the switch. I have determined that it is in the best interest of the department to make this change.

Other topics to note are:

- Discussing the function of our command car in the larger mutual aid response.
- Changes in operational response to I-380 during construction.
- A more modern response model for Oxford and Tiffin fire.
- Our interactions and relationships with community partners.

Department Culture

In my first few months here, I was asking questions, learning, making notes, and assessing the overall department. This has led me to the following assessment; the Tiffin Fire Department has a leadership group who all care. The department is extremely young in experience, and we largely lack the ability to effectively train our members to the level that should be expected. The Tiffin Fire Department is also well funded. We have a brand-new engine, top of the line SCBAs, great hoses, nozzles, and a great aerial, etc. I commend you, the Council, on supporting the fire department to the level that you have. It appears to me that there are very few things that the department has asked for that we haven't gotten. That being said, the department leadership has allowed there to be an imbalance of power and authority, and has focused largely on equipment, things, and technology. This has created a lack of trust, a lack of ownership, very little empowerment, and low morale throughout the department.

I often sum up my assessment as this, "the department has focused on processes over people." These systems, while sometime well intentioned, have created obstacles for the department. There is no equipment that I can purchase that will increase the morale and response reliability of the fire department, including a new station. We need to ensure that all team members have an opportunity to contribute, feel valued, and are encouraged to participate in a respectful and supportive manner. The department needs to know and trust that the Chief is in charge and that organizational level decisions will be handled by the Chief and/or the Chief Officers.

Looking Forward

The first phase of this transition primarily involved stabilizing, evaluating, organizing, and establishing roles and expectations.

The next phase should increasingly focus on implementation and long-term planning.

My priorities moving forward include:

- Continued implementation of the revised organizational structure and officer responsibilities.
- Invest in the culture, rebuild trust, empower and encourage members growth.
- Completing and adopting priority department policies and guidelines.
- Continued implementation of the EMS only program.
- A revised deployment model that clearly defines what apparatus to take to what calls and ensures that we are best deploying our resources.
- Strengthening our training program, look to fund a part time training officer.
- Evaluate our apparatus and determine a long term replacement plan.
- Evaluate staffing plan for the future.
- Planning of a new fire station.
- Position the department to transition to a full-time Fire Chief.