

Staffing Proposal and Request for Funding by the Cheshire Fire Department FY 2024 Budget

The Cheshire Fire Department (CFD) is recommending and requesting funding in its FY 2024 budget as follows to provide for improved emergency responses, faster response times, and better management/administration of the fire department:

Provide Stipends for Volunteer Firefighters: \$ 25,000

Facts

The CFD is unable to provide an emergency medical service (EMS) response to thirty-five percent (35%) of EMS incidents during the daytime (8AM to 6PM). The CFD is unable to provide an EMS response to fifteen percent (15%) of EMS incident during the nighttime (6PM to 8AM). *See Chart #1: Responses vs. No Responses, Day vs Night, 2021.*

When someone in Cheshire calls for an ambulance, the ambulance arrives in 22 minutes or less ninety percent (90%) of the time. Ambulance response times have been as long as 26 minutes. People are waiting too long for medical assistance from the ambulance crew. Unless the Town of Cheshire decides to start an ambulance service in town, instead of using an ambulance service from outside of town, there is no likelihood that we can significantly change ambulance response times.

Cheshire is asking half as many volunteers to respond to twice as many emergency calls. In 1995, Cheshire had 62 volunteers who were asked to respond to 200 of emergencies. Today, 27 volunteers are being asked to respond to almost 400 emergency incidents each year¹. *See Chart #2: Volunteer Staff vs. Emergency Incident, 1995-2020.*

Emergency incidents in Cheshire have increased 26% in five years. This kind of growth requires new approaches and action now, or we risk a crisis in the near future. *See Chart #3: Emergency Incidents – Five Year Trend 2018-2022.*

The CFD estimates, that its part-time firefighters will respond to EMS incidents in eight-minutes for less ninety percent (90%) of the time. Compare this to the ambulance response of twenty-two minutes or less ninety percent (90%) of the time. There are almost no locations in Cheshire that are more than a seven-minute drive from the Cheshire Fire Station.

The national standard for receiving a 911 call and dispatching the response is 60 seconds, and the national standard for the fire department to initiate its response, a unit on the road

¹ In 2022, the department was called to 397 emergency incidents.

responding, is 60 seconds for EMS and 90 seconds for fires. This means that when someone calls 911 for assistance, the first CFD unit should be responding within two minutes (from home, the fire station, or some other appropriate location). The rest of the response time is travel time – the time it takes to drive to the incident location. While there will be a small number of incidents with longer response times, the CFD expects that 90% of the time, its first responding unit should be on location in 8 minutes or less.

The CFD is unable to respond to about 50% of EMS incidents simply because there are not enough volunteer firefighters available to respond. This is in large part because fifty-nine percent (59%) of incidents occur during the daytime when most volunteers are at work, and most volunteers work outside of Cheshire. Seventy-five percent (75%) of the CFD's volunteers work outside of town. Of the few volunteers that work in-town, only one member has a lot of flexibility to be able to leave work for almost any emergency call. Only about seven members have the ability to leave work for occasional, serious, emergency incidents, and most of them have to travel back into town.

Even with these limitations, the volunteers of the CFD are still able to cover twenty-four percent (24%) of daytime EMS incidents. This demonstrates a tremendous amount of dedication on the part of the CFD's volunteer force and demonstrates their extreme value to the community.

Additionally, the CFD is unable to respond to EMS incidents in part because of the increasing volume of EMS incidents. The rising EMS volume is going to increase burnout among volunteers. This helps explain the fifteen percent (15%) of EMS incidents that go unanswered by the CFD at night, when there should be plenty of available volunteers. The department expects that nighttime responses will improve if daytime response pressure is eased.

Data indicates that the CFD, when it can respond to an EMS incident, arrives faster than the ambulance does 27% of the time during the daytime and 21% of the time during the nighttime. The CFD arrives about the same time as the ambulance 19% of the time during the day and 21% of the time at night. The important lesson in this data is that the CFD can meet or exceed ambulance response times when its staff need to leave home or work and respond – they aren't on-duty at the fire station ready to respond. See Chart #4: Arrival Before, With, and After the Ambulance.

Stipends for Volunteer Firefighters

What:

The CFD is proposing and asking that Cheshire's volunteer firefighters receive a stipend for responding to emergency incidents and attending weekly drills/training. Currently, volunteers receive nothing for their participation.

The payment of a stipend does not change the legal status of our department's volunteers to part-time employees. The federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) exempts stipends paid to volunteer firefighters from the legal definition of part-time or full-time employee.

The FLSA requires that a volunteer stipend cannot be based upon an hourly wage. The stipend is paid no matter how much time the volunteer firefighter spends at the incident or the training. For example, A one-hour drill gets the same stipend as a two- or three-hour drill.

See Appendix A, Managing Volunteer Firefighters for FLSA Compliance, for additional detail on the FLSA requirements.

And, since the CFD members retain their volunteer status, they do not have to be paid for any other activities. Moving to the call firefighter model and paying Cheshire's volunteer firefighters an hourly rate (for instance \$15/hour), converts them from volunteers to part-time municipal employees. This means they have to get paid for everything they do and every hour they work on behalf of the CFD.

The cost of this proposal is \$25,000, plus the town's share of Medicare withholding

Why:

Cheshire is asking half as many volunteers to respond to twice as many emergency calls. In 1995, Cheshire had 62 volunteers who were asked to respond to 200 of emergencies. Today (2022), 27 volunteers are being asked to respond to 397 emergency incidents.

It's not as simple as saying that the CFD's volunteer firefighters will come to more emergency calls, especially EMS incidents if the town pays them. While there is likely to be a short-term increase in participation by firefighters upon implementation of a stipend program, it won't last without other changes, particularly the addition of part-time staff and full-time management.

Money doesn't motivate, except in the short-term. Morale and a sense that the community appreciates them must also be present. The money is a form of showing appreciation and recognizing that what they do is critically important to quality of life in Cheshire. If having a well-trained and effective volunteer fire department is important to the community, then there needs to be ways of demonstrating that value and appreciation. Stipends can be an effective tool for doing so.

Additionally, stipends help volunteers manage their family's expectations and burdens. Volunteer fire and EMS places a great burden on the volunteer's family. When the volunteer gets out of bed at night to rush to an emergency, his or her spouse and family are being awoken as well. The family is typically waiting up or listening to the radio at home. It is disruptive to family life. Volunteers are routinely missing family events, holidays, and meals.

In many cases, the payment of a stipend is more for the family than the volunteer. If the family feels too burdened or senses that the community doesn't appreciate the disruption volunteer firefighting causes, they will exert pressure on the volunteer to respond less or even quit.

As the volume of emergency calls increases, as it is in Cheshire, the volunteer force will become more and more stressed, as will their families. This stress will also become apparent to others making it harder to recruit new additional volunteers. It was one thing to expect volunteers to drop what they were doing or jump out of bed for an emergency when there were only one or two emergency calls each week. Now, the CFD is asking its volunteers to respond almost daily. A new strategy for getting and maintaining a volunteer response in the new environment is critical to the continued success of a primarily volunteer fire and EMS force. Stipends are one of those new strategies.

Paying stipends are also a tool for recruiting new volunteer firefighters. The CFD needs to grow its volunteer force to reduce the workload on its members. The CFD has been experiencing an increasing workload on a smaller and smaller group of volunteers. This is not a sustainable situation. Every tool at our disposal should be used to bring in additional volunteers.

Potential Barriers:

Once you start paying a stipend you cannot stop. If the Town decides to pay stipends the payments must be sustainable. Once started, stopping stipends can result in greater problems than the payment of the stipends solved.

Non-Financial

In addition to the additional funding, the CFD needs to make other changes to its operations in order to meet its mission and provide excellent service to the community. While these changes don't require additional funding or only small expense this year, it is important to summarize some of these key changes in order to see how the requested funding and changes fits into a bigger, long-range or strategic plan.

The CFD currently fails to field a response to about 15% of EMS incidents at night (6PM to 8AM). Stipends for volunteers will provide an additional incentive to respond to EMS calls at night.

But, additional changes are needed to ensure that all of the nighttime calls get an effective response by the CFD. First, the department will look at creating a “squad system” where groups of three (more or less) firefighters are on-call each night to respond to EMS incidents. This way, volunteers know which nights they don’t have to worry about responding to EMS incidents, and which nights they are responsible to respond.

If there are eight squads, each squad is only on-call 4 nights a month. This reduces burnout among the volunteers, as four nights a week is not a big burden, and the certainty that comes with knowing what nights you have “off” from EMS responses helps rest everyone.

A survey of the CFD volunteers indicated (generally) that volunteers didn’t feel as well trained for EMS as they are for firefighting. Reading between the lines, this means that some volunteers do not respond to EMS incidents because they don’t feel confident to treat patients. The department needs to address this with better EMS training, including joint training with the ambulance crews.

To make these kinds of changes, and make them work over time, requires active management and leadership. Other departments that have made these changes and successfully improved service to their community found that it took years to get it right. Change comes in fits and starts. There will be errors along the way. Unanticipated barriers will arise. The culture of an organization and resistance to change requires time to overcome.

And the department needs to monitor, collect, and use data to see what is working and what needs to be adjusted. It needs to use more data to inform our community and its leadership about what it does well and where it needs to improve.

Thoughts from the Membership

In 2022, the department conducted an anonymous survey of this membership to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the department. Some of that information was used to create this proposal. Here are some of the key findings from that survey.

Strengths:

The members of the CFD identified the following key strengths:

1. Good Training
2. Dedicated members
3. Good Equipment
4. Teamwork

Weakness:

The members of the CFD identified the following key weaknesses:

1. Recruitment of Volunteers & Staffing
2. EMS Training & Qualifications
3. The Fire Station

Opportunities:

The members of the CFD identified the following key opportunities for the future:

1. Joint training with neighboring departments
2. Improved Training – Particularly EMS
3. Paid Ambulance and/or Station Staffing

Threats:

The members of the CFD identified the following key threats to the department:

1. Staffing and Volunteer Availability
2. Burnout from EMS

The CFD staff also identified (without prompting) paying stipends as something they would welcome. They indicated that while current training is good, that better drill planning and EMS training are wanted. There were also comments about improving morale and culture that could indicate burnout is starting to take hold. To head off burnout, leadership and management will need to lead in new directions with new tools.

And staff also suggested that the loss of the junior program, the failure to improve EMS training, a failure to better recognize the value and achievements of the volunteers, poor funding, the loss of the chief, and merger with a less well-trained department would all be damaging to the CFD.

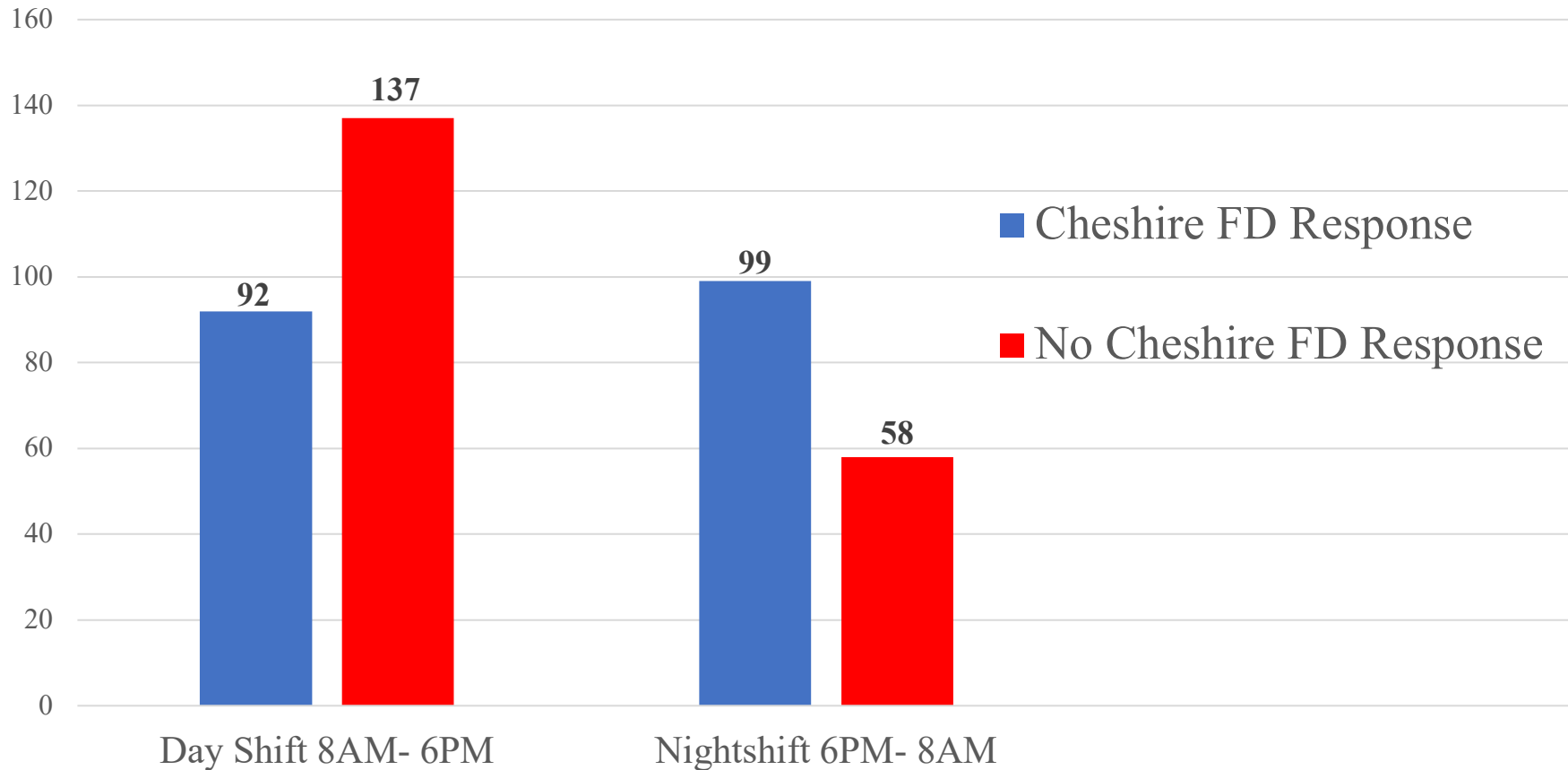
The full survey results (26 pages) are not appended to this because of their size but are available to anyone who would like to review them.

It is important that we recognize that there are excellent elements to the Cheshire Fire Department, and that while it needs additional funding and staffing, all is not bad. The members of the department are well trained, motivated, and dedicated to serving the community.

The current system generally works how it was designed to work, however, that design is rooted in the economic, demographic, and culture of the 1970s. It's time to look at how these factors have changed our community and the demands on our fire department. Then we can enhance what is still working well and develop new approaches for what isn't still working well. That is the core of this request.

Chart #1

Responses vs. No Responses
Day vs. Night
Cheshire Fire Department
2021



In 2021, the Cheshire Fire Department was unable to respond to 195 calls for emergency medical service (EMS) out of 386 calls.

The Cheshire Fire Department is 2 times more likely to fail to respond in the daytime between 8AM and 6PM.

Volunteer Staff vs. Emergency Incidents Cheshire Fire Department 1995-2020

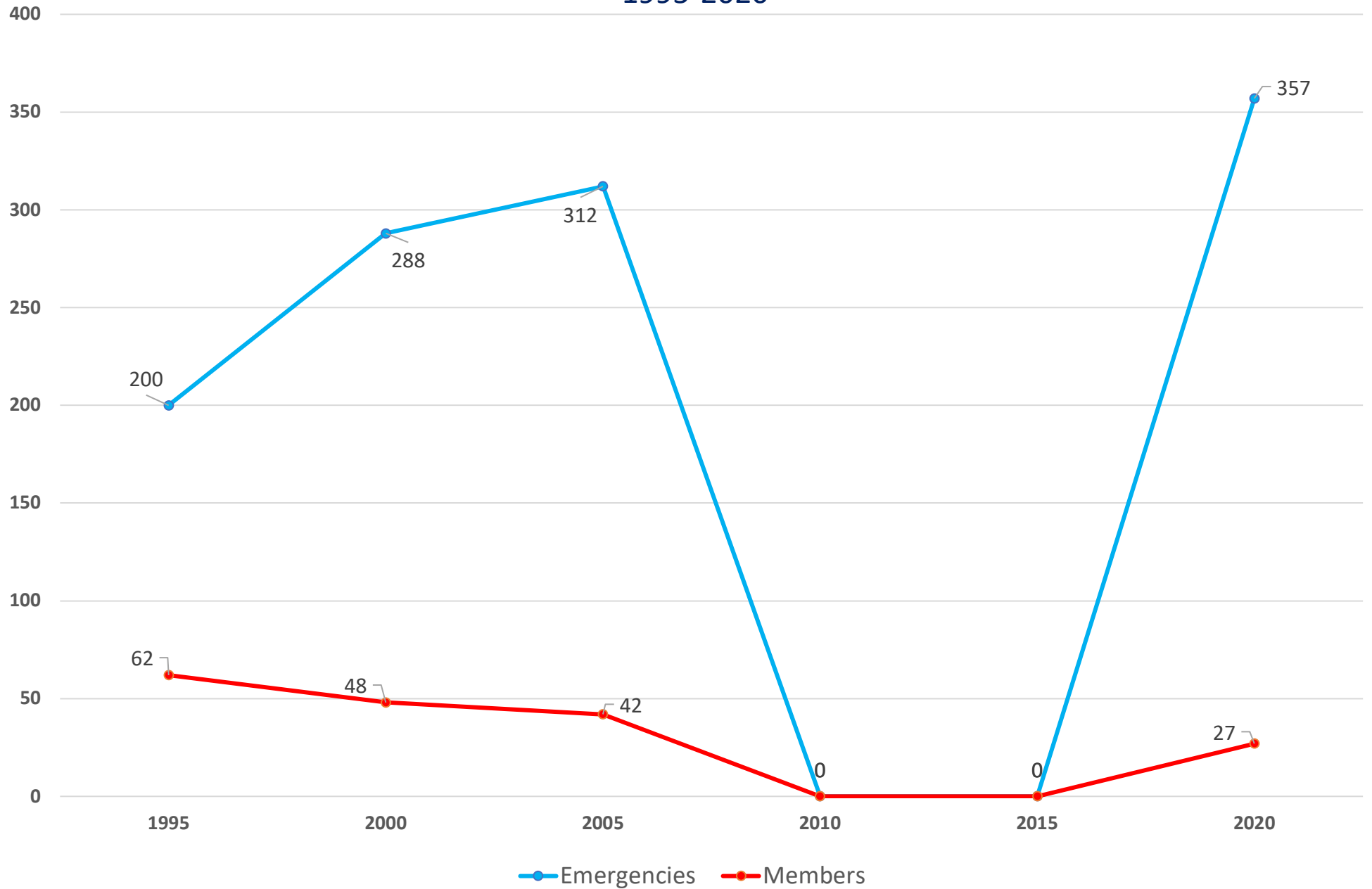


Chart #3

Emergency Incidents- Five Year Trend

Cheshire Fire Department

2018-2022

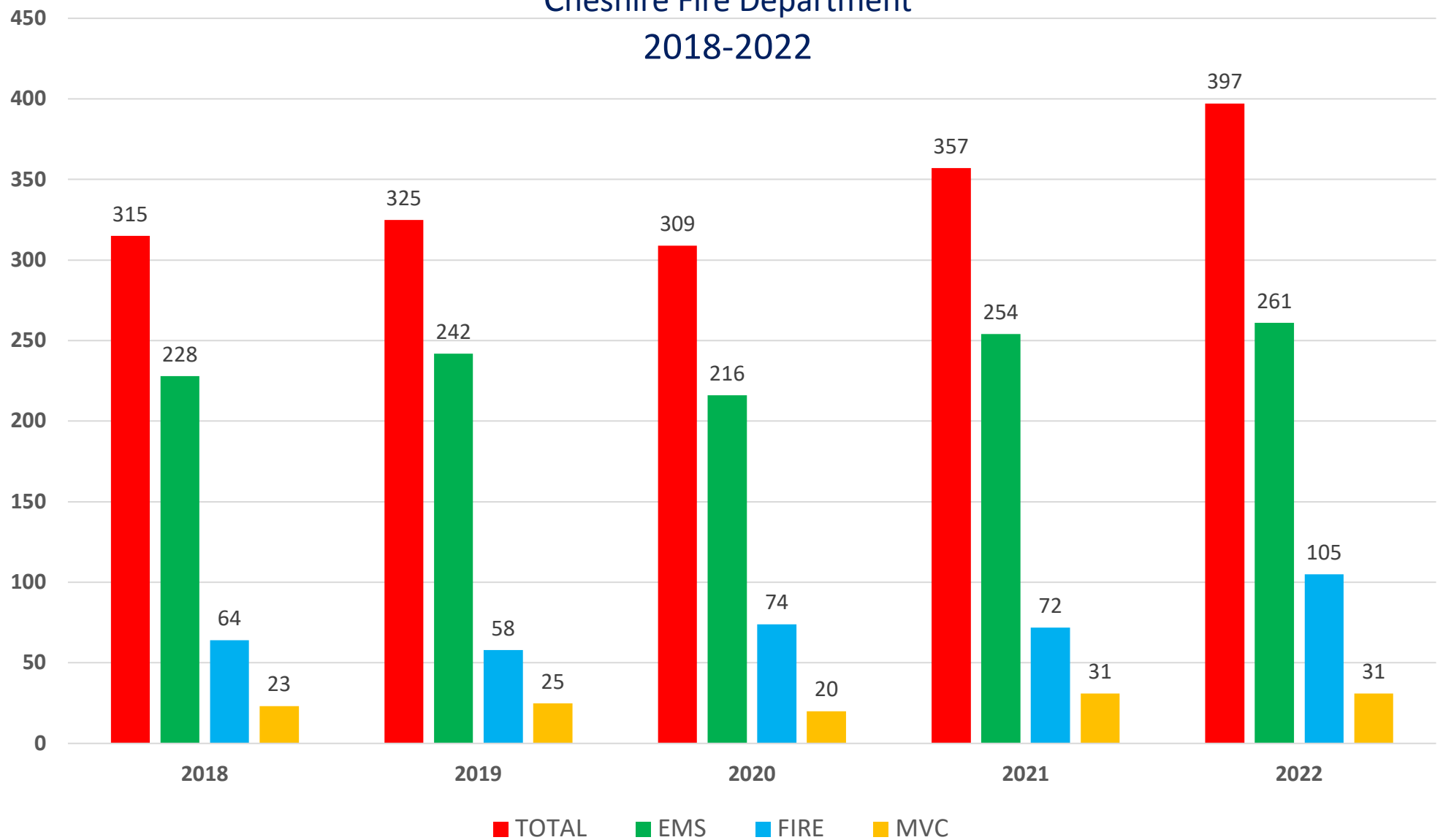


Chart #4

Arrival Before, With, and After the Ambulance- 2021 Cheshire Fire Department

When the Cheshire Fire Department does respond to a call for emergency medical services (EMS) it is highly effective arriving ahead of the ambulance forty-eight percent (48%) of the time.

The Cheshire Fire Department arrives simultaneously with the ambulance forty percent (40%) of the time.

The ambulance arrives ahead of the Cheshire Fire Department only twelve percent (12%) of the time.

