



Staffing issues curb operations at West Falmouth fire station

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FALMOUTH — Some residents were surprised Wednesday when they saw a sign posted on the door of the West Falmouth Fire Station saying it was closed, as many were under the impression the station would remain open.

Todd Taylor, who was a Falmouth firefighter for 35 years, held a sign outside the station Wednesday morning letting people know that the station was closed.

“They upped the staffing in other areas of town and shut this area of town down, which is a great public safety hazard,” he said. “People have to understand that seconds and minutes count, and we wish our elected officials would adhere to that.”

“Months ago they talked about closing it,” Falmouth resident Michael Heylin said Wednesday morning, “and they changed their minds and (said) that it would be open and that it was going to be on a voluntary basis. But the last that the public knew about it was that it was going to be open. And now it’s not.”

Falmouth Town Manager Julian Suso and Fire Chief Michael Small released a statement in the afternoon to address some of the confusion.

The Falmouth Fire/Rescue Department implemented a new staffing and deployment model effective 8 a.m. Wednesday that increased staffing from 10 firefighters to 14 and added staffing to the two stations with the most calls in town.

In 2019, the fire department responded to 8,159 calls, more than any other fire department on the Cape, according to data presented Small at a public forum in January. Of those calls, 80% came from downtown and East Falmouth, and 5% came from West Falmouth.

Two additional firefighters will be assigned to the East Falmouth station, and two others will be assigned to the headquarters. The change will eliminate the practice of sending a single firefighter out on an apparatus, according to the statement.

“The new rule prohibiting deployment of an engine or ladder truck with only one firefighter does impact our ability to operate all five fire stations given present staffing levels,” the statement reads.

All five fire stations will continue to be open when 16 firefighters are on duty across the department, according to the statement. The West Falmouth station will be closed on days when the number of firefighters on duty is less than 16.

The town is offering overtime shifts every day in an attempt to raise daily staffing, according to the statement.

Small said in a phone interview Wednesday that it is hard to say how often the department will get 16 firefighters on duty.

“I wish I had a magic number,” Small said. “I wish I had a crystal ball to say it’s going to be this percentage or that percentage, but I just don’t know.”

He predicts it will be more of a challenge in July and August because a number of people are out on injury, and five firefighters are entering the training academy on Monday and will not be ready for street duty until the middle of September. Many people tend to take vacation during the summer as well.

“Guys who have had a particularly stressful 24-hour shift, a lot of times the last thing you want to do is work another 24-hour shift right on top of that,” Small said. “There needs to be some decompression time. The schedule that they work is conducive to that, but at some point ... that time off and the time to get your head straight and get some rest, that is important as well.”

Town voters recently approved an override to hire eight new firefighters. The operating budget for fiscal 2021 includes funding for two additional firefighters.

Once those 10 firefighters are trained and the positions have been filled, all five fire stations will operate on a consistent basis.

The statement said these are all positive steps that will improve fire and rescue response for the entire town. “We are grateful for the community support which made this possible,” the statement reads.

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