



Orcas Island Fire & Rescue

Neighbors Serving Neighbors since 1948

August 25th, 2023

Dear Orcas Island Community,

On Monday, August 21st, I was appointed Fire Chief of Orcas Island Fire and Rescue. I am excited to continue the work we have done over the past two years, and would like to invite you, the community, to join us in moving forward.

First, I would like to express my gratitude to the members of Orcas Island Fire and Rescue for welcoming me in to be a part of their family nearly two years ago. Without hesitation, OIFR exemplifies all that drew me to the fire service in the first place. "Neighbors Serving Neighbors" isn't just a catchphrase here; it is our creed.

I have never served with a better group of devoted, caring, hardworking individuals fueled by the altruistic love of their neighbors than those I serve alongside today.

I came to OIFR at the end of 2021, during a time of publicly broadcast turmoil within the department. The relationship between labor and management had eroded to the point of becoming largely dysfunctional. Volunteers reported to me that they would turn their pagers off depending on which full timers were on the schedule. Such strife has no place in a department that depends entirely on teamwork to succeed.

I am grateful to report that these issues are either significantly improved or non-existent as of this writing. Administration and the Union have worked intentionally to improve this crucial relationship, keeping in sight the community's best interest at all times. Because of these and other positive changes, our volunteer officers welcomed the career officers back into their monthly officers' meeting, which was not happening in 2021. Best of all, volunteers who previously told me they were checking the staffing schedule and turning off their pagers tell me they never do this anymore.

More important than my own words, are those of our long-time members. Safety Officer Bob Nutt and I attended a National Fire Academy Course in April of this year. The course's focus was health and wellness program management and included strategies to change a department's culture to encourage safety and overall health, mental, physical, and emotional. At one point, the instructor cautioned us not to hope for cultural change to happen quickly. "Cultural change," he said, "takes an average of 14 years in a fire department." I was blown away when Safety Officer Nutt stood up and said to the class, "It doesn't have to take that long. In our department it took 14 months."

I want to be clear that that change didn't happen because of me. I came at a critical time and was supported and empowered to offer our department members a path and a process to make that change. But *I* did not make the change. The change happened because those who stayed were committed to it. They chose to put old scars behind them. They grounded themselves to our Purpose of "Neighbors Serving Neighbors." Together as one team - firefighters and EMTs, career and volunteer, officer and non-rank member - we committed and chose to fulfill our Purpose with an Ethos: Communication, Compassion, Trust, Professionalism, and Ownership.

San Juan County Fire Protection District # 2
45 Lavender Lane, Eastsound, WA 98245
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And when neighbors serve neighbors, good things happen:

- In 2022, OIFR and all San Juan County agencies achieved a 100% survival rate following cardiac arrest from a heart rhythm that could be defibrillated, the highest survival rate in Washington State. The national survival rate following this type of cardiac arrest was 32%, according to the Cardiac Arrest Registry (CARES) Report data.
- In addition, our survival rate for all cardiac arrests (those with shockable and non-shockable rhythm) is the second highest rate in Washington State per the CARES report. In 2022, San Juan County had a 28% survival rate following cardiac arrest, significantly higher than the national average of 8% survival.
- Our Safety Committee has started a wellness/fitness initiative amongst the career staff, enrolled in the Firefighter Injury and Illness Reduction (FIIRE) program with the Department of Labor and Industries, and just received word of a \$25,000 grant as part of a cancer prevention program.
- Our Public Records Officer wrote for and was awarded a public records-related grant, which will pay for additional administrative office hours to do this vital work in our (currently) understaffed office.
- We joined with the Fire Districts of Shaw, San Juan, and Lopez Islands to write a regional grant application to FEMA, which would allow our County to establish a regional fire department training consortium and increase our volunteer recruitment and retention abilities. More on this when they announce the awards!
- We have onboarded multiple new volunteer firefighters and EMTs. We're now able to bring them into a team focused on our Purpose and committed to growing within our Ethos.
- Our paid union staff have taken it upon themselves to plan their vacation days in a way that eliminates overtime created by vacation use. (I have never seen a union choose to do this of their own accord.)
- Multiple former members who left during the previous strife have returned to OIFR. They have told me that the department feels like it used to be - like one family focused on the same goal.
- We have started our first volunteer resident firefighter program, adding a significant number of response-available hours to one of the most remote areas on the island - which is the beginning of the plan to grow this program to serve more of our outlying communities.
- And most importantly, Station 21 is a lively, busy building again. Members come and go throughout the day, and when they apologize for 'interrupting me', I tell them it is a 'problem' that I could only hope to have when I arrived here, and a change I would like to keep.

These accomplishments did not occur by accident. High-performance results come from high-performance teams, and I can confidently say that our OIFR team is the best I have encountered in my career.

Has it been perfect? No. We all stumble. This is part of our shared humanity. Has it gotten better? YES. I am confident that our department members are committed to continuing in the positive direction we have taken in the last two years.

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It is now my duty to ask you, the Orcas Community, to assist your fire department in moving forward.

The past is relevant only to help shape our future. I invite you to work with us towards a positive future that stays focused on our goals, embodies our mutual purpose, and acknowledges the essence of teamwork.

This change is real; it can happen, but only if we choose it and choose it together. I invite you to join in our renewed purpose, building on the best part of this community: Neighbors Serving Neighbors.

Yours in gratitude and service,

Holly vanSchaick

Fire Chief

Orcas Island Fire & Rescue

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