<div align="center">**Growing Your NFIRS Program**</div>

Goal: Opening with a presentation from Iowa, discussion will center on improving an NFIRS program at the level of the attendee, both state and local. Share strategies for boosting data quality and reporting compliance.

Prompt questions:
- What are your goals for NFIRS?
- How do you get people interested in NFIRS?
- How do you keep in contact with fire departments?
- How have you boosted participation in NFIRS?
- Are there strategies that have had negative results?
- What's going right for you with NFIRS at your department?
- What would help personnel become more interested in NFIRS?
- What do you need to succeed in growing your NFIRS program?

The session started with a presentation from Alicia Ver Huel, Iowa Department of Public Safety State Fire Marshal Division, called Fighting Fires with Facts. Alicia was specifically ask to present because she has grown her NFIRS program into success. She shared the road she and her office/State took to get where they are today. Please take a look at her presentation included in this packet. While Alicia is a State Program Manager, many of the techniques apply directly to fire departments as well.
- First, they assessed why people were failing to report or what barriers they had. Many of the attendees found the answers to be common in their own programs, whether State or local.
- Responses to barriers were separated into two categories: problems that could be addressed and whining/general negativity.
- Based on the feed, Iowa FM purchased a statewide software that could meet the needs of both the State and fire departments. Training was offered.
- To get the software, costs were analyzed regarding what fire departments paid vs what the State could pay in a chunk and save everyone. The Iowa Fire Service was asked to work together to get a one-time funding to purchase and rollout the software.
- The NFIRS system in Iowa went from 32% to 76% of departments reporting in 3 years and resulted in usable data which is applied to many projects.

After Alicia's presentation, the floor was opened to ask group questions. The first question was what goals anyone had for their NFIRS program. Responses included:
- Getting better data
- Learning the best ways to use data now
- Better managing data
- Using data to benefit FD "I need because…."
- Getting better numbers for Prevention measures
- Tracking man hours with apparatus and personnel
- Following response times to see performance and problems
- Increasing use of social media with numbers
- Many attendees had trouble articulating a goal for their NFIRS programs. The suggestion was made to sit down and really think about where a fire department or state wants to go. Improvement is difficult if there are no clear goals

One of the easier discussions was in regards to barriers preventing an NFIRS program from reaching success or why reporting wasn't accomplished. Responses included:
- Administrations or management of a fire department believe they understand the workload and information without needing the data or reports. There is a mindset that many people "just know" what their department is doing or needs. In reality, the data may be saying something completely different but it is difficult to convince chiefs to buy into the data

- Poor management support of NFIRS in general, both in FDs and State level. Many states do not have a "full time" state program manager. Instead, an entire state operates with a "half person" who really struggles to keep the program going, keep communication going, and any advancement of the program has to be put aside in favor of just keeping it going
- "Data silo" mentality, otherwise known as "it's my data and I don't want to share it." This is a dangerous mentality that has resulted in many legal consequences for the Public Sector. It is also highly frowned upon by the public and leaders after 9/11.
- Getting the data into a report format is not easy
- Paying for computers and internet can be too much for micro budgets and rural areas where services are difficult to maintain. Strategies mentioned were partnering with Emergency Management who often provide free internet to a FD who offers to store EM equipment or provide a meeting space in times of large incidents or training. Hospitals and State governments regularly change out computers and send them to surplus or offer them to the Public Sector. Kanas offers any old desktop computers that have been rotated out to local FDs and has seen success with this, instead of shipping the computers off to State Surplus. If a dedicated computer cannot be obtained, small FDs may be able to partner with a location for computer/internet access through libraries, churches, schools, etc. While this situation is not ideal it is better than no electronic access at all.
- Computers are often not well maintained at a FD. Normally there is no dedicated "tech person" to clean up computers and the result are slower computers that crash often. This leads to a strong dislike of using computers at the FD and may result in the FD eventually ceasing to report because of the hassle
- Narratives are lacking which can make quality control/assurance difficult. Discussion was held on "model narratives" which can be both positive and negative. One FD reported that when they tried to institute a narrative template, the users would only put the number codes and would offer no extra information beyond the template "fill in the blank" format. Instead of providing a template, a model narrative could be developed to show "the best" of what a narrative could be with bullet points that share information that should always be included, as well as prompt questions. Writing can be very stressful and difficult for many people, and many have never even seen what a narrative looks like. If they could see a model narrative they would gain understanding of what the goal even looks like
- There is little recognition across the board of those FDs "doing it right". Some programs include sending certificates to those who have maintained a high level of reporting compliance. This practice would benefit from more application
- The Fire Service has had a historical problem being open about success. "Just doing our job" is fine to say but the public often times has no idea how much goes into the job, what fire departments are truly doing, and what they need to keep doing it. It's possible to be humble and open
- There is not enough support at the State level, often times because the State PM has other duties. There is usually one state PM for hundreds of FDs and the ratio is very difficult to maintain quality customer service and support
- Sometimes when a user doesn't understand data analysis or presentation conflicting numbers arise. This can lead to uncomfortable discussions and inquiries which make a user gun-shy about presenting anything further
- Many times once a person becomes very familiar with NFIRS they find themselves frustrated with the status quo. We discussed Version 6.0 at many points throughout the Workshop. None of us are deluded into thinking NFIRS is perfect and we all want progress. It will take all of us, at all levels (from micro tiny FDs, to rural FDs, to Metros, to State, to Federal) all working and advocating for an update to NFIRS. We must convince the Legislation to fund a new NFIRS system and then work together to make it the best possible system
- It is difficult to provide training all over a state given budgets and travel required

One of the more curious questions asked "Are there strategies that resulted in negative results?" This topic was intended to help us avoid pitfalls. Knowing that something didn't work (and why) can be incredibly valuable. Responses included:
- Narrative templates that resulted in "fill in the blank" style narratives that actually decreased the quality of the narrative (mentioned in the previous section already)
- Good data inadvertently leads to more requests for data. Once you have good data and everybody knows it you can find it difficult to keep up with an influx of specialized requests

- Software takes maintenance and needs people to keep it going. Usually there are continuing costs for the technology and updates
- Promises should be made with care. While you might be able to meet them today keep your eyes on the future. Can you sustain all the promises you made today in a year? Workloads can quickly spiral out of control
- Legacy stats do not stay the same. Analysis cannot be made once because old reports could trickle in at any time and reports can be updated. Any time legacy stats are stated, the user should be going back and looking over the data to make sure the stats remain the same
- Changing legacy stats can also provide conflicting information about the program itself. For example, Iowa said they had 32% reporting but as departments went back and submitted that missing information it looked like there wasn't a problem, which led to questions. In reality, the 32% was correct at the time and the solutions worked well because FDs went back and submitted the missing data. Make sure to keep notes of involvement with dates so you can answer any questions about past performance vs today's statistics too. Consider keeping a copy of a database from that time so you can answer any questions superiors have. Kansas mentioned keeping a spreadsheet of reporting departments with their submissions (#'s for each month in a year) and then creating a new worksheet each time the numbers were requested by superiors. This can be accomplished using a PivotTable (shared in the Resources & Tools Showcase document)
- Be careful in labeling NFIRS, training, and/or users. Negative labels and rhetoric hurt the mentality towards NFIRS. For example, saying "dumb it down" cannot be accepted. Our users are not dumb. While NFIRS reports may be easy for an individual, that does not mean they are inherently "easy." We must look at the realities and skills of all people involved. Your "reality" may include strong computer skills which makes using NFIRS software easy. Not everyone has strong computer skills making their "reality" different which affect reporting. Train for each level of skill but avoid negative rhetoric and labels and respect the reality of an audience

A lengthy discussion centered on the public requests for an NFIRS request. Points included:
- FD fear going to court in general but that is compounded by fear of what they write in a report
- Confusion over NFIRS open record information and HIPAA
- The misunderstanding that if there are holes in the report, blanks, or "Undetermined" (even when the information has been determined) that the FD will not be held accountable in a court setting. The reality is that holes in reporting will lead to serious questioning of the FD personnel.
- Courts can call FD personnel years after an incident. A well completed report is the best defense against memory lapse. Memory should not be relied upon and has been known documented in failing during court testimony
- You're going to court whether or not you do/submit the report. When your FD gets summoned to court chances are that anything you have regarding that incident will be subpoenaed anyway
- Many people join a fire department to protect and serve their own neighborhood. Failing to create quality reports can hurt homeowners trying to work with the insurance companies. These are the very neighbors that a FF wants to help. Insurance companies are trying to reduce their liability and payout. Right or wrong this is the business. Missing reports can also delay payments to homeowners.

The last portion of the discussion was responses to "What is going right for your program?" Responses were:
- Maine State Fire Marshal partners with the Red Cross and State Farm working to provide smoke detectors and prevention campaigns
- Using one contact to answer all questions instead of a "group discussion" on what the right code should be. Having one person be the final answer works better than attempting to gain consensus. Several FDs expressed the value of this technique
- Using social media to spread information has increased participation with the information and spread the ideas further than normal publications and PSAs would normally reach. There were participants requested a sample Social Media policy so if anybody reading this can help with that please share.
- Acknowledging how bad the data really is opened the door to improvement. If a FD doesn't look at how bad the data is it can never be improved and change will never occur
- Having passion about NFIRS. People may not respond to your training but they'll respond to your passion. If you don't believe in the power of data and NFIRS you will have great difficulty achieving anything

- Keeping the lines of communication open inside the fire department. Being accessible to questions when they occur means phone calls or emails at odd hours but it is incredibly powerful for success. Many people shared success with this strategy of open communication lines
- Having an accessible state PM. Kansas changed from a "half person" State PM to a full-time dedicated state PM who is able to consistently provide information and answer questions. Since the switch, Kansas has seen reporting participation go from 34% to 80% in 18 months
- Providing training to FDs. While the travel is expensive the payout is worth it. Take advantage of any regional training to provide a NFIRS class. Ask a FD to host and maximize your travel efforts by inviting surrounding departments to attend, widening your impact

There is much room for further discussing this topic and there are many strategies yet to be explored. I would like to see this topic continued and more participation from across the U.S. Do you have answers to the prompt questions above?