



Client Case Study

Skagit County, Washington



Client Snapshot Skagit County, Washington

Location: Snohomish County, Washington, approximately 60 miles north of Seattle

Population: 125,000

Fire Protection: 19 fire districts, 7 municipal fire departments

Personnel: Mostly volunteer, with some districts and municipal departments employing career personnel

Fire Districts Served: #2, #3, #4, #9, #13, Town of La Conner

Rescue Hub Go-Live Date: January-May, 2018

Training Meets Technology

In 2012, career firefighters Todd Wigal and Jason Huizenga created Fire Training Unlimited (FTU) to bring expert, hands-on training to district fire stations in northwest Washington State. Led by instructors who drew from real-life situations in the field rather than textbooks, FTU's fire training curriculum quickly became a hit with fire chiefs and training officers, who were eager to bring more outside expertise to their districts. They asked if FTU might share their curriculum so that their firefighters would be able to attend the same sessions.

Wigal and Huizenga embarked on a search for software that would help them share FTU resources. Although several programs offered ways to track training, none had the ability to both deliver training and track it. Notifications about and preliminary materials for upcoming training had generally been sent by email, so when a session approached, firefighters would have to search their inboxes for something sent weeks earlier. The owners of FTU rapidly began to see the value of a program that could deliver and track training materials as well as provide a messaging feature for reminders and other communications. Enter Rescue Hub.

“...deliver and track training materials as well as a messaging feature for reminders...”

While on a family vacation, Todd Wigal told his brother Jeff, a web developer, about FTU's predicament. They began brainstorming about a program that could help FTU improve their fire training workflow from start to



finish. When an initial attempt to build one on the Moodle platform failed, Jeff and Todd Wigal began custom-designing, with Huizenga, a software program that would be robust enough to handle the entire process. Soliciting input from fire officers at various departments, they started beta testing the program in 2016 and began servicing six Skagit County fire districts in 2018.

Communication and Flexibility

Mike Ray keeps busy. A career firefighter who has worked for the Bellingham, WA, Fire Department for the past 22 years, he was recently hired for a second role as fire chief for Skagit County Fire District #3. He has been using Rescue Hub to manage the training for 50 volunteer firefighters since he started the position a year ago. “It’s a phenomenal product,” he says, noting that the communication among firefighters and fire stations in the county has improved significantly since they started using the software.

Since volunteer stations do not have a corporate email structure like professional stations, there has typically been no reliable way to contact all volunteers with information about an upcoming training or to verify that they have completed a module. “We would have to constantly update email lists,” Ray says, a tedious and time-consuming task. The messaging function within the Rescue Hub app has been the perfect remedy for this problem. Now, firefighters manage their own accounts, including contact information updates, freeing Ray from having to chase down this information himself. Emails are sent to the individual’s Rescue Hub account as well as their email account, so they are unlikely to be lost.

Previously, Ray notes, firefighters attending a drill night would write their name on a sign-in sheet, which would then be entered into a computer record by someone else. This two-step method often led to inaccuracies, with people either not signing in or their names being inadvertently left out of the computer log. No one could see their training record unless an officer or administrative assistant gave them a report, so firefighters might not know that they hadn’t gotten credit for a session until much later. With Rescue Hub, instructors, officers, and firefighters can record attendance themselves on their own smartphones or at a station computer. Personnel can log on to their account at any time to monitor which training requirements they still need to complete. It’s also easy for Ray to compile quarterly and annual reports demonstrating that training requirements have been met.

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District 3 has also benefitted from the ability to complete some training remotely. “It’s so much more comfortable to be able to review something while having coffee, or sitting in a recliner. You can be much more focused,” Ray adds. His personnel appreciate that they can now watch video or review training material on laptops, tablets, or smartphones at their own discretion.

“Jeff has been great to work with,” says Ray, noting that Wigal has helped him make adjustments to the station’s interface as they’ve developed their use of the tool. He notes that firefighters with varying levels of tech ability have found the program easy to use—even those who are still using flip-phones. And as a supervisor, he is pleased that time formerly used up watching videos in a conference room can now be spent in service, “out drilling with hoses.”

A New Perspective

Jeff Schwab has been a firefighter for Skagit County Fire District #2 for ten years, and was promoted to assistant chief two years ago. Like many firefighters he wears several hats, also working a day job as a sales representative. With so many details to keep straight in both roles, Schwab is grateful for Rescue Hub's comprehensive delivery and tracking system, which the station has used for the past year.

"It's made my workflow a heck of a lot easier," says Schwab, who supervises 33 volunteer firefighters. "I've always been challenged with people asking where they are and what they need to make up—that's gone away. It's made it really simple as a training officer."

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At first, Schwab wondered how his personnel would respond to the new system, since their levels of comfort with technology vary wildly. But he found that his volunteers—who range from tech-savvy 22-year-olds to 65-year-olds who hardly use computers—all caught on quickly. "The guys adopted it much better and faster than I thought," he says. They have become so accustomed to receiving weekly reminders for upcoming trainings through Rescue Hub, in fact, that they actually question Schwab if they don't receive one.

"It's really changed our perspective on what firefighters need to accomplish throughout the year," Schwab notes. Because training materials and tracking are all in one place, a firefighter can easily see at a glance which training topics are coming up, as well as those they've already completed. Preliminary articles or videos are added when training invitations are sent, so individuals can log into their accounts to read or watch the material before the training session when it's convenient for them. When firefighters know where to find material and can review it at their leisure, they're more likely to retain what they learn and be well prepared for the training session.

In the past, the training schedule had been entered into an Excel spreadsheet calendar, printed, and posted on the wall of the fire station. Invitations, along with patchwork of preliminary material such as YouTube videos and information from training websites were sent via email. Paper sign-in sheets from trainings were stored in manila folders. With Rescue Hub, the training calendar, preliminary materials, and attendance statistics are all pooled in one easily accessible place, and all of these features interact with each other. Both trainers and personnel can breathe easy knowing that personnel will be prepared for upcoming sessions and that their participation will be recorded accurately. "It solves the problem of me getting pestered about where I am with requirements," Schwab adds.

A Common Language

Todd Wigal and Jason Huizenga created Fire Training Unlimited with a mission to give back to their community by providing quality fire training. They believe that firefighters who are better trained have more pride in their work, which leads to improved morale and higher rates of job retention. In only a year's time, Rescue Hub has already helped put this mission into motion.

Rescue Hub's platform power makes it a clear improvement over previous methods of information sharing. Not only is the entire workflow housed in one program, but users do not

have to be concerned about uploading material with a large file size, a frequent concern when materials are sent by email. Firefighters can also upload their own videos rather than having to rely on YouTube or Vimeo to demonstrate a specific skill. By recording a quick smartphone video of an equipment demonstration and uploading it straight into Rescue Hub, departments save time and make training materials more relevant to other county firefighters.

In addition to the benefits the software has provided individual fire districts, it makes resource sharing among districts not just possible, but seamless. “We’ve created a consortium of information,” says Huizenga, noting that all participating districts across Skagit County can view each other’s calendars and training materials. If firefighters cannot attend a training in their district, they can likely find it in another one.

Resource sharing takes on a special importance when firefighters working in different stations find themselves suddenly thrown together on a call. “The bottom line is, we’re really trying to create a system for folks to be able to share information,” Wigal says. When everyone is getting the same training, he adds, a “common language” develops throughout the county that is mutually beneficial for all. By creating a single, accessible system for the sharing and tracking of FTU’s training curriculum, Rescue Hub has shown its commitment to allowing such communication to thrive.

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For more information, contact:

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