

Joint MVA initiative improves use of fire, police resources

By Len Garis, Fire Chief, City of Surrey, and Fraser MacRae, Chief Superintendent, Surrey RCMP

A partnership between the fire and police services in one British Columbia city is improving the response to motor vehicle accidents (MVAs) while freeing up resources.

Implemented in 2005, the joint initiative by Surrey Fire Service and Surrey RCMP has reduced response duplication by an average of 60%, by streamlining response protocols and handing over some scene management capacity to fire crews.

One of the main results is that RCMP are no longer attending minor “fender benders” that used to eat up significant time and resources, while fire crews no longer have to wait for the RCMP to arrive to start clearing the scene.

“We can get multiple MVAs during the day at rush hour, and so the assistance of the fire department has been immeasurable,” said Cathie Matthews, Manager of Surrey RCMP’s Operational Communications Centre.

About 4,000 MVAs occur in Surrey each year, including those involving injuries or fatalities and those involving only property damage.

While the fire service responds to both categories of MVA, RCMP protocol requires the RCMP to respond to all injury accidents and only those property damage incidents where there is a suspicion of criminality (impaired driving, assault etc.) or significant traffic control issues.

However, prior to the initiative, Surrey RCMP would frequently respond to calls that did not fit this criteria, and often spend 30 to 45 minutes processing the scene.

Because scene management was strictly a police responsibility at the time, the responding fire crews had to wait for police to arrive before taking any action – such as requesting tow trucks, clearing the roadway, directing traffic, facilitating the transfer of insurance documents, or leaving the scene. In some cases, the crews waited for more than 25 minutes for police to arrive.

This was even the case during minor collisions where there was clearly no injury or criminal reason for the police to attend. Because many drivers still have the misconception that they must wait for police to arrive to move their vehicle, the resulting traffic tie-ups could be significant.

In 2005, Surrey police and fire representatives sat down together to address the inefficiencies caused by the response procedures. The new protocol they developed empowered fire officers to assess and manage the scene of non-injury/property damage MVAs.

Fire officers arriving first at an MVA are now assigned responsibility for determining if police involvement or attendance is required.

RCMP are still called to MVAs in cases involving an injury or death, a criminal offence, individuals who insist on police attendance, individuals from outside the region, violation

of a person’s rights, traffic control issues, or an emergency/city vehicle. However, all others can now be managed by fire crews.

When the new protocol was established, training was provided to fire personnel to prepare them for the new responsibilities. The RCMP were initially involved in establishing the training parameters – including scene assessment and preserving evidence – but now, MVA scene assessment and management is part of the training Surrey Fire Service provides its members.

The result of the initiative has been more efficient use of both fire and police resources, as indicated by Surrey MVA statistics from 2006 to 2009.

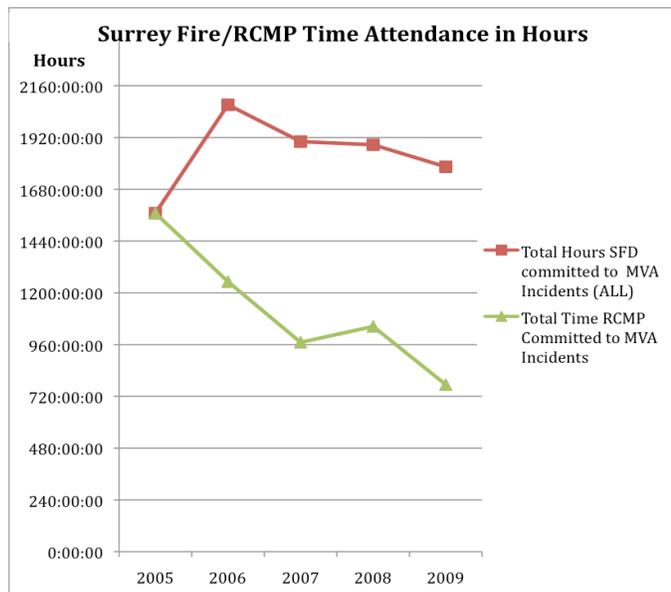
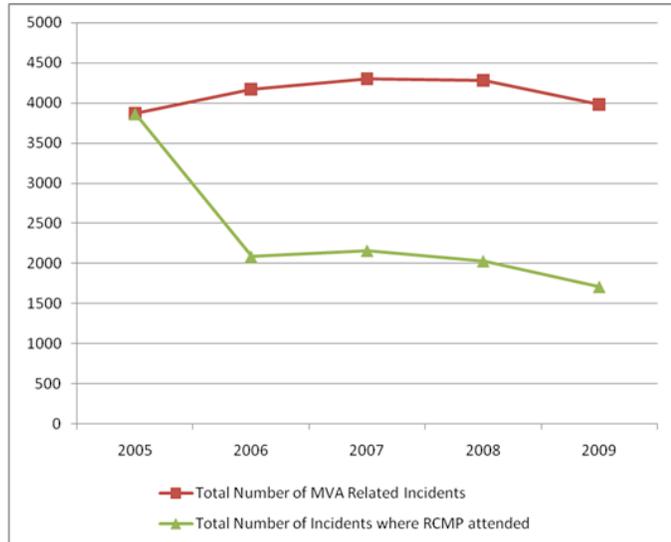
RCMP now attend about 40% of all MVAs in Surrey. The reduced attendance is saving the RCMP at least 900 hours per year – and this estimate does not include the time officers had previously spent at MVA scenes conducting interviews and writing reports.

The initiative has also reduced the time fire crews spend responding to MVAs, freeing them up for other priorities.

“If the RCMP aren’t needed, we’re able to more efficiently clear the scenes – tow trucks can be called, we can push the cars off the road, tell people to exchange information and go on their way,” noted Surrey Deputy Fire Chief Jon Caviglia. “It makes sense that we’re no longer duplicating services, and it makes sense that those resources can be allocated elsewhere.”

Another benefit is that Surrey’s MVAs are cleared more quickly and have less impact on the community and other motorists.

“At times, one could expect to have up to five emergency vehicles, including fire, police and ambulance, at a minor motor vehicle incident,” said Surrey Deputy Fire Chief Karen Fry. “This partnership not only reduces traffic congestion, it also reduces the carbon footprint in our city.”



The initiative was possible because of the strong relationship between Surrey's fire and police departments, and their shared interest in finding innovative ways to improve efficiency and serve the community better.

"It's all about making the right decisions to manage our resources by allocating only the responders required at an emergency incident," Fry said. "Our goal is to provide the best and most efficient response of resources to emergency incidents in the City of Surrey, and this model saves our partner agency, the RCMP, time to respond to more critical incidents."

Matthews noted that the strategic placement of fire department infrastructure throughout the community is another reason it makes sense for fire crews to manage MVAs that don't require RCMP involvement. Some of the RCMP zones cover large areas, which means the closest patrol car may be a considerable distance from an MVA scene.

"The partnership is one that needs to be maintained and developed," Matthews said. "I think the fire department can be of greater assistance to us because of their location and availability. I'd like to see the partnership grow even further."

Similar positive results are predicted if the initiative was to expand to include the ambulance service, which sometimes attends MVAs where its presence is not required. For example, fire officers arriving first at an MVA could cancel the ambulance if it was not needed for treatment or transportation. This would result in a more efficient use of the community's three primary emergency response resources.

At a time when governments are struggling to reduce costs while meeting increasing service demands, this initiative and partnership demonstrates that working together without being constrained by traditional protocols can achieve improved service, more efficient use of resources, and reduced costs and duplication.

Len Garis is the Fire Chief for the City of Surrey, British Columbia and is an Adjunct Professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of the Fraser Valley. Fraser MacRae is the Chief Superintendent, Officer in Charge at the RCMP detachment in the City of Surrey, British Columbia.