

Firehouse Lawyer

Volume 8, Number 8

August 15, 2008

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A Tribute to Dan Packer

Late last month, we received the tragic and shocking news that one of our finest Washington State Fire Chiefs died while fighting a wildland fire in California. Dan Packer, Chief of East Pierce Fire & Rescue, was a valued Chief, husband, father, leader, client and friend. His position was overrun by an out of control wildland fire in Northern California on July 26, 2008.

I have gotten to know Dan pretty well over the years that he has been a Chief, first for the City of Bonney Lake, then for District 22 and the City, and finally for East Pierce. District 22, near Lake Tapps, has been a client of mine since the mid-90's. Of all of my many Fire Chief clients, over the past 22 years focusing on representing fire departments, Dan had to be one of the very finest. He had that perfect combination of organizational skills, a desire to achieve, intelligence, but tempered with great "people skills". In short, he had all the right stuff that makes for a strong leader. It was no accident that he was selected to be the President of the Washington State Association of Fire Chiefs. At his memorial, we also learned that he was a loving husband and father, with a touch of Montana bull-rider thrown in for good measure. He deserved every bit of the quality "sendoff" he was given by family, friends, fire service and other folks at that memorial service. The turnout was impressive and well-earned.

One of Dan's most noteworthy achievements was the creation and development of East Pierce Fire & Rescue, an organization that now serves an area and population once served by no less than seven different fire departments. The cities of Bonney Lake and Sumner, together with Pierce County Fire Districts 1, 12, 20, 22, and 24 now comprise East Pierce Fire & Rescue, but the fact is that a mere ten years ago they were seven fire departments with seven budgets and seven boards (with at least five Fire Chiefs). Dan did not make that drastic organizational change all by himself—he just spearheaded the effort. Indeed, he was continuing that process just last month. As he drove down to that California fire, Dan discussed with me a couple more interagency agreements to cooperatively provide services to neighboring departments.

In fact, I will never forget that last conversation with Dan on Friday, July 25, 2008. We were discussing draft documents as he drove down I-5.

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After about a twenty-minute conversation, we agreed on the steps to take next and signed off. I threw out two words, sort of casually, without thinking too much about the content of what I said: "Be safe."

In light of what happened to Dan the next day, I will never say those words again to any friend or client without really stopping and thinking about it, and *really, really* meaning it! While we will miss Dan a lot, let us honor his memory by moving forward with the legacy he left to the Washington Fire Service family. He would have wanted all of us to continue to find innovative and creative ways to provide better and more efficient service to the citizens of our state.

Dan Packer is a genuine hero. His equal will not be seen soon. Please support Marylee and their daughters in every way possible. To them, we say only "thank you" for sharing Dan with the fire service. Please also have a kind word for East Pierce, as those folks have lost a precious leader.

I was planning to include a few more articles this month, but right now that is just not possible. None of these legal issues seem very important at this moment. This issue is dedicated to Dan Packer—a Fire Chief of the first order.



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