Fire chief: ‘spectacular experience’

By Melody Kinser mkinser@mechlocal.com

“A spectacular experience” is how Jethro Piland describes his leadership role as chief of Hanover Fire-EMS. He rose to the department's top position two years ago.

Although he brought the knowledge and strengths to serve, he readily admits that he has “learned a ton of life lessons.” There have been great successes, as well as difficult and stressful challenges.

Guiding a multi-site operation that focuses on life safety and rescue, Piland said they have three noteworthy areas of success during his tenure as chief.

He said there has been an “overall reorganization and set-up to sort of better define our system, our people and the services that we deliver to the citizens.”

Community partnerships are valuable to their work, the chief added. “There's no way we could do what we do without the partnerships.” In addition to accomplishing the goals they set for themselves, they are able to achieve successful day-to-day operations because of the interactions with citizens, business owners, hospital systems and regional partnerships with other Fire-EMS departments. “The business that we do touches a lot of different areas,” he said.

“Early on in becoming the fire chief I had an opportunity with my executive staff to review our services, reinvent ourselves to the community, and select and focus on four major strategic goals,” Piland said.
“The first is staffing and capabilities; second, information technology enhancements; third is health and safety; and fourth is officer development. All of these goals are consistent with our mission and our vision of the department,” Piland added.

With staffing and capabilities, he continued, “It's really a twofold piece; one is administrative. We developed, designed and implemented a new planning division. We took an existing executive leader and sort of recrafted it. The planning division really focuses on emergency management and community preparedness. They provide intelligence and information and help us design emergency response guides.”

Those guides, Piland explained, provide instruction in how they respond to major mass casualty incidents, a railroad emergency and targeted hazards such as the airport, college and some industrial manufacturing groups.

Another facet of Piland’s reorganization involved defining a full-time public information officer. “His office is to reach out to the media. He has been able to promote our department through some of the social media areas and develop relationships with big businesses in the community,” the chief said of Battalion Chief Jason Williams.

Piland said he has leaders that focus on community partnerships and helped in coordinating with Memorial Regional Medical Center in emergency plans, a disaster drill and an Ebola exercise. That same group also reached out to CSX and Amtrak for railroad issues.

The chief has been working to refocus the operations group and the leaders within the fire stations, both career and volunteer. “I want them to get out in the community and meet with the local civic leaders, the school principals and the business association leaders. Part of what we do as a fire service is ‘customer service’ from the standpoint of not a stranger coming to our business. The men and women in the field are the face of the organization. They develop the public trust.”

“We've enhanced our image,” Piland said, with some modifications in their uniforms. He said they wear a more formal dress shirt on a daily basis. “I think people want to see their fire service sharp. If you look professional, you are professional. When I talk about our system, it's a high performance system.”

With staffing and capabilities, Piland turns his attention to response. “We've had the opportunity to streamline some of our policies, procedures and guidelines. We've had an opportunity to work with research agencies and help define some new firefighting strategies across the United States. Hanover County is a leader in some new techniques on fighting fire. Today, with the use of synthetics and lightweight construction, fires burn hotter faster and are more dangerous than they have been in the past 20 years.”

He said his department is a “trendsetter in the way we fight fires.” Operational readiness also emphasizes firefighter safety. When attacking a fire, he said they “want to be smart, utilize the information from the data collectors, from the scientists to ensure our folks operate in a safer manner. I realize what we do is inherently dangerous.”
As chief, Piland said he has set some standards on minimum staffing and focused on “putting the appropriate resources in the system. It’s not just career personnel; it’s volunteer staffing — it’s a combination of staffing.”

He has reviewed data from the past five years leading him to focus on life safety and the ability to implement a rescue; emergency medical response, “which is truly the number of ambulances in the system;” and “supporting our volunteer system, which is truly the most dynamic part of our organization. My responsibility is when they need support and they ask for help I need to be responsive.”

Those are his targeted areas when he compiles a budget – “not only for this year but for the next five years.”

As technology evolves, Piland said the fire service needs to continue to keep up with it and to use it to achieve goals with fire and EMS (emergency medical services). Included on his list are computers on the ambulances so that patient care records can be transferred electronically to the hospitals.

Thanks to the support of those serving Hanover Fire-EMS and the Hanover County Board of Supervisors, Piland said they have applied for some grants and upgraded defibrillators to the latest technology. He said they also had been able to use Internet features “to keep us organized, share information and really consume the data of our response times, our units available where is our major call volume, what are our geographic challenges.”

Looking ahead, he envisions the opportunity for GPS (global positioning system) locators in their air packs (the breathing apparatus), which will help battlefield commanders determine the location of firefighters within a structure. He said the locators also provide important information such as how much air they have in reserve whether they’re moving or stationary or even horizontal or vertical.

Enhancing capabilities and focusing on the safety of the men and women in his department who, “truly are the most important resource in the organization,” Piland said.

Health and safety involve “a broad range of objectives” for the chief. He has reassigned a management position to a full-time risk manager who looks at procedures, equipment and protective clothing “to ensure that we are protecting our most valuable asset, which is the men and women – career and volunteer folks.”

The Ebola scare, Piland said, “has been one of our primary focuses – not only enhancing our equipment but drawing a greater focus on our medical screening.” He said they are focusing “on their personal protective equipment and training to make sure we know how to use and operate the equipment as it pertains to infectious disease across the board.”

According to Piland, another focus of the risk manager is on cancer prevention, “which is paramount for me so that our folks can go home to their families. This focus has helped me drive some of our budget requests the past few years to include additional gear washers, additional sets of turnout gear protective clothing we use going into a fire.”

With that position, he said his department has been able to “enhance our policies or our practices for post-structure fire decontamination. We’ve also had an
opportunity to evaluate our fire stations to ensure that we enhance compliance and they become safer environments."

Piland wants to place an emphasis on fitness by developing a program to evaluate career and volunteer members, as well as providing them with an opportunity for physical fitness, education, nutrition and stress management.

Officer development offers educational opportunities for the younger leaders to advance – whether they are career or volunteers.

“Developing the individual is an area of importance,” Piland said. “We’ve been able to offer some education for our volunteers in the means of fire academies and EMT (emergency medical technician) classes. We’ve been able to partner with J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College to provide educational opportunities.”

Hanover Fire-EMS also has partnered with Hanover County Public Schools to provide what the chief calls a “phenomenal” program at the high schools. This year’s class has 80 students enrolled, with 20 in the fire academy, 20 in the EMT program and 40 in a new program, “Introduction to Public Safety.”

The new curriculum focuses on “introducing law enforcement, fire, EMS and emergency communications to our students. This program has been extremely successful.” Piland also pointed out that it is a “huge pipeline for our volunteers.”

Piland joins the fire companies in encouraging volunteerism, which, he acknowledges, has changed over the years. Hanover Fire-EMS has been able to attract younger volunteers who “might not live in our communities,” with a goal of landing a Fire-EMS job somewhere in the commonwealth.

“We have a strong volunteer presence from folks who don't live in Hanover County. We have great volunteers,” the chief continued. The volunteers coming to the county will devote three to five years. “We're not seeing them 20 years the way I've seen them in the past. They get some training and experience and get hired sometimes by Hanover County Fire-EMS and sometimes by local jurisdictions around us — Henrico, Chesterfield and the City of Richmond.”

With pride, Piland said “Our volunteers are educated and they are trained. It's a younger generation that's looking for a job and their leaders are recognizing that they are a temporary work force and their leaders are coming to me looking for a permanent solution.”

Piland said that it is a strong system, but it's changed. With those changes, he faces challenges in his “ability to put resources on the road. They're a temporary work force for the companies and they've reached out for help. Ultimately, me as the fire chief and the leaders of the volunteer organizations realize that we need additional staffing to meet the expectations of the community. It doesn't matter if it's career volunteer or combination staffing. We need trained, competent individuals.”

From a resource management perspective, Piland said their system is strained. “Our response goal compliance is slipping and the data is showing that we need additional ambulances in our system.”

A fully equipped fire truck costs $500,000 and an ambulance has a price tag of about $200,000.
“We believe in Hanover County,” the chief said. “We get to grow our own through our internal training.”

Piland said he has been a Hanover County resident “my whole life” and that’s why he “got interested in serving the community.” He started as a volunteer and decided after college that he wanted to serve the community full-time. He graduated from the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in Lexington.

As chief, Piland said he is “absolutely excited and honored to lead the Fire-EMS organization.”