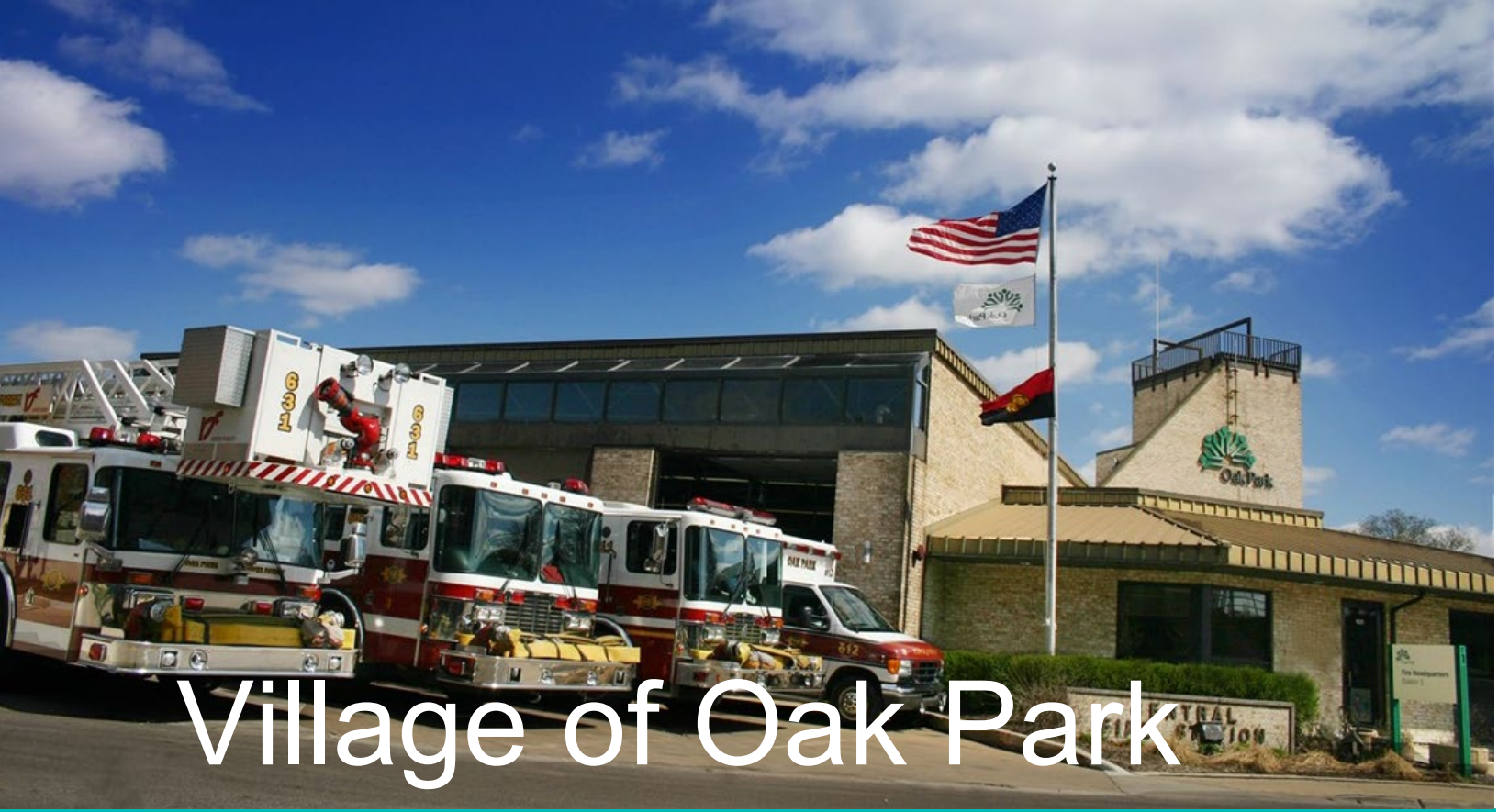




Village of Oak Park

Fire Department Organizational Assessment

September 2025





September 18, 2025

Mr. Kevin Jackson, Village Manager
Ms. Lisa Shelley, Deputy Village Manager
Ms. Donna Gayden, Interim Chief Financial Officer
Mr. JT Terry, Fire Chief
Village of Oak Park
123 Madison Street
Oak Park, IL 60302

Dear Mr. Jackson, Ms. Shelley, Ms. Gayden, and Chief Terry:

Baker Tilly is pleased to transmit the final report of our assessment of the Fire Department organizational assessment. The report presents our observations as well as a set of proposed recommendations to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of the Department in meeting the growing needs of the community. Specifically, we have outlined strategies to optimize staffing levels, improve resource allocation, and streamline operational processes, ensuring the Department's continued success in providing essential public safety services to the City's residents.

We wish to thank the Village staff for their assistance in providing us with a variety of information and for having candid discussions with our team members to inform this assessment. Their cooperation and insights have been invaluable in shaping our understanding of the Department's operations and challenges.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to collaborate on this important initiative. We look forward to discussing the findings and recommendations of the report with you in further detail.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Carol Jacobs".

Carol Jacobs
Managing Director

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Executive Summary

The Village of Oak Park engaged Baker Tilly to perform a comprehensive organizational assessment of the Oak Park Fire Department (OPFD). This report presents our detailed observations and recommendations based on analysis of the Department's staffing, facilities, equipment, operations, and financials, with the primary goal of improving efficiency and accommodating long-term growth. Our team reviewed Fire Department data and documents, interviewed Village leadership and fire personnel, toured facilities, and benchmarked the Department against industry best practices. The findings below provide Oak Park with the information necessary to fully understand the Fire Department's current state and to guide strategic improvements.

This report provides 26 recommendations that address areas of improvement for the Fire Department, which are listed in Attachment A.

Major Areas of Focus/Recommendations

During our assessment, we conducted nine individual interviews, toured the three fire stations, reviewed submitted documents and information, deployed and analyzed an employee survey, and reviewed and applied industry best practices. These activities informed the major areas of focus that we believe Department leaders should focus on in the near term, and our report is organized around these focus areas as explained below.

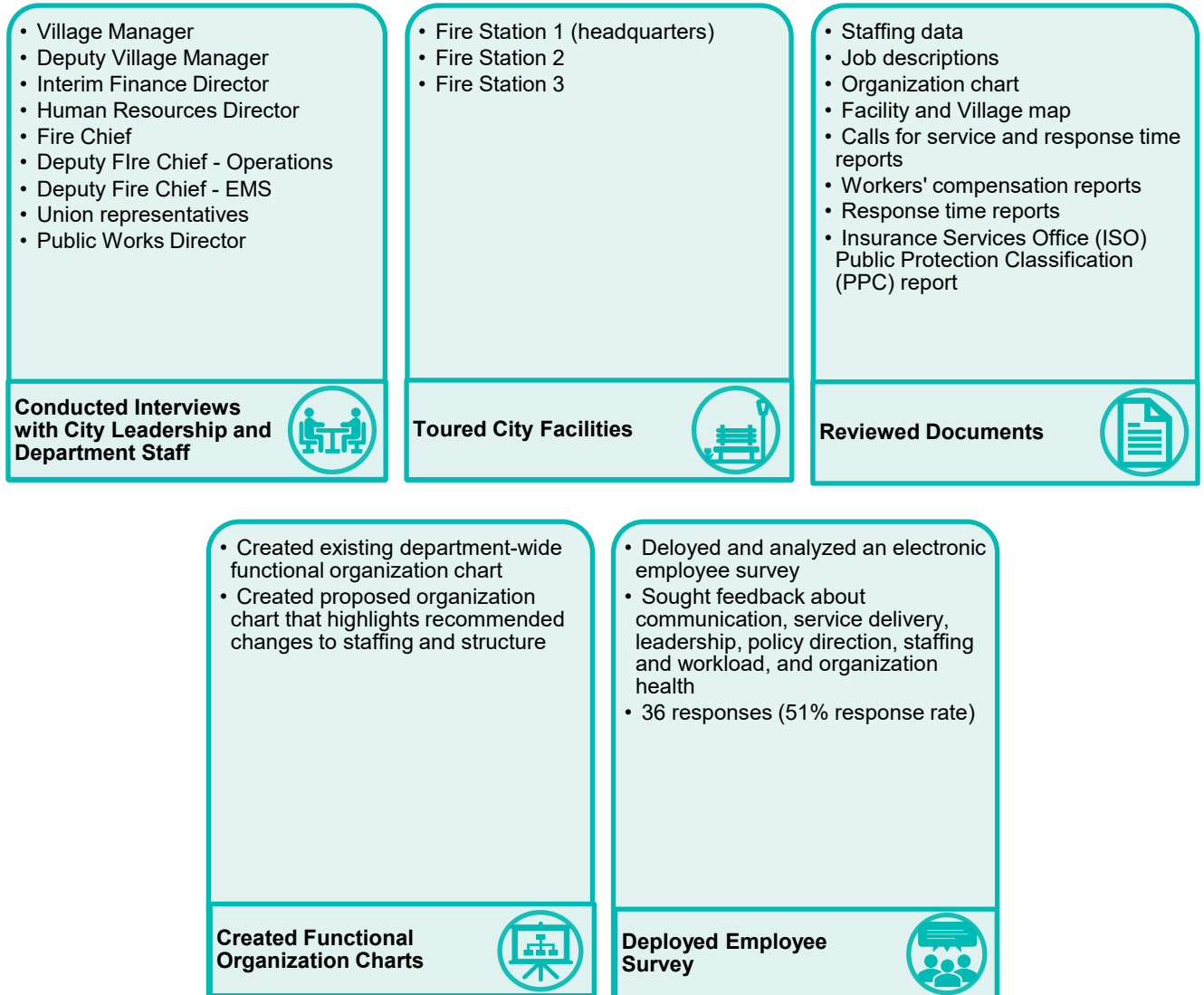
Organization of the Document

This report is organized into the following major sections:

- Executive Summary
- Project Approach
- Oak Park Fire Department Background
- Department Staffing and Personnel
- Facilities
- Apparatus and Equipment
- Operations
- Revenue and Expenditures
- Conclusion

Project Approach

Baker Tilly and Oak Park staff began the project with a kickoff meeting to discuss the project's objectives and timeline. Baker Tilly obtained information to perform our analysis and inform the recommendations in this report through the activities that are summarized below.



Staff Outreach Themes

Baker Tilly recognized staff outreach as a critical component of the organizational assessment. The interviews and employee survey provided staff with an opportunity to share their opinions about what is working well in the Fire Department, as well as what could be improved. Developing common themes from stakeholder engagement processes, such as confidential one-on-one interviews and the employee survey, is essential in conducting any organization review. In these settings, participants are in the best position to provide candid feedback about what is working well, what can be improved upon, and where opportunities for improvement may exist. The overall themes that emerged from the interviews are summarized below. A summary of the employee survey is provided in Attachment B.

Village Staff Interview Themes

At the outset of our engagement, the Baker Tilly team conducted on-site interviews with Village staff. Common themes that were heard include the following:

1. The Village commissioned its own staffing study to provide an objective analysis amid political pressure and union lobbying. With rising service call volumes, limited ambulance availability, and ongoing staffing shortages, the Department faces operational strain. This has prompted recommendations for a fourth ambulance, a specialized squad unit, and increased staffing, all while balancing financial constraints.
2. There is an overall sense that the Department provides excellent fire and EMS service and is proud of its professionalism and top ratings. The Department fosters a service-oriented, well-trained, and supportive team culture.
3. Key challenges facing the Department include facility issues, the lack of a training coordinator, and perceived staffing shortages. Staff are concerned about the high call volume, ambulance availability, morale, and cultural and recruitment challenges. Staff are affected by excessive overtime, which leads to work-life imbalances.
4. The Department is facing significant overtime costs (exceeding \$1,000,000 per year), due to staffing shortages, injuries, and contractual minimum staffing requirements. Post-COVID staffing challenges, limited public education on appropriate 911 use, and the need for lighter response vehicles contribute to operational strain, though trust in the department remains high.
5. The Department's facilities need significant upgrades, with Station 2 being the most critical due to its age and uncertain future. While improvements are underway at Station 1 and Station 3, funding all necessary projects may be a challenge. A bond issuance is being considered to support the work.
6. The Department ensures quality and effective services through a combination of structures, post-incident reviews, mentorship, regular evaluations, and open communication. Ongoing training, feedback from residents, and collaboration with Loyola Hospital for continuing education also support continuous improvement for both fire and EMS operations.
7. Recruitment is handled internally by the Department, but delays in the Human Resources Department, especially background checks, have resulted in the loss of some viable candidates. Suggestions for improving this situation include keeping applications open year-round, using an outside firm for faster processing, expanding outreach efforts, and more effectively using the Board approved "over hire" candidate lists to maintain staffing levels.
8. The Department is progressive in its use of technology, with tools such as new monitors, thermal imaging cameras, iPads, and smartphone-based inventory systems enhancing operations. While a new CAD system is in progress and Telestaff scheduling software improve efficiency, concerns remain about IT support, with a preference for dedicated Fire Department IT services and improved integration with fleet management systems.
9. The Engaging Community for Healthy Outcomes (ECHO) program is working effectively, providing crucial aftercare and follow-up support through social workers for community individuals with complex needs, such as mental health issues or housing instability. By tracking performance and maintaining communication with the Department, ECHO helps improve outcomes and may eventually reduce call volume.

Oak Park Fire Department Background

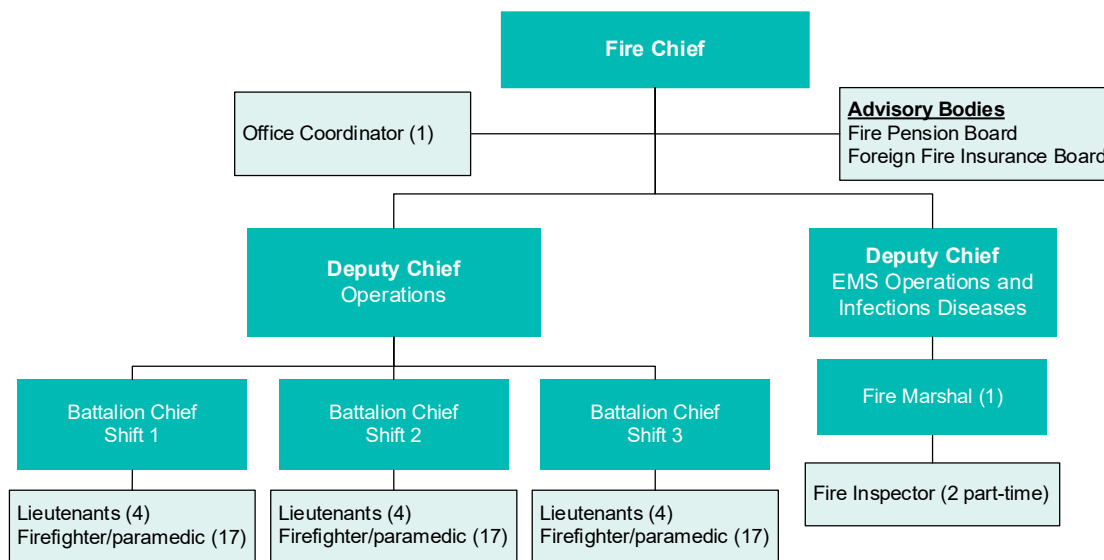
Incorporated as a village in 1902, Oak Park is located just west of downtown Chicago. The Village spans 4.7 square miles and is home to over 54,000 residents. Oak Park is celebrated for its strong sense of community with a unique blend of urban and suburban living. The community offers high-quality public schools, excellent public transportation, and robust public services.

The Oak Park Fire Department was established over 100 years ago. Department staff are committed to protecting the community and adapting to its evolving needs. Emergency services provided by the Fire Department include fire suppression, basic and advanced life support, hazardous materials mitigation, and special rescue. Non-emergency services include alarm registration, public education and cardiopulmonary resuscitation/automated external defibrillator (CPR/AED) classes, station tours, pre-fire planning, and annual fire inspections of commercial and public buildings.

Organization and Staffing

The Fire Department is staffed by administrative and operational personnel. Administration staff include a Fire Chief, two Deputy Fire Chiefs, a Fire Marshal, two part-time Fire Inspectors, and an Office Coordinator. Operations staff include three Battalion Chiefs, 12 Lieutenants, and 51 Firefighters/Paramedics. The Fire Department's current organization structure is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Current Fire Department Organization Structure



Since 2017, the Fire Department has added a Fire Marshal position and two part-time Fire Inspector positions, increasing the total administrative positions from 4.0 full-time equivalents (FTE) to 6.0 FTE. Since 2017, operations staff have increased from 60.0 FTE to 66.0 FTE, which is a 10.0% increase over the period reviewed. Historical Department staffing is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Historical Fire Department Staffing

Positions	FY 2017 Actual	FY 2018 Actual	FY 2019 Actual	FY 2020 Actual	FY 2021 Actual	FY 2022 Actual	FY 2023 Actual	FY 2024 Budgeted	FY 2025 Budgeted
Administration FTE									
Fire Chief	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00

Positions	FY 2017 Actual	FY 2018 Actual	FY 2019 Actual	FY 2020 Actual	FY 2021 Actual	FY 2022 Actual	FY 2023 Actual	FY 2024 Budgeted	FY 2025 Budgeted
Deputy Fire Chief – EMS and Infectious Disease (Community Svs.)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Deputy Fire Chief – Operations	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Intern		0.25	0.25	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fire Marshal	-	-	-	-	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Fire Inspector (2 civilian part-time – 1 FTE)	-	-	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Office Coordinator	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Administration Total	4.00	4.25	5.25	5.00	6.00	6.00	5.00	6.00	6.00
Operations FTE									
Battalion Chief	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00
Lieutenant	12.00	12.00	12.00	12.00	12.00	12.00	12.00	12.00	12.00
Firefighter/Paramedic	45.00	48.00	48.00	48.00	48.00	48.00	51.00	51.00	51.00
Operations Total	60.00	63.00	63.00	63.00	63.00	63.00	66.00	66.00	66.00
Grand Total Fire	64.00	67.25	68.25	68.00	69.00	69.00	72.00	72.00	72.00

Source: Village adopted budget documents.

Staffing and Apparatus by Station

Oak Park operates three fire stations, with resources allocated as outlined below.

- Station 1: Fire Headquarters at 100 N. Euclid Avenue
 - Houses administrative offices, a 104' tower ladder truck, two advanced life support (ALS) ambulances, and the Battalion Chief/shift commander.
- Station 2: 212 Augusta Street
 - Houses a three-person engine company.
- Station 3: 900 S. East Avenue
 - Houses a three-person engine company and one two-person ALS ambulance.

The Department has a fourth ambulance, which can be put into service if a full complement of staffing is available for the day or can add a person to the truck or engine based on need. At full staffing levels, the Department staffs three shifts of 22 sworn personnel per shift to staff these units and provide service 24/7. This staffing by station is shown in Table 2 below.

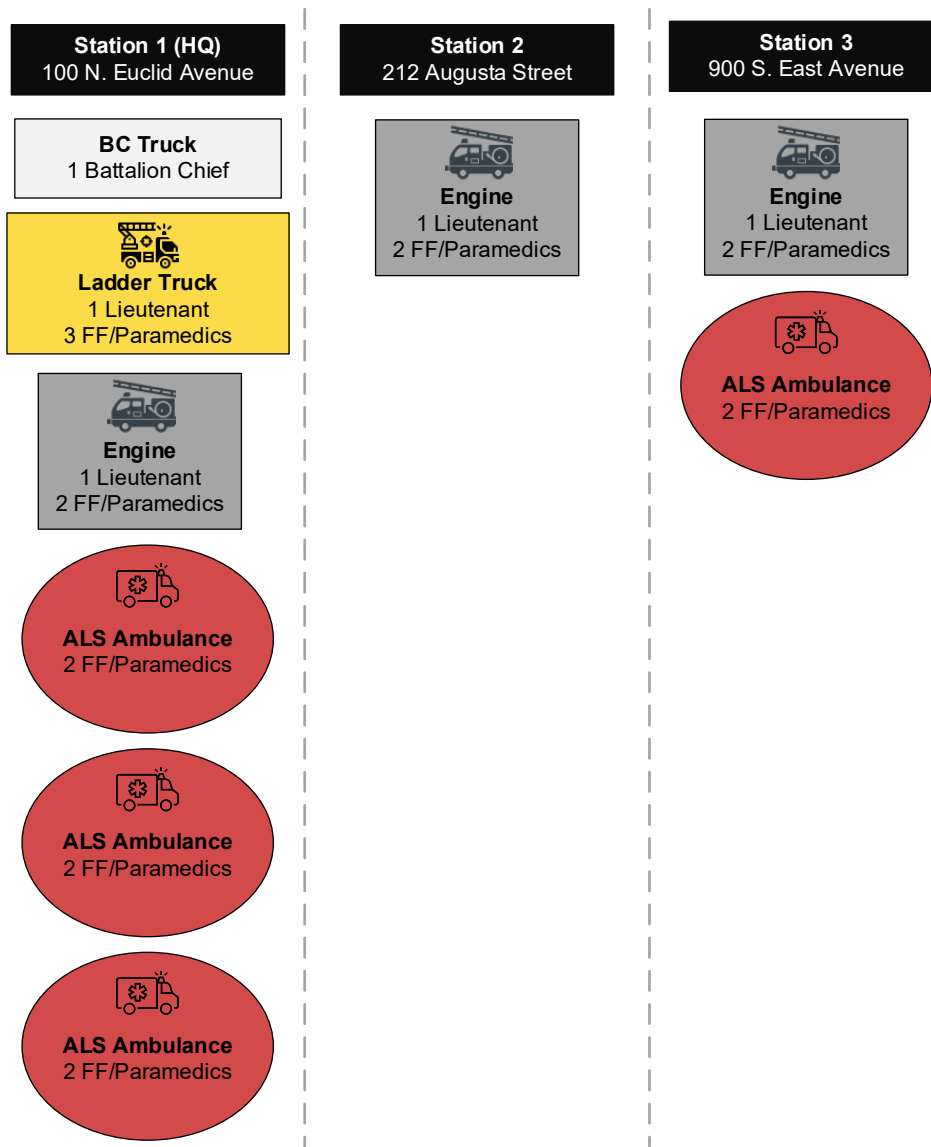
Table 2. Staffing by Station

Station 1	Station 2	Station 3
1 Battalion Chief		
1 LT, 3 FF – Ladder Truck	1LT, 2 FF, Engine	1 LT, 2 FF, Engine
1 LT, 2 FF - Engine		
2 FF - Ambulance		2 FF - Ambulance
2 FF - Ambulance		
2 FF – Ambulance		
14 per shift	3 per shift	5 per shift

Note: If full staffing of 22 is not available, the engine at Station 1 and one of the ambulances at Station 1 are not fully staffed.

The current apparatus by station is shown below in Figure 2, with fully-staffed 22-personnel shifts.

Figure 2. Apparatus by Fire Station



Calls for Service

The Fire Department collects data on three types of calls: structure fire calls, service calls, and EMS calls. The tracking for this grouping has been ongoing since 2019. Service calls are considered small, non-structural fire calls (e.g., car, garbage can, dumpster fires) or other non-emergency calls, which could include false alarms, lift assists, lockouts, odors, public assists, and other non-emergency service calls. EMS calls require a paramedic response. The Oak Park Fire Department's call volume has been steadily increasing, driven primarily by EMS calls. Currently, the Department handles nearly 9,000 calls per year and it is estimated to approach 10,000 calls annually within the next couple of years. Over the past three years, total calls for service have grown approximately 3.6% per year. Between 2019 and 2024, EMS calls represented 58% to 68% of all incidents. Table 3 below shows call volume over the past six years.

Table 3. Annual Calls for Service

Year	Structure Fire Calls	Service Calls	EMS Calls	Total
2019	42	3,116	4,504	7,662
2020	34	2,961	4,223	7,218
2021	47	3,334	4,615	7,996
2022	45	3,228	5,333	8,606
2023	64	2,652	5,913	8,629
2024	30	3,483	5,405	8,918

Using the annual calls for service data that was provided by the Village, Baker Tilly calculated the average daily structure fire calls, service calls, and EMS calls, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Average Daily Calls for Service

Year	Structure Fire Calls	Service Calls	EMS Calls	Total
2019	0.12	8.54	12.34	20.99
2020	0.09	8.11	11.57	19.78
2021	0.13	9.13	12.64	21.91
2022	0.12	8.84	14.61	23.58
2023	0.18	7.27	16.20	23.64
2024	0.08	9.54	14.81	24.43

Changes in Service Needs

Oak Park's service needs are evolving with demographic and development trends. Key emerging factors include an aging resident population (seniors aging in place in single-family homes and approximately seven to eight newer assisted living/memory care facilities), numerous new mid-rise and high-rise residential developments which increase population density and changing community health and safety challenges (e.g. more calls related to behavioral health, substance abuse, and unhoused individuals).

These trends indicate a slow-growing demand for EMS and fire/non-emergency services. At the same time, traditional fire suppression/non-emergency demands have fluctuated during this six-year period; however, the risk associated with larger buildings and tight urban layouts remains high. The Village has also considered eliminating some zoning restrictions, which could spur redevelopment and further

densification, impacting future service demand. Oak Park is experimenting with innovative programs, such as ECHO, where specialized teams follow up with individuals who have received services from the Fire Department and may need additional resources after the incident. This program recognizes that additional support can be beneficial in some instances, reducing the burden on the Fire Department for repeat non-emergency incidents.

As discussed later in this report, the most recent community risk assessment (CRA) was conducted in 2004 to 2005. Baker Tilly recommends performing a new CRA to evaluate how demographic changes and new development will affect fire and EMS needs. Based on that analysis, the Village can plan for resource changes such as additional EMS units, a smaller squad truck for minor responses, or even relocating or adding stations if coverage gaps appear.

Recommendation 1. The Department should set a schedule to regularly conduct strategic forecasts of service demand five and ten years out.

We also suggest coordinating with other Village departments (e.g. Building/Zoning, Public Health) to implement risk-reduction strategies. For example, working with senior living facilities on on-site medical resources or fall prevention could mitigate the surge in EMS calls from those sites. Embracing programs like ECHO is forward-thinking and the Fire Department should continue to collaborate with that program, tracking its impact on call volume, and be prepared to integrate such alternative response models permanently if they prove effective.

Department Staffing and Personnel

On-Duty Staffing

Oak Park is the sixth most densely populated community in Illinois outside of Chicago, according to the ZIPAtlas. It also contains numerous multi-story buildings, which can complicate emergency response. Maintaining an adequate crew at each station is critical for not only the safety of the community and staff, but also the efficient and effective delivery of services.

The Fire Department maintains a minimum daily staffing level of 16 firefighters, plus a chief officer, a requirement established by Village policy and Board approval. This staffing level ensures that the Department can operate at least four companies, including two engines, one ladder, and three ambulances, along with a chief officer on duty. The Department is not permitted to drop below this minimum without special approval. Consequently, when personnel are unavailable due to illness or leave, overtime is used to maintain the required staffing level. Although there is no formally defined maximum staffing level, the Department's budget allows for up to 22 personnel per shift, which includes a buffer to accommodate days off. In practice, daily staffing typically ranges from 17 to 20 personnel when the Department is fully staffed. However, injuries and vacancies often reduce this number back to the minimum of 16.

Recommendation 2. Continue to maintain the 16-person minimum staffing level.

Training

Training is a critical component of staffing needs, and the Oak Park Fire Department faces challenges in this area. There is no dedicated full-time training chief; this position was eliminated due to budget constraints. Training responsibilities are handled on a part-time and ad-hoc basis by existing staff. For example, a Lieutenant might coordinate drills, or a Battalion Chief oversees training in addition to other duties. While the Department has operated without a full-time training officer, each shift continues to do what they can to keep the employees up to date on their training, which can include debriefings, working with the local hospital to keep EMS skills sharp and a review of medical calls for quality assurance.

This is not an ideal scenario for a department of this size and could result in the decertification of employees if training is not completed in a timely fashion. The continuing education of firefighters/paramedics is key to having a department that is compliant with State and Federal laws.

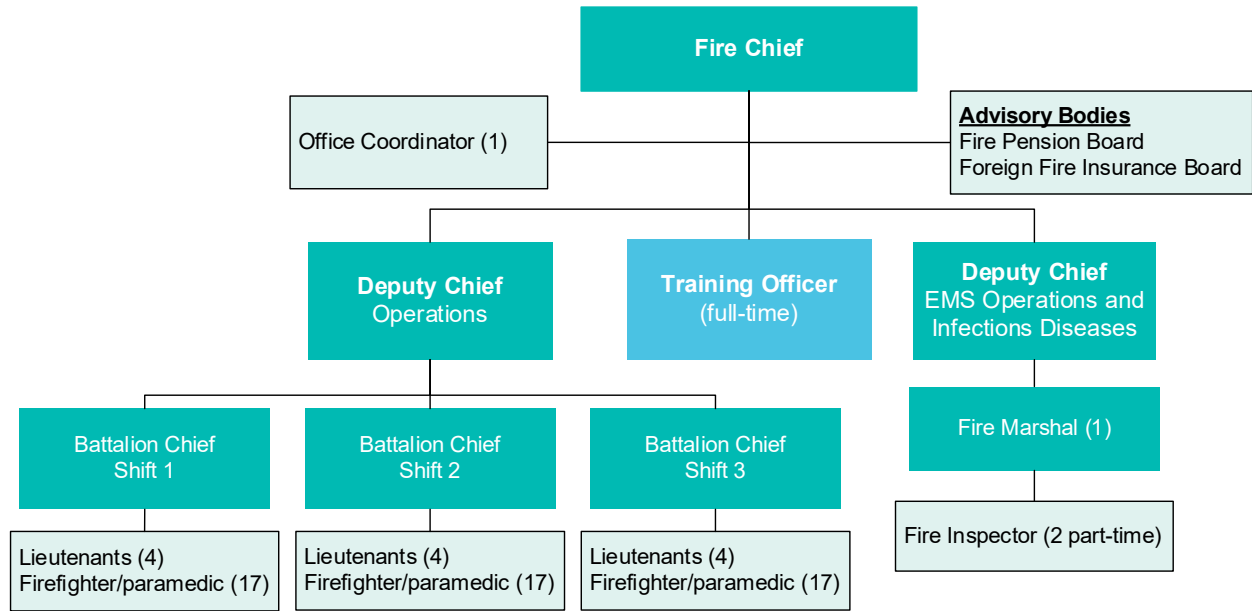
The lack of a full-time training officer has led to coordination and documentation gaps. Meeting the extensive training documentation requirements of NFPA, ISO, and OSHA has been difficult without someone exclusively in charge.

A full-time training officer could be created at the deputy chief, battalion chief, or lieutenant level, depending on the Department's training needs and objectives. Creating this position at a higher level would provide the Chief with additional administrative support for recruitment and community outreach. This training officer would be responsible for managing all aspects of training, such as planning the annual training calendar, ensuring all required drills (fire, EMS, special operations) are completed and logged, coordinating multi-company or multi-agency exercises, and keeping certifications up to date. If adding a new position is not immediately feasible, consider assigning an existing officer on modified duty or a rotating Battalion Chief specifically to handle training coordination on a part-time, yet structured basis.

Recommendation 3. Create and fill a full-time training officer position.

The Department's proposed organization chart is shown in Figure 5 below.

Figure 3. Proposed Fire Department Organization Chart



Note: Blue indicates a proposed new position.

Overtime

Overtime is a significant concern for many fire departments. Firefighters often work long and physically demanding shifts. Excessive overtime can lead to fatigue, which may have an impact on reaction times and decision-making abilities. Overtime can also lead to burnout and decreased job satisfaction, which affects the Department's retention and recruitment. While overtime pay can be financially beneficial for individual Firefighters, it can strain the Department's budget and potentially divert funds from other critical areas, such as equipment maintenance, training, and hiring. Overtime costs for the Operations Division of the Fire Department from 2017 to 2025 are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 5. Historical Overtime Costs

Budget Account	FY 2017 Actual	FY 2018 Actual	FY 2019 Actual	FY 2020 Actual	FY 2021 Actual	FY 2022 Actual	FY 2023 Actual	FY 2024 Year-End Estimate	FY 2025 Budgeted
Fire Operations Overtime (account 510503)	\$630,259	\$289,188	\$423,322	\$947,433	\$898,072	\$992,314	\$1,176,151	\$830,000	\$800,000

Source: Annual adopted budgets

Overtime is caused by a variety of events, including vacation time, training time, sick time, workers' compensation injuries, off-duty injuries, and vacancies within the Department. The number of workers' compensation injuries/illnesses and days away from work is shown in Table 4 below.

Table 6. Annual Workers' Compensation Injuries/Illnesses and Days Away from Work

Work Related Injuries and Illnesses	CY 2017	CY 2018	CY 2019	CY 2020	CY 2021	CY 2022	CY 2023	CY 2024
Total Number of Injuries/Illnesses	Not available	Not available	18	14	14	18	22	10
Total Days Away from Work	Not available	Not available	654	394	573	524	1,049	871

Source: OSHA Form 300

Note: Before 2019, the Village did not report workers' compensation by department.

In addition, Baker Tilly reviewed separation data from the past three fiscal years. When there was a vacancy in a Battalion Chief or Lieutenant position, an internal replacement was made within 17 calendar days, on average. However, the much more problematic hiring challenge the Department faces is replacing the Firefighter/Paramedic positions that are left vacant as a result of either internal promotions or vacancies in firefighter positions. These recruitments are by definition external in nature and take more time for vetting, but hiring a new Firefighter to fill a vacant Firefighter position took an average of 154 days. This is clearly one reason for the Department's high and growing overtime costs. A summary of vacancy days is shown in Table 5 below.

Table 7. Annual Vacancy Days

Role	Separation	Date of Internal Replacement	Calendar Days Between Separation and Internal Replacement	Date Hired	Calendar Days Between Separation and New Firefighter Hire
BC	5/11/2023	6/4/2023	24	10/2/2023	120
Lieutenant	9/13/2024	9/16/2024	3	2/18/2025	155
Lieutenant	8/10/2024	8/11/2024	1	1/3/2025	145
Lieutenant	1/10/2023	1/20/2023	10	7/24/2023	185
Lieutenant	5/11/2023	6/29/2023	49	10/9/2023	102
Lieutenant	6/17/2023	6/29/2023	12	10/2/2023	95
Firefighter	12/13/2023	N/A	N/A	2/25/2025	440
Firefighter	4/13/2022	N/A	N/A	6/15/2022	63
Firefighter	4/23/2022	N/A	N/A	7/13/2022	81
Firefighter	3/20/2025	N/A	N/A	Vacant at time of analysis	
Average Number of Vacancy Days			17		154

Improving Hiring Practices and Reducing Vacancy Factors

The Fire Department's hiring process follows a civil-service style testing model common in Illinois. Key elements of the current practice include a written exam (often through a testing company) and physical ability test for job applicants, creation of an eligibility list, and then interviews/background checks when a hiring need arises.

One of the reasons the process is lengthy is due to several state statutes and the Village's Fire Commission. The process begins when a vacancy occurs within the Firefighter/Paramedic ranks. The Fire Commission is notified by the Human Resources Department, and the Fire Commission has a call for examinations and posts a public notice of at least two weeks in local papers based on the requirements of the Board and Fire Police Act. The process is outlined below.

1. The Committee calls for an examination to fill a vacancy: indicate time/place for exam, where applications may be obtained, and application due date.
2. The exam is advertised in a newspaper of general circulation for at least **two weeks** before the exam.
3. Applicant files application forms with the Committee.
4. Exams are held on the dates fixed by the Committee.
5. Oral interviews are conducted by the Committee.
6. Applicants are placed on an initial eligibility register.
7. The initial eligibility register is posted **within 60 days** after the exam, including all final grades of applicants.
8. Applicants may claim preference points **within 10 days** of initial registry posting (e.g., veteran, education, residency).
9. The Committee prepares the final eligibility register, which includes claimed preference points.
10. The Committee conducts background investigations, psychological exams, and medical exams.
11. Eligible list for employment.

This process, as outlined by the State, is inherently long, to provide opportunity and transparency in the hiring process. However, long delays can result in significant overtime and employee fatigue. In order to reduce the time frame, the Village should consider methods that will keep an eligibility list fresh.

Recommendation 4. Schedule regular entrance exams (e.g., quarterly or every six months) regardless of immediate openings, so that the eligibility list stays current. Regular exams will institutionalize the process of maintaining the eligibility list rather than waiting for vacancies to start the process.

As noted above, the hiring process is reactive, in that the Village typically only hires when a position is vacant, rather than maintaining a staffing buffer. However, Oak Park can request to over hire (hire extra personnel beyond authorized strength) with Village Board approval in anticipation of known upcoming retirements or attrition. Because Firefighters frequently take leave for vacation, injuries, or training, over hiring can provide coverage for these missed shifts, without relying on costly overtime. Reducing mandatory overtime can help maintain morale and physical and psychological readiness for the job. Additionally, over-hires help ensure seamless transitions when vacancies arise.

The Village Board is encouraged to allow over hiring by one to two positions when the eligibility list is strong. Based on recent vacancies, workers' compensation leave, and expected Department retirements, the Fire Department would benefit from over hiring in the Firefighter/Paramedic classification.

Recommendation 5. Institute a process for determining when over hiring in the Firefighter/Paramedic classification is optimal for the Village.

The Department would benefit from shortening the hiring cycle. If background checks and medical clearances can be done faster (via outsourcing or dedicating human resources staff to public safety hires), the time from exam to job offer could shrink.

To speed up processing, the Village should consider using an outside firm for background checks and screenings. Contracting for these services would improve efficiency, accuracy, and compliance in the hiring process. External firms often will have faster turnaround times, specialized expertise, and up-to-date knowledge of legal requirements.

Recommendation 6. Conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine whether the Village should contract for background checks and screening services.

Training for new hires depends on their prior certifications. Those who are already state-certified go through about three weeks of in-house orientation training, while new hires who are uncertified attend an eight-week fire academy funded by the Village. All new hires must already be paramedics, which is advantageous given Oak Park's EMS workload.

Finally, to improve retention and hiring success, ensure that pay and benefits remain competitive and highlight Oak Park's commitments to training, career development, and work-life balance (given the prior morale concerns about overtime). A streamlined, candidate-friendly hiring process will help Oak Park secure top talent in a competitive job market.

Unit Hour Utilization

There is a methodology that Fire Departments use to inform staffing positions based on call volume per shift. Of concern is that too many calls for service could lead to firefighter/paramedic fatigue. The Unit Hour Utilization (UHU) is considered an industry standard. While the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), which is considered the gold standard for fire department operations, does not have a standard for the paramedic runs in a 24-hour period, the UHU can be used as a proxy for monitoring workload and fatigue. UHU is calculated as a percentage of time a unit is committed to calls during a shift. For example:

A UHU of 25-30% is often cited as the upper threshold for a 24-hour shift. This equates to roughly 6-8 hours of active call time in a 24-hour shift.

Exceeding this threshold can lead to fatigue, reduced performance and increased risk of burnout or medical error. Caution and good judgment should be used if using the UHU, as it is not standardized across departments, and its interpretations can vary.¹

The Village Fire Department does not currently use UHU to evaluate the workload of its ambulances or fire apparatus.

Recommendation 7. Calculate the UHU for both ambulance and fire apparatus to determine whether they are within the utilization standards.

Diversity Recruitment Protocols

Workforce diversity and inclusive hiring are priorities for the Village. A diverse fire department better reflects the community it serves, which can, in turn, foster trust among the community it serves. A commitment to diversity helps the Village attract a broader range of candidates. Currently, the Fire Department handles recruitment largely internally, with a focus on broad outreach. The most recent Firefighter entrance exam involved a grassroots recruitment effort to attract candidates from diverse communities and educational institutions.

There is no residency requirement or requirement for fire academy certification at application time, which helps open the candidate pool. The Department encourages applicants with paramedic training (EMT-P is required by hire or shortly after) and has done outreach at paramedic schools and colleges.

The Department should formalize its diversity recruitment strategy by defining clear goals (e.g., targets for gender, ethnicity, age) and reviewing job descriptions to ensure they are inclusive. Recruitment metrics (applicant demographics, yield at each hiring stage) should be monitored and reported to identify where improvements can be made. To expand talent pools, the Department should partner with local high schools, community colleges, and community organizations to participate in career fairs, offer ride-along programs, and market fire and EMS careers to underrepresented groups.

Recommendation 8. Formalize the Department's diversity recruitment strategy, taking into consideration the suggestions offered above.

¹ *Fire Service Fatigue: A Problem You Can't Afford to Ignore. Fitch and Associates.*

As discussed above, the Fire Commission creates eligibility registers that are good for two years. When the list is exhausted, the recruitment process starts again. This two-year serial process could cause the Department to lose out on candidates in between exam cycles. Open recruitment year-round (even without an immediate opening) can ensure a pipeline of talent ready when positions open.

Recommendation 9. Establish ongoing recruitment protocols, including continuous or more frequent application periods, to always build and maintain an eligibility list of diverse candidates.

Facilities

Station 1 (Headquarters)

Station 1 – Fire Headquarters, located at 100 N. Euclid Avenue is the largest station and home to department administration. It has a central location in the Village and houses critical resources (ladder truck, two ambulances, Battalion Chief with response vehicle). As the Fire Department's headquarters, it includes training space (for CPR classes, etc.) and has room for some expansion on-site.

Station 1 is an older facility that requires upgrades. Identified issues include the need to expand the building (to accommodate modern apparatus and possibly additional staff), outdated restroom and locker room facilities (particularly to accommodate a diverse workforce), and insulation/windows that need replacement.

Based on interviews, the building's energy efficiency and climate control are subpar due to old windows and poor insulation. According to staff, there are plans in place to address some of these issues, including building out/expanding the main station, updating the restrooms and lockers, and insulating and installing new windows.

These upgrades would improve living conditions for crews and energy efficiency. Station 1's location is good for covering the northern and central parts of Oak Park, though as call volume grows, apparatus from this location are frequently pulled to the south side for backups.

Proceeding with the planned Station 1 expansion and facility upgrades will extend the useful life of the headquarters and allow space for future additions, such as an extra ambulance or a dedicated squad vehicle bay. When renovating locker and restroom areas, they need to be designed to be gender-inclusive and large enough for the current staffing.

We also recommend exploring the feasibility of adding a training room or dedicated EOC/command room in the expansion, leveraging Station 1's role as headquarters. In planning these improvements, it is essential to ensure minimal disruption to operations – a phased construction or temporary facility may be needed. Upgrading Station 1 will enhance the Department's professional image and provide firefighters with a safer, more functional work environment.

Recommendation 10. Schedule the planned Station 1 expansion and facility upgrades.

Station 2

Station 2, located at 212 Augusta St., is the oldest fire station in Oak Park, at over 100 years old. It is strategically located on the north side of town and houses an engine company that is critical for responding to that area and assisting in the downtown/Oak Park Hospital vicinity. The community is accustomed to having a station in this area for quick response.

Station 2's age and size are its biggest downsides. The facility is described by Fire Administration staff as "the biggest need; need to rebuild". It has structural and space limitations, old design bays that are too small for modern apparatus, a lack of modern decontamination areas, and outdated living quarters. At this point, the Village has not made a decision on the future of Station 2. The Village has funds allocated for a study to explore options. Options could include a major renovation, a complete rebuild on site, or even relocation if a better site can be found. Until a decision is made, Station 2 continues to operate in its suboptimal condition.

Reconstruction or replacement of Station 2 should be a top capital priority for the Village. Given its age and the increasing service load, a new Station 2 is likely warranted, designed to today's standards (including adequate apparatus bays, exhaust removal systems, bunker gear storage, and accommodations for a diverse workforce). In the interim, the Village must ensure critical maintenance is done.

Recommendation 11. Complete the feasibility study for Station 2 as soon as possible, examining the cost-benefit of renovating the existing structure versus constructing a new station.

Station 3

Station 3, at 900 S. East Ave., serves the south end of Oak Park. Station 3's location is important for covering the southern neighborhoods and sharing coverage on the west with Station 2. It houses an engine and an ambulance, making it a key EMS response location. The station is newer than Station 2 (though still several decades old) and is currently undergoing upgrades.

Station 3 has aging infrastructure (windows, insulation, and kitchen). However, improvements are in progress: the kitchen is being renovated and windows/insulation are being upgraded, which should make the station viable for "20 more years" once complete, according to staff. Station 3 does not have the space requirements for additional vehicles.

Overall, with the improvements, Station 3's pros (good location, upgraded facility) should far outweigh its cons.

Recommendation 12. Continue and complete the current renovation projects at Station 3, ensuring renovations are made in a timely manner.

Apparatus and Equipment

The Fire Department's apparatus and equipment were reviewed, including the distribution of vehicles, their age and replacement cycles, funding mechanisms for replacements, and possibilities for reassigning equipment among stations. Oak Park's fleet includes modern ambulances and fire apparatus, but there is currently no dedicated long-term funding source for replacements. Below is an overview by sub-topic and recommendations to ensure the Department's apparatus and equipment remain reliable and up to date.

Fire Apparatus by Station

Oak Park's emergency vehicle fleet is distributed across the three stations as follows:

Station 1 (Headquarters) houses one Truck, a 104' tower ladder truck. Station 1 also has two frontline ALS ambulances staffed 24/7. The Battalion Chief's command vehicle is also based here. Notably, Station 1 currently does not have a traditional engine company; the fire truck serves that role when needed. Additionally, various reserve units (such as a spare ambulance or older engine) may be stored at Station 1 due to space.

Station 2 houses one Engine. This station typically has no ambulance; its crew focuses on fire suppression and first response until an ambulance arrives from Station 1 or Station 3.

Station 3 houses one Engine and one frontline ALS Ambulance. This station handles both fire and EMS initial response for the south end.

Deployment of Apparatus

Ambulance Calls

As the fire service has moved from responding to fires to responding to emergency medical calls and service calls, the Village determined that a third ambulance would alleviate the stress on its two-ambulance model and provide better service to the community. A third ambulance was put into service in May 2024. The Fire Department and Village management will need to evaluate the effectiveness of the third ambulance, determining if there are decreased response times, are more calls for service to respond to, and how often the ambulance is used for mutual aid.

Our interviews indicated that there may be a need for a fourth ambulance in the future. Part of this analysis will be determined by the increased calls for service for EMS, by determining what may be causing the increase in service calls.

On an average day from 2017 to 2024, Oak Park's three ambulances respond to 15-20 calls per day, often resulting in all ambulances being busy simultaneously. When Oak Park's ambulances are tied up, neighboring towns (Cicero, Berwyn, Forest Park, River Forest) are called for mutual aid ambulance runs.

According to NFPA 1710, there is no national standard for the number of ambulances per population. The standard is identified by response times. The Fire Department's standard for response times should be met 90% of the time. If the response time falls below that threshold, the Village should consider adding additional resources. After the Department has three years of call data for the ambulances, the Department should review utilization rates to determine whether a fourth ambulance is warranted.

Recommendation 13. Assess the need for the fourth ambulance after gathering two additional years of service call data.

Other Apparatus Considerations

During our field visits and interviews with employees, we noted that at Fire Station 1, the ladder truck goes out on all calls dispatched to Station 1, as there is no engine or smaller squad capability within the Fire Department. This leads to the most expensive and most significant piece of fire apparatus being

overutilized and not for its intended purpose. This can also be challenging due to the density of the community and the narrow streets in which the Department operates.

Many fire departments have an engine and ambulance respond to calls together, which is more efficient and economical than having a ladder truck respond to calls on a regular basis. Adding an engine can be a costly piece of equipment to reduce the truck's response to calls. Another option is to purchase a squad unit in the near term.

Adding a squad vehicle to the department's fleet would improve operational efficiency, given the urban and congested nature of parts of Oak Park. Squad vehicles are typically pickup trucks equipped with utility packs in the back, which are smaller and more agile than traditional fire engines. Being able to move through traffic quickly allows staff to reach emergency scenes faster. This is particularly useful for non-structure fires (e.g., car fires and dumpster fires), hazardous materials response, or medical emergencies where a full-size engine may not be necessary. By deploying a squad vehicle instead of a larger apparatus, the department can reduce wear and tear on more expensive equipment, lower fuel and maintenance costs, and optimize resource allocation.

We recommend exploring funding options for a two-person squad vehicle, such as a grant or demonstration program, to offset costs. Staffing the squad may involve creative scheduling, such as cross-staffing the squad with an engine crew when needed or using it as a peak-time unit staffed by overtime or part-time personnel. Start by defining the squad's role clearly (e.g., it responds to all vehicle fires, certain EMS assists, public service calls, etc.).

Recommendation 14. Explore funding opportunities and staffing requirements for a two-person squad vehicle.

Age and Replacement Schedule

Those in the fire profession consider the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) to be the gold standard for fire safety. The NFPA standard 1911, "Standard for the Inspection, Maintenance, Testing and Retirement of In-Service Emergency" was last updated in 2017. NFPA 1911 provides guidelines for first-line and reserve fire apparatus. The guidelines indicate that in the last 15 years, many upgrades have been made to fire apparatus to improve functional and safety features. Because of these recent upgrades, NFPA generally recommends that fire departments consider the value and risk of keeping fire apparatus beyond 15 years in first-line service. On the other hand, NFPA recognizes that the care, use, and maintenance of fire apparatus are the most significant factors in determining how a fire apparatus ages (i.e., some apparatus may simply be worn out at eight or ten years, while some may still be in serviceable condition at 20 years).

While the NFPA replacement standards are best practice guidelines, Oak Park has generally adhered to these guidelines, with an expected replacement of the ladder truck at 15 years and rotating or replacing ambulances on an eight-year cycle. However, the two primary engines (at Stations 2 and 3) are 15 years old and have experienced heavy use and multiple breakdowns in recent years. A summary of the Fire Department's fleet is provided in Table 6 below.

Table 8. Oak Park Fire Department Fleet

Year	Make	Model	Description	Acquired	Purchase Price	Replacement Year	Current Value
2014	Dodge	Charger	Admin Sedan Take home	5/22/2014	\$23,658	2025	\$5,000
2014	Ford	Expedition	SUV	8/20/2014	\$31,500	2026	\$12,000
2017	Ford	Fusion Hybrid	Admin Compact Take-home	9/7/2016	\$24,475	2027	\$12,000
2017	Ford	Fusion Hybrid	Admin Compact Take-home	9/7/2016	\$24,828	2027	\$12,000
2023	Nissan	Leaf	Admin Compact Inspector	2/14/2023	\$26,807	2032	\$15,000

Year	Make	Model	Description	Acquired	Purchase Price	Replacement Year	Current Value
2023	Nissan	Leaf	Admin Compact Inspector	2/14/2023	\$ 26,807	2032	\$15,000
2016	Ford	F 550	Ambulance AEV	5/18/2016	\$211,860	2028	\$25,000
2024	Ford	F 550	Ambulance	4/3/2025	\$326,927	2033	\$326,927
2020	Ford	F 550	Ambulance	4/23/2021	\$283,004	2030	\$35,000
2013	Ford	F450	Ambulance	3/7/2013	\$174,583	2025	\$25,000
2007	Bobcat	CLUB	ATV Fire purchase. No data.	10/18/2007			
2016	Ford	EXPLORER	F/D CAR	10/17/2016	\$29,180	2027	\$13,000
2020	Pierce	PIERCE	F/D ENGINE TRK 12 YR	1/14/2020	\$695,824	2032	\$50,000
2010	C.S. HME	Central States /HME	F/D ENGINE TRK 12 YR	11/10/2010	\$450,000	2028	\$25,000
2010	C.S. HME	Central States/HME	F/D ENGINE TRK 12 YR	11/10/2010	\$450,000	2025	\$25,000
2014	Ladder Truck	E-ONE	LADDER TRUCK Updated est 8/4/22	7/1/2014	\$798,294	2029	\$50,000
2006	Ford	F-350	PICKUP 2WD 3/4T	6/1/2006	\$36,810	2027	\$10,000
Total					\$3,614,557		\$655,927

Funding for New Vehicles

Oak Park used to fund vehicle replacements through an internal service fund (ISF), but that is no longer in place. Purchases are now made from the Village or fleet budget on an as-needed basis, which can be challenging for planning. The lead time for a new fire engine is typically one to two years, and recent estimates indicate a four-year timeframe to build a ladder truck once the order is placed. Ambulances are scheduled to be replaced every eight years (so each ambulance might be up for replacement in a staggered fashion) and engines every 10 to 15 years. The Public Works Department has a replacement schedule, but all other Village needs limit the funding of fire apparatus. Funding those replacements on time has been an issue.

Establishing an ISF for fire apparatus is a smart financial strategy and best practice that helps fire departments manage high costs and long-term planning associated with purchasing and maintaining vehicles. ISFs enable a department to make regular, planned contributions to the fund over time, instead of managing large, unpredictable capital outlays. Departments that use ISFs can plan for future needs rather than reacting to breakdowns or emergencies, and funds can be allocated based on the expected lifespan of each vehicle.

Recommendation 15. Develop a formal Fire Department apparatus and equipment replacement fund spanning the lifetime of the equipment.

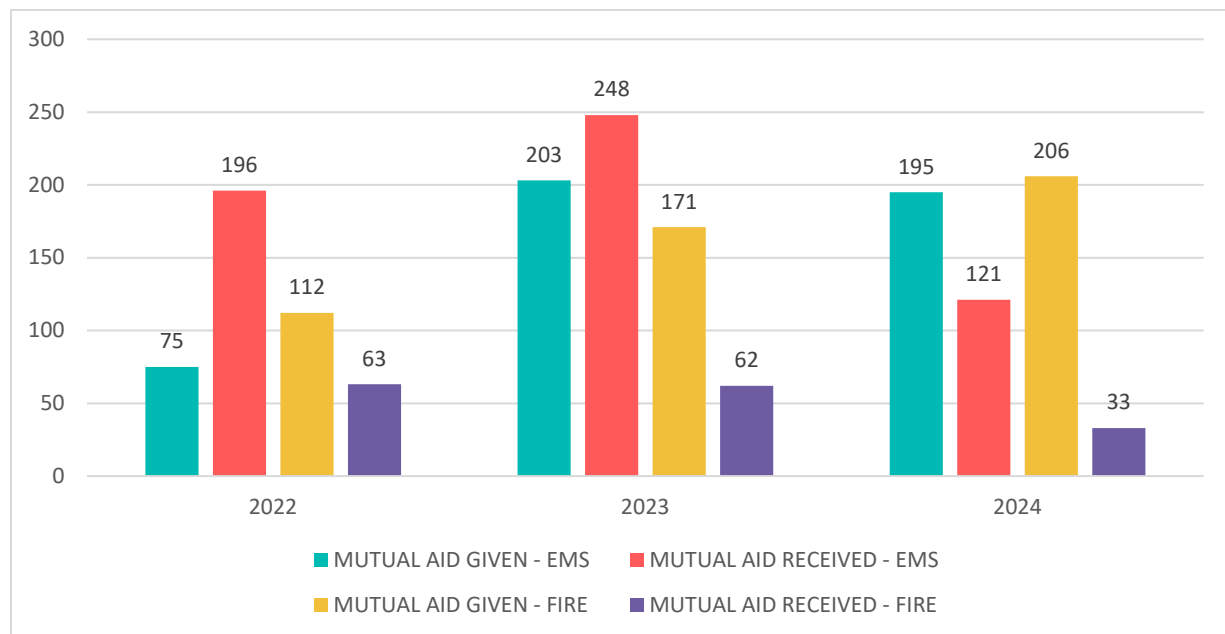
Operations

This section reviews how the Fire Department conducts its operations, including mutual aid agreements, dispatching, training programs, risk management, accreditation standards (ISO rating), community risk reduction, and public engagement. Oak Park Fire Department is a professional operation with strong mutual aid partnerships and good service outcomes, but there are areas for improvement, such as formalizing training coordination, enhancing risk reduction efforts, and striving for top-tier accreditation standards. Key operational topics and recommendations are detailed below.

Mutual Aid Response

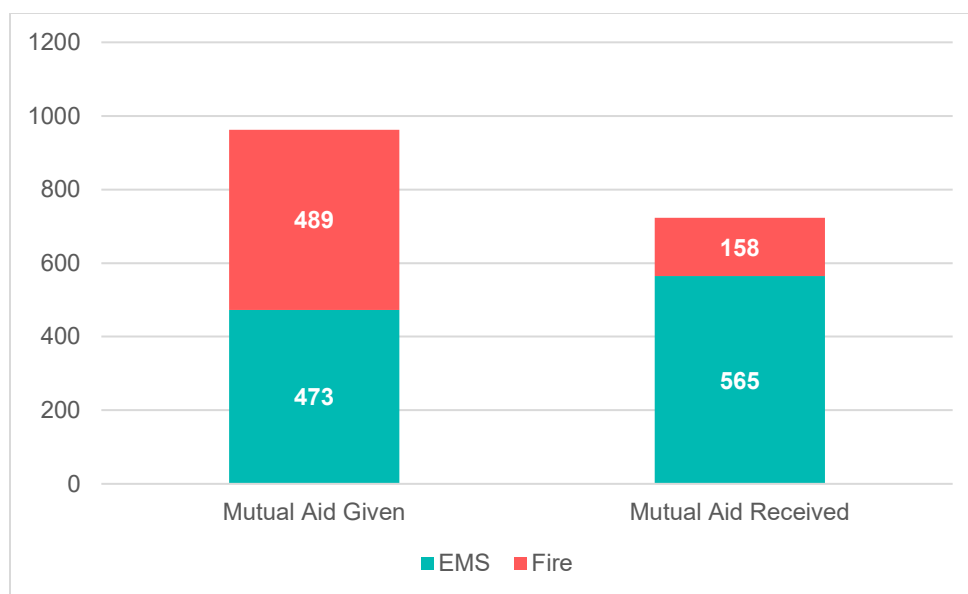
Oak Park is an active participant in mutual aid and automatic aid with neighboring fire departments. The Village belongs to MABAS Division 11, which formalizes regional response plans. For any confirmed structure fire in Oak Park, River Forest, and Forest Park, each jurisdiction automatically sends an engine to assist. For a working fire beyond initial alarm, Oak Park will get additional companies from Berwyn and Cicero automatically (and likewise provides aid to them). The number of times mutual assistance was given and received over the past three years is shown in Figure 6 below.

Figure 4. Mutual Aid Given and Received



Over the past three years, Oak Park has provided about 25% more service to its neighbors than it has received. The Village provided 962 calls for service outside of the village and received 723 mutual aid responses. Oak Park added its third ambulance in May of 2024, which may be why there has been a reduction in the calls for EMS assistance from 2022 and 2023, compared to 2024. Total mutual aid given and received from 2022 through 2024 is shown in Figure 7 below.

Figure 5. Total Mutual Aid Given and Received (CY 2022 to CY 2024)



The mutual aid system (MABAS) provides a predefined “box card” system that identifies which departments respond to what level of incident. Dispatchers have these run cards so they know how to escalate calls and whom to request. Oak Park’s integration into this system is strong; they benefit from outside help and also give help when others are overtaxed.

Recommendation 16. Continue to nurture mutual aid relationships and ensure that the automatic aid agreements are up to date, particularly if new apparatus are added to the fleet.

Community Risk Assessment

A community risk assessment is a systematic evaluation of fire and life-safety risks in the community, often used to guide prevention and deployment strategies. In Oak Park, a formal community risk assessment was conducted in approximately 2005. This represents a gap of 20 years, during which Oak Park’s risk profile has evolved with more multi-story buildings and an aging population. However, the Department does recognize specific risk factors: for instance, each new senior facility is estimated to add 250 calls per year (many non-emergency lift assists), and they have identified the large number of high-rises (20-story buildings) and vintage multi-family buildings (50% of housing stock built in the 1900s) as significant risk considerations.

Oak Park is discussing steps to improve risk reduction: discussion of charging frequent callers (like senior facilities) after a certain number of free lift assists, to discourage overuse, and there’s mention that Trustees are talking about impact fees on new buildings for fire services – that indicates awareness of development-driven risk/cost increases. Additionally, Oak Park’s new ECHO program (addressed later) is a form of addressing community risk by providing follow-up to vulnerable individuals and hopefully reducing repeat 911 calls.

Recommendation 17. Undertake a comprehensive community risk assessment.

Injury Prevention and Risk Management (Firefighter Safety)

Firefighting and EMS are physically demanding, and the Fire Department has seen a high number of on-duty injuries and workers’ compensation claims in recent years, as shown above in Table 4. Having a robust injury prevention program will reduce injuries as well as overtime. The injury rate did improve when a third ambulance was added, suggesting that lowering individual workload and lifting tasks helped.

Based on our interviews, common injuries have been back injuries from lifting patients, though the Department recently purchased powered stair chairs, which should help mitigate that risk. The average firefighter is scheduled to work 121 shifts per year. Reducing workplace injuries and ensuring quick and proper care may assist in reducing overtime costs.

Oak Park appears progressive in acquiring safety equipment for employees and debriefs of incidents, which can encourage safety protocols. Additional occupational health and safety programs could reduce workers' compensation claims. This training can include lift-assist protocols, fitness programs, cancer prevention practices, SCBA use, 2-in/2-out policies, and OSHA mandates.

Recommendation 18. Review and enhance health and safety programs within the Department to prevent workplace injuries.

ISO Class 1 Rating Requirements

The Insurance Services Office (ISO) rating evaluates fire protection on a scale of 1 (best) to 10. Oak Park is currently an ISO Class 2 department, which is an excellent rating (few departments achieve a rating of Class 1; Oak Park is in the top 2.5% of departments in Illinois at Class 2). Achieving Class 1 would require improvements in several evaluated areas, such as manpower, training, apparatus, water supply, emergency communications, and fire prevention. The last ISO report was created in November of 2018 and was effective March 1, 2019. The Village is currently in an ISO review period. The ISO rating comprises the following factors:

- Emergency Communications (10% of score) – Oak Park likely scores well here due to the consolidated dispatch center and modern systems.
- Fire Department (50% of score) – things like number of engines/ladders, personnel, training hours, equipment, etc. Oak Park might have lost points for minimal staffing or lack of training documentation.
- Water Supply (40% of score) – presumably, Oak Park's hydrant system is good, being an urban area.
- Community Risk Reduction (extra credit) – things like fire prevention, public education, and fire investigation efforts.

The Village received an 87.89 rating out of 105.50 points. To achieve a Class 1 Rating, Oak Park would need to maximize points in all categories and receive at least 90 points.

If Class 1 is a goal, Oak Park should review the report from 2019 and request an ISO evaluation summary to identify where points were lost. There are downsides to seeking a new ISO rating, as it can either remain the same or decrease.

Recommendation 19. Request an ISO evaluation summary to determine where points were lost.

Community Engagement and Public Education

The Fire Department engages with the community through various programs and is exploring new ways to meet community needs beyond emergency response. Traditional public engagement includes public education such as station tours, open houses, and CPR/AED classes for the community. The Department also performs annual fire safety inspections for every commercial and public building in the Village, which not only ensures code compliance but also connects firefighters with the community in a non-emergency setting. These efforts contribute to a positive image and prevention.

A standout new initiative is Engaging Community for Healthy Outcomes (ECHO), launched in 2025. ECHO teams (including social workers) follow up on certain 911 calls involving issues such as mental health, homelessness, or frequent fall patients. Feedback on ECHO has been very positive and ensures people get help after the immediate incident. For example, if the Fire Department responds to a call for an

unhoused person or a senior who fell multiple times, the ECHO team will later contact that individual to connect them with services (e.g., housing resources, social services) and hopefully prevent future emergencies. ECHO is starting to track its performance metrics, which will be important to quantify its benefits. Firefighters appreciate knowing that some of their frequent patients are getting additional care. ECHO even reports back to the Department on outcomes. The Department also prides itself on great customer service and a welcoming culture (noted in interviews: professionalism, service-oriented staff, and even hosting open houses to welcome new hires to the community).

It is critical that there is good data sharing between ECHO and the Fire Department (with privacy considerations) so firefighters know that their high-utilizer patients are being cared for. The Department should incorporate ECHO outcomes into its planning (e.g., if ECHO successfully reduces repeat 911 calls from certain individuals, that frees up department capacity for other incidents). If necessary, the Department should advocate for sustained funding of ECHO beyond the pilot, as it appears to be a beneficial program.

Recommendation 20. Continue to expand and support ECHO, as such programs represent the future of integrated community risk reduction.

Engaging youth can foster community support and even help with future recruitment diversity. The Department may consider reviving or increasing the frequency of fire safety education in schools by starting a Fire Explorer or junior firefighter program. Another potential area of community engagement is community CPR training. Oak Park already offers classes; the Department could partner with community centers to reach even more residents, which could provide better outcomes for the community. Additional community engagement programs could include home smoke alarm installation drives, and planning events for Station 2's future.

Public information campaigns about when to call 911 versus non-emergency numbers can help ensure that emergency resources are used appropriately and efficiently. When residents understand the difference, true emergencies receive faster responses, while nonurgent issues can be handled without tying up crucial personnel and equipment. This ultimately improves public safety and reduces the strain on emergency services. Additionally, promoting preventative healthcare and fall prevention in senior facilities can also significantly reduce emergency calls.

The Fire Department could work with the Village communications team to develop marketing material for social media and the Village newsletter about proper use of emergency services, and could highlight various Fire Department programs.

Recommendation 21. Explore ways to enhance and expand public education, youth programs, and community engagement.

It was reported in the interviews that customer service feedback from residents is good. The Department should continue to solicit feedback (perhaps via post-incident surveys for residents who receive service) to identify any potential areas for improvement and also provide testimonials to share with the Village Board. Community engagement involves both outreach and listening, making it crucial to maintain channels for the public to voice concerns or ideas related to fire and EMS. Feedback could be provided through the Village's Citizen Committees or an annual public safety forum. By strengthening these engagements, the Oak Park Fire Department will enhance public trust and cooperation, which are invaluable during emergencies.

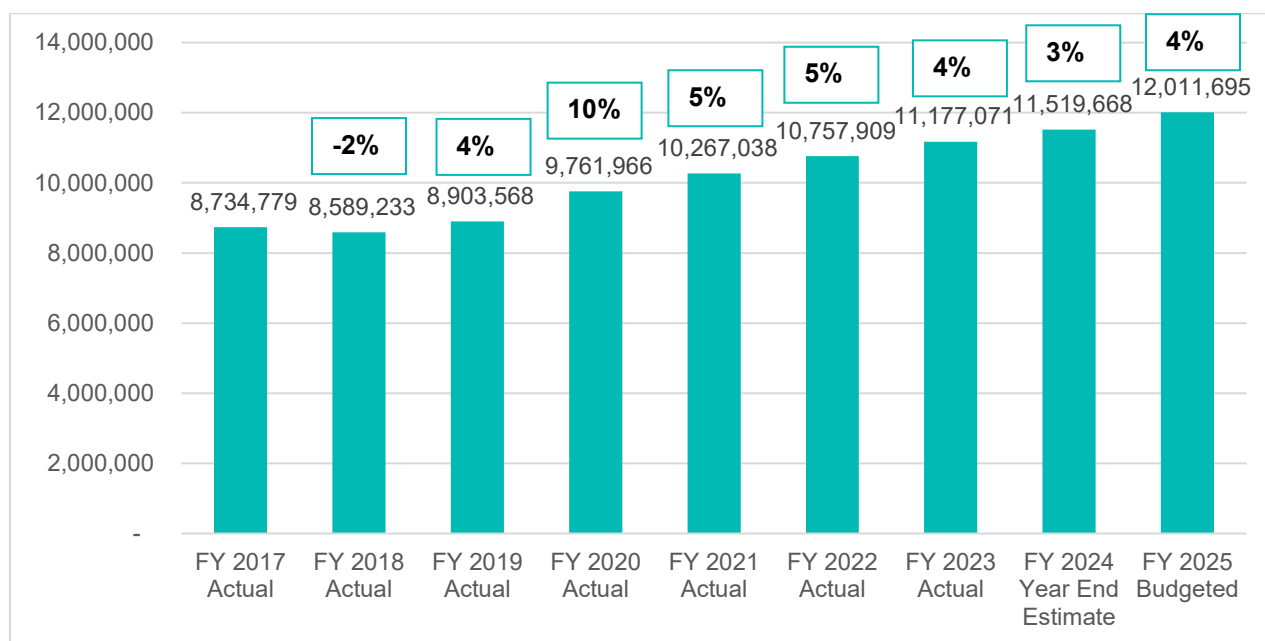
Revenues and Expenditures

This section addresses the Fire Department's finances, including historical costs, budget trends, overtime expenditures, and grants/revenue sources. Overall, the Department's budget is pressured by personnel costs (including overtime) and rising operational costs, while revenue opportunities (like EMS billing and grants) can be better leveraged. We present key points and recommendations for financial sustainability below.

Historical Fire Department Expenditures

The Fire Department's operating budget has grown modestly in recent years, primarily due to contractual wage increases, higher overtime, and benefit costs. While the Department aims to adhere to Village guidance of no more than 3% budget growth per year, the COVID pandemic had an unavoidable effect on Department expenditures. The Fire Department administration manages the Department's budget expenditures and actual costs closely with Finance, providing monthly reports to track spending. Historical expenditures and annual percentage increases are shown in Figure 8 below.

Figure 6. Historical Fire Operations Total General Fund Expenditures



A major cost driver has been overtime, which skyrocketed from roughly \$300,000 to \$400,000 annually in FY 2018 and FY 2019, to over \$990,000 by FY 2022. In FY 2023, overtime was \$1.176 million (and budgeted slightly lower for FY 2024, anticipating relief from full staffing or other measures). This overtime is largely due to staffing shortages, on- and off-duty injuries, and other time off, coupled with minimum staffing requirements.

Workers' compensation expenses have also spiked (both injury payouts and insurance premiums); apparatus maintenance might also be notable given the aging fleet. Additionally, Oak Park's decision to always provide ALS service means higher training and equipment costs.

Recommendation 22. Continue to monitor workers' compensation costs and invest in injury prevention because preventing injuries is a direct cost saver.

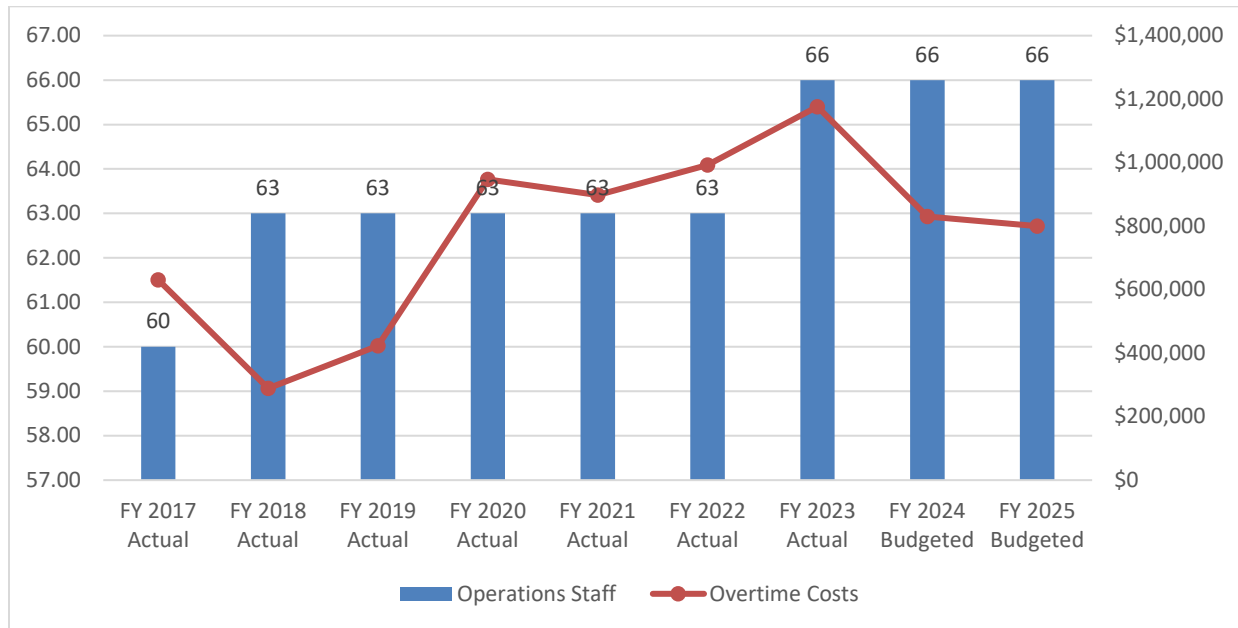
Overtime Expenditures Review

Due to the nature of the work, all fire departments have overtime as part of their operations. Overtime isn't inherently bad, it provides flexibility and reduces the need for additional full-time staffing; however,

long-term sustained high levels are problematic. It can add stress to firefighters, leading to burnout or more injuries, and can cause budget overruns.

Overtime continues to be a major budget issue for the Fire Department and Village operations. The table below demonstrates the number of operations staff working in the fire stations and the overtime costs by year. Fire Department overtime costs increased significantly between FY 2019 and FY 2020, primarily due to COVID, which was an unprecedented time in the country. Overtime costs have not dropped to pre-COVID levels, however, due to the number of workers' compensation days and other time off the employees are entitled to, this is expected. Historical operations staff levels and overtime costs are shown in Figure 9 below.

Figure 7. Historical Operations Staff and Overtime Costs



Overtime is not driven by the number of staff in the Department, but by the number of vacancies, workers' compensation injuries, vacation time, scheduling, and off-duty injuries that may have longer-term impacts on the overtime budget.

Many fire departments use overtime as a means to offset the benefits costs incurred by full-time employees, which can account for over 50% of the salary and benefits, making it more cost-effective to have employees work overtime. At the current staffing levels, five employees can be off on any shift without requiring overtime. If the trend continues, the Village may consider overhiring by one or two positions, as discussed in the Hiring Practices section above. If the Village were to overhire and not increase minimum staffing there would be a bigger cushion before overtime is incurred and the Department may reach full-staffing capacity of 22 more often than it has in the recent past.

An additional tool that management can utilize is scheduling vacations and time off to reduce overtime. Understanding that only five employees can be off at any one time before overtime is incurred can help reduce known overtime costs.

Recommendation 23. Manage scheduling of time off considering workers' compensation injuries and other requested time off.

Revenue and Grants

Oak Park does not have fees in place for many Fire Department-related services. The following fees could be considered by the Village for additional revenue.

- **False fire alarm fee schedule:** Consider allowing two or three false alarms free per year per address, then charge \$100 for the fourth, escalating thereafter. This can encourage property owners to fix alarm issues and generate some revenue for Fire Department responses when they don't.
- **Non-emergency calls to nursing homes and assisted living facilities:** Consider charging fees for non-emergency calls to nursing homes and assisted living facilities, and review EMS billing policies. The Department could begin charging nominal fees for lift-assist calls at nursing facilities after a certain number of free responses. The Department has already considered charging beyond a certain number of free lifts. Those facilities should have protocols in place to reduce unnecessary 911 calls, and a fee would be a motivating factor in following such practices.
- **EMS services:** The Department does not charge EMS services to its residents. The Village's philosophy is that residents already pay enough in property taxes without being charged additionally for ambulance services. However, the Village does charge insurance companies, Medicare, and Medicaid for ambulance services. Revenue from ambulance services has increased significantly from 2019 to 2025, as shown in Table 9 below.

Table 9. Annual Ambulance Charge Revenue

2019 Actual	2020 Actual	2021 Actual	2022 Actual	2023 Actual	2024 Year End Estimate	2025 Adopted
\$976,315	\$1,560,317	\$2,260,382	\$2,616,608	\$2,470,537	\$3,700,000	\$4,000,000

Source: Village of Oak Park adopted budgets.

- The Village could consider implementing an EMS subscription service as a strategic way to enhance financial sustainability and improve community access to emergency care. These programs typically allow residents and businesses to pay a flat annual fee that covers or significantly reduces the cost of emergency medical transport, helping protect them from unexpected bills.
- **Fire development impact fees:** Based on our interviews, the Village does not charge development impact fees to developers applying for new building permits. The Village should consider fire development impact fees to support additional growth, new fire facilities, additional staffing, and upgraded equipment. It should be noted that such impact fees can only be charged for impacts linked to new development.

Recommendation 24. Monitor administrative time for program services to determine whether additional administrative staff are needed.

Recommendation 25. Consider the feasibility of implementing false alarm fees, non-emergency calls to facilities fees, and development impact fees.

The Oak Park Fire Department has utilized grants in the past and should continue to do so. Notable grants and opportunities include:

- **FEMA Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG):** Oak Park obtained a grant to replace breathing apparatus (with only a 5% cost match), which is a big win. Future AFG rounds could be sought for other equipment (vehicles, radio upgrades, etc.). The regional approach might help too (e.g., a joint grant with neighbors for training props, etc.).

- **SAFER Grant:** This is available for hiring firefighters. If Oak Park decides to increase staffing, a SAFER grant could fund salaries for (typically) 3 years on a sliding scale. The Department should consider applying, especially to get the 4th ambulance staffed or to fund a dedicated training officer position via grant.
- **Emergency Management/Resilience Grants:** Possibly for things like generators for stations or disaster preparedness equipment. If Oak Park's Emergency Management falls under Fire, there could be homeland security grants available.

State or Local Grants: Sometimes the state fire marshal offers small grants for gear or training or the Village may receive funding locally or from foundations. A review of grants should include what has been applied for, what was received, and what could be sought after next. The initial information suggests Oak Park has been opportunistic (the Village received SCBA via grant), but there might be more on the table. Following this review, the Department should create a grant strategy, identifying top funding needs that align with grant programs (examples include a new ladder truck would be an AFG grant, additional staffing would be a SAFER grant, fire prevention programs would be an FP&S grant). A grant strategy would include grant application deadlines, lead person responsible, and whether the Village's grant writers can assist. Given the competitive nature of grants, start early and use data to make a compelling case.

Grants can also be collaborative. For instance, a regional training grant with neighboring departments to establish a joint training program could make for a particularly attractive application. Since Oak Park has a relatively high call volume, playing that up can show the need for more resources.

Ensure grant compliance and management for those already obtained (e.g., ensure SCBAs bought with grants are documented, and any reporting back is done so Oak Park remains in good standing for future awards).

Recommendation 26. Create a grant strategy for the Fire Department.

Conclusion

The Oak Park Fire Department is a well-respected organization that provides high-quality fire, EMS, and rescue services to the community. This assessment finds that core services are strong, evidenced by an ISO Class 2 rating and strategic investments. Changes are needed to keep pace with rising demand and modern best practices. Key recommendations include adding a training officer, upgrading or replacing aging facilities (especially Station 2), implementing a new squad unit and preparing for a future fourth ambulance, securing sustainable funding for apparatus replacements, seeking additional revenue sources and strengthening training and safety programs with dedicated leadership, and expanding community risk reduction initiatives.

Many of these recommendations align with Oak Park's long-term growth and the project objectives set forth in the assessment scope: to improve department efficiency and accommodate regional growth. We encourage the Village to prioritize these changes and provide the necessary support and funding. The cooperation and dedication of Fire Department staff throughout this assessment has been exemplary. Fire Department staff have demonstrated professionalism, adaptability, and a commitment to improvement. With strong support from Village leadership in implementing the recommendations, the Oak Park Fire Department can move from excellence to an even higher level, ensuring the safety and well-being of the Oak Park community for years to come.

As part of this project, Baker Tilly will provide an implementation action plan in which the Village can prioritize the recommendations and timing. This can be a valuable management tool for the Fire Department and Village staff.

By embracing the observations and recommendations in this report, Oak Park will position its Fire Department to meet current challenges and future demands, continuing its tradition of excellent service. The community's trust and safety depend on it, and the insights gained here provide a clear pathway for strengthening this vital public service.

Attachment A – List of Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The Department should set a schedule to regularly conduct strategic forecasts of service demand five and ten years out.

Recommendation 2. Continue to maintain the 16-person minimum staffing level.

Recommendation 3. Hire a full-time Deputy Chief – Training position.

Recommendation 4. Schedule regular entrance exams (e.g., quarterly or every six months) regardless of immediate openings, so that the eligibility list stays current.

Recommendation 5. Institute a process for determining when over hiring in the Firefighter/Paramedic classification is optimal for the Village.

Recommendation 6. Conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine whether the Village should contract for background checks and screening services.

Recommendation 7. Calculate the UHU for both ambulance and fire apparatus to determine whether they are within the utilization standards.

Recommendation 8. Formalize the Department's diversity recruitment strategy, taking into consideration the suggestions offered above.

Recommendation 9. Establish ongoing recruitment protocols, including continuous or more frequent application periods, to always build and maintain an eligibility list of diverse candidates.

Recommendation 10. Schedule the planned Station 1 expansion and facility upgrades.

Recommendation 11. Complete the feasibility study for Station 2 as soon as possible, examining the cost-benefit of renovating the existing structure versus constructing a new station.

Recommendation 12. Continue and complete the current renovation projects at Station 3, ensuring renovations are made in a timely manner.

Recommendation 13. Assess the need for the fourth ambulance after gathering two additional years of service call data.

Recommendation 14. Explore funding opportunities and staffing requirements for a two-person squad vehicle.

Recommendation 15. Develop a formal Fire Department apparatus and equipment replacement fund spanning the lifetime of the equipment.

Recommendation 16. Continue to nurture mutual aid relationships and ensure that the automatic aid agreements are up to date, particularly if new apparatus are added to the fleet.

Recommendation 17. Undertake a comprehensive community risk assessment.

Recommendation 18. Review and enhance health and safety programs within the Department to prevent workplace injuries.

Recommendation 19. Request an ISO evaluation summary to determine where points were lost.

Recommendation 20. Continue to expand and support ECHO, as such programs represent the future of integrated community risk reduction.

Recommendation 21. Explore ways to enhance and expand public education, youth programs, and community engagement.

Recommendation 22. Continue to monitor workers' compensation costs and invest in injury prevention because preventing injuries is a direct cost saver.

Recommendation 23. Manage scheduling of time off considering workers' compensation injuries and other requested time off.

Recommendation 24. Monitor administrative time for program services to determine whether additional administrative staff are needed.

Recommendation 25. Consider the feasibility of implementing false alarm fees, non-emergency calls to facilities fees, and development impact fees.

Recommendation 26. Create a grant strategy for the Fire Department.

Attachment B – Employee Survey Results