

THE BUGLE'S ECHO

This issue is dedicated in memory of three Keokuk, Iowa firefighters and three children who were tragically lost. On December 22, 1999, Keokuk, Iowa lost three courageous firefighters: Assistant Chief Dave McNally (48), Firefighter Jason Bitting (29), and Firefighter Nate Tuck (39). They died in a flashover while searching for three children trapped in a duplex fire. A mother's frantic warning spurred their immediate rescue attempt. Tragically, the children (two one-year-old twins and a seven-year-old) also perished, and the three firefighters left behind a total of eight children.



The fire started in the kitchen of an old wooden duplex that had been converted into apartments. Keokuk's firefighters arrived quickly, responding to a mother's cries that her children were trapped inside.

That morning, staffing was limited, with only a few firefighters on duty. The fire escalated rapidly while two firefighters and the assistant chief searched. A simulation by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) later showed that a flashover occurred in the kitchen, quickly spreading flames through several rooms and up the stairs.

In a difficult decision, Chief Mark Wessell left to transport a non-breathing child to the hospital himself, as it was the only option. Upon return, he found only two crew members outside, while the flashover had trapped the three firefighters inside.

All three firefighters wore SCBA gear and PASS devices, but the PASS alarms did not activate when they became incapacitated. Autopsies confirmed their deaths were due to extreme heat and smoke inhalation.

This issue combines elements presented to MFSI's Advisory Committee during its bi-annual meeting on December 5, 2025.

Lessons & Legacy

Bravery & Selflessness: These men went in because there were children inside. That instinct to protect, even at the highest risk, is at the core of who we are as firefighters.

Staffing & Resources: The tragedy underscores how resource limitations are dangerous. With so few personnel on scene, covering all necessary tasks (search, suppression, backup) becomes nearly impossible in a rapidly changing situation.

Fire Behavior Awareness: The NIST simulation gives us invaluable insight. The fire flashed over quickly, filling the stairwell and upper floors with lethal heat and gases in a matter of seconds. This highlights the importance of training on modern fire dynamics, understanding how fast conditions can deteriorate and how heat, flow path, and ventilation all play a role.

Equipment Reliability: The failure of the PASS devices to alarm is a stark reminder that even our lifesaving tools can fail. It reinforces that we must constantly test, maintain, and critically evaluate our gear.

Leadership Under Pressure: Chief Wessell's decision to leave to transport a rescued child was gut-wrenching, but made in desperation. Other resources were available. This situation shows how quickly command decisions can shift from strategy to life-saving triage and why we need contingency plans and mutual aid.

Honor Through Learning: These losses were not in vain. The NIOSH investigation and NIST simulations that followed have contributed to fire service-wide lessons about fire behavior, building construction, staffing, and equipment.

By remembering firefighters that we have lost and the lessons learned, we continued to commit ourselves to learning and to training, as if our fellow firefighters lives depended on it, because, in a real fire, they do.





The Maine Fire Service Institute continues to operate under steadily increasing demands for fire service training, certification, and coordination. These expectations come while maintaining full accountability to both the Maine Community College System (MCCS) and Southern Maine Community College (SMCC) administrative structures.

STRATEGIC PLAN 2026-2030

The draft of the 2026–2031 MFSI Strategic Plan is scheduled for review in June 2026. We have begun the arduous process of reviewing the current plan, assessing what we have accomplished over the past several years and identifying where our focus and efforts need to be moving forward. This process will help ensure that MFSI remains aligned with its mission and continues to meet the evolving needs of Maine's Fire Service.

WATER TRAINING PROPS ARE OUT-OF-SERVICE UNTIL SPRING 2026

Certain training props are out-of-service during the winter/cold weather months. A list is available on the MFSI website. Spring requests can still be made anytime; however specific 'return to service' dates are weather and maintenance dependent.

MFSI's Support Services continues to provide critical logistical and operational support across the entire state, directly boosting local training capacity in every region. The use of MFSI-owned props and equipment has reached an all-time high, demonstrating both the demand for and the trust in the resources we provide to Maine's fire service. Inconsistent communication from requestors has at times complicated scheduling and logistics, creating avoidable inefficiencies.

SUPPORT SERVICES HIRING

The MFSI Support Services Specialist role has been posted, but unfortunately, the applicant pool has been limited, reflecting the broader hiring challenges seen across the state. In the interim we are fortunate to have the continued assistance of SFI Donald Robishaw and SFI Christopher Poremby to help bridge the gap.

EQUIPMENT & PROP MANAGEMENT

All props are now maintained under an annual maintenance plan, and every piece of equipment follows an annual maintenance and testing schedule with full documentation for accountability and safety. Maine Trailer of Hampden continues to provide excellent service in maintaining our trailer fleet, ensuring safe and reliable transport of training equipment statewide.

The most requested training props from January 1 to November 19, 2025 have been:

1. Forcible Entry Door (4 trailers) 83
2. EVDT (4 trailers) 44
3. SCBA Maze (2 trailers) 34
4. Air Cascade (2 trailers) 34
5. Car Fire (2 trailers) 19 *maintenance issues
6. MAST (1 trailer) 17
7. Pumps (1 trailer) 15
8. System 64 (1 trailer) 10

The damage rate to props and trailers has decreased significantly, thanks to both our internal policy changes and the strong cooperation of the fire service community in caring for shared resources.

Due to high mileage, anticipated increases in mechanical failures and long lead times, we have begun to cycle out our Support Services trucks with the purchase of a 2025 F-450 in June. Whereas Central Fleet has discontinued leasing vehicles adequate to haul our entire trailer fleet, replacements must be purchased and maintained by MFSI. The full financial impact of this transition is still unknown. The purchasing process of the second replacement has begun.

Mechanical issues with our gas-fired props continue to be an issue. In addition, with the acquisition of the SUV car-fire prop we have experienced a significant increase in propane usage in the field. We are currently monitoring the financial impact and may need to consider mitigation in the future.



State Fire Instructor Ray Gale taught Basic Pumps, Hancock County, 2025

INCREASED PROGRAM DEMAND

The growing demand for programs such as Basic Pumps Operator Course (BPOC), Emergency Vehicle Driver Training (EVDT), Firefighter I & II, Fire Instructor I & II, and Fire Officer I & II continues to strain a shrinking pool of instructors and evaluators. As class complexity increases, the number of available qualified instructors decreases. Many programs also require weekend testing, which adds further challenges, both in terms of staffing and work-life balance for instructors and evaluators. Additionally, identifying and securing appropriate training and testing sites remains a persistent logistical hurdle.

STATE FIRE INSTRUCTORS RECRUITMENT

MFSI is currently engaged in a statewide recruitment effort to expand our roster of qualified State Fire Instructors. The goal is to bring new talent into the organization to support our growing mission. This process will continue through the winter months.

TRAIN-THE-TRAINER SUV FIRE PROP

Jim Roy led trainings for the operation of the new Symtech SUV Car Fire Prop. A total of 47 participants across six locations attended these train-the-trainers. Planning for training sessions in northern and eastern locations across Maine will be set for spring deliveries.

BASIC FIRE SCHOOL

This program is due for an update, and TPM Hammond has agreed to rework, modify, and bring to life a new Version 3.0 of the curriculum. MFSI Administration fully supports this effort and recognizes the program's value, even with potential changes coming from the OSHA standard. This remains a great tool for departments to incorporate into their monthly training to get back to the basics. It's easy to document and recognized by Maine BLS.



State Fire Instructor McLaughlin taught Fire Instructor I & II programs with SFI Rice, Dingee, Brooks, and Tracy, 2025

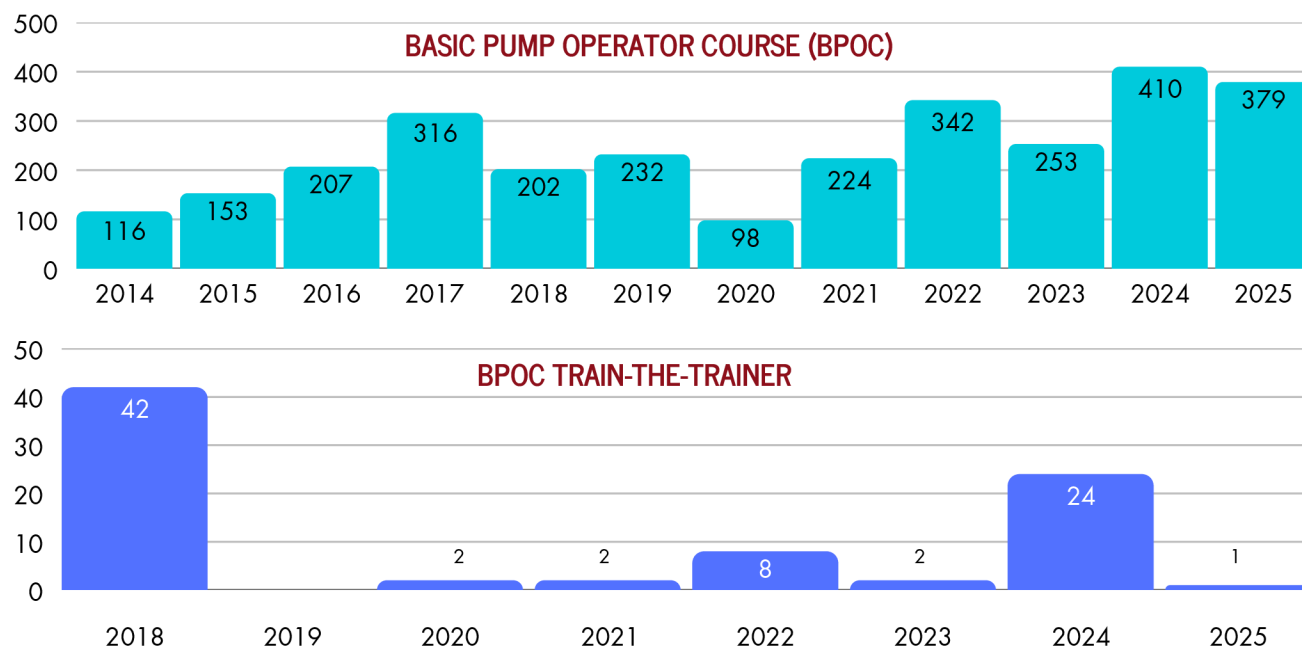
MFSI COUNTY REPRESENTATIVES

Androscoggin - Craig Bouchard
Aroostook - Darren Woods
Cumberland - Mike Robitaille
Franklin - Steve Bunker
Hancock - Ray Gale
Kennebec - Dave Groder
Knox - Tom Johnston
Lincoln - Paul Smeltzer
Oxford - Bill Dingee
Penobscot - Pete Metcalf
Piscataquis - Mike Surdick
Sagadahoc - Chris McLaughlin
Somerset - Jim Roy
Waldo - Mike Drinkwater
Washington - Tony Ramsdell
York - Roger Green



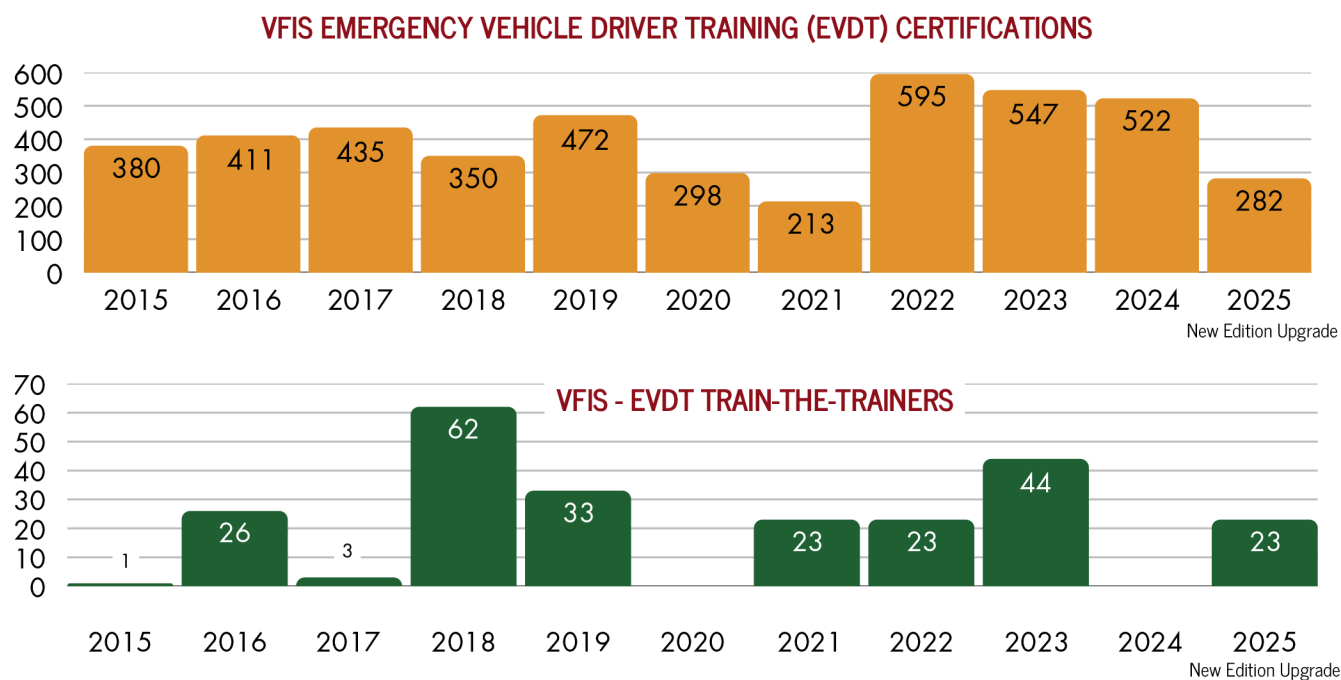
BASIC PUMPS

The Basic Pumps programs continue to be offered almost every weekend and remain one of our most well-received training opportunities. This program is scheduled for review to ensure alignment with current fire service training trends and the NFPA 1010 Driver/Operator Standard.

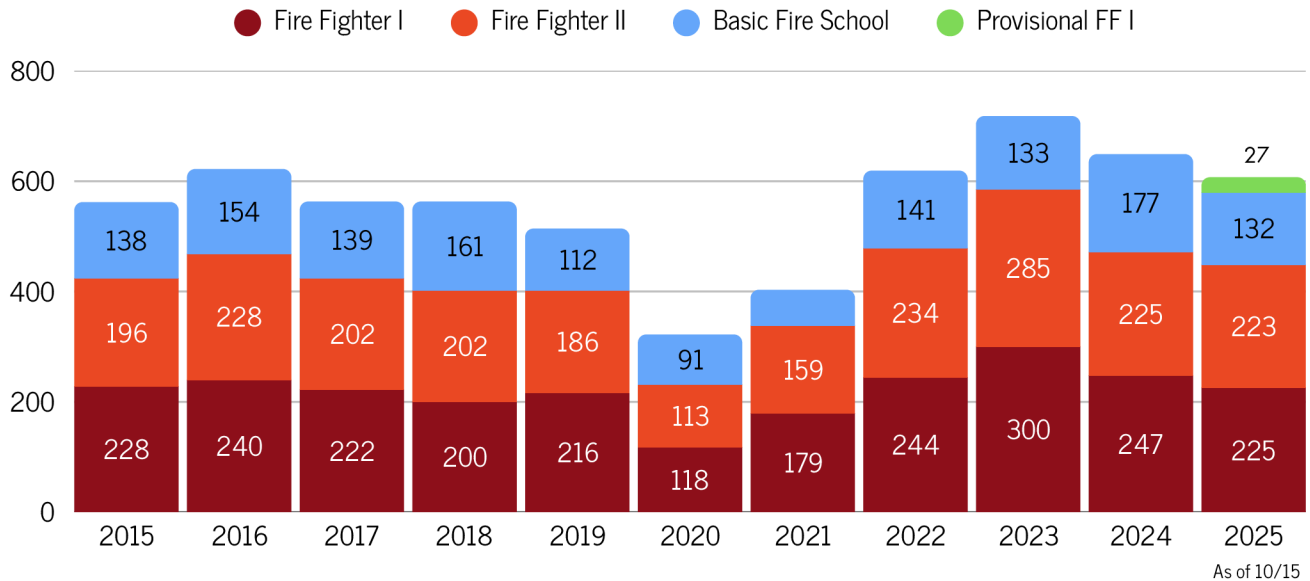


UPDATE TO VFIS EVDT TRAINING

The new VFIS Emergency Vehicle Driver Training (EVDT) program has successfully transitioned to an online Moodle platform. While this new format may take some time for instructors to become familiar with, it brings significant benefits to municipal fire departments. The VFIS Learning Academy now allows instructors to issue certificates directly, which reduces paperwork and printing responsibilities for MFSI. Since the course materials are copyrighted, MFSI will no longer print certificates; however, we remain capable of delivering this program upon request.



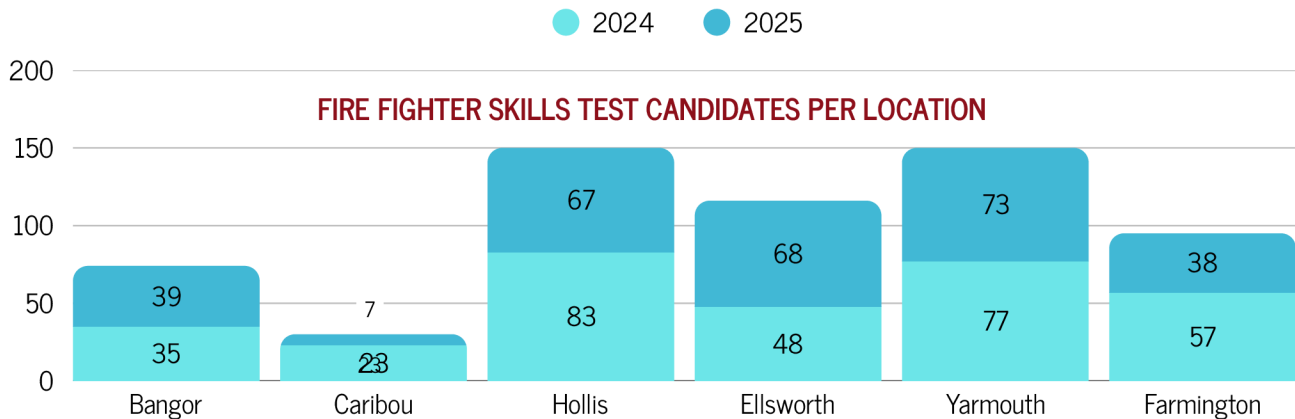
FIREFIGHTER CERTIFICATIONS AWARDED



SKILLS EXAMINATIONS

In 2024, MFSI conducted 8 skills examinations, testing 328 candidates, of which 300 passed, resulting in a 91% pass rate. In 2025, MFSI has conducted 9 skills examinations, testing 374 candidates, with 328 passing, for a 88 % pass rate, representing a 14% increase in tests administered over the previous year.

Practical skills end tests require a considerable amount of planning, scheduling and staffing. They also result in increased pressure on Support Services for mobilizing, transporting, inventorying, cleaning and repairing equipment utilized.



12 candidates from Hancock County completed their Basic Fire School with the Class A Burn

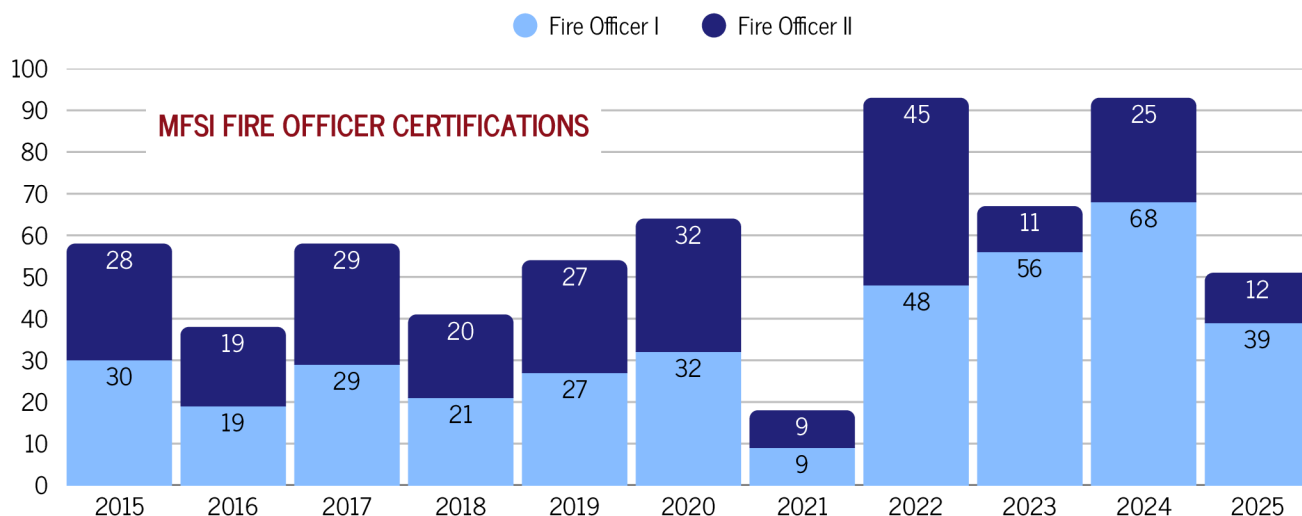


State Fire Instructor & Evaluators at End Test in Yarmouth, December 2025



OSHA CHALLENGES & OFFICER CERTIFICATION

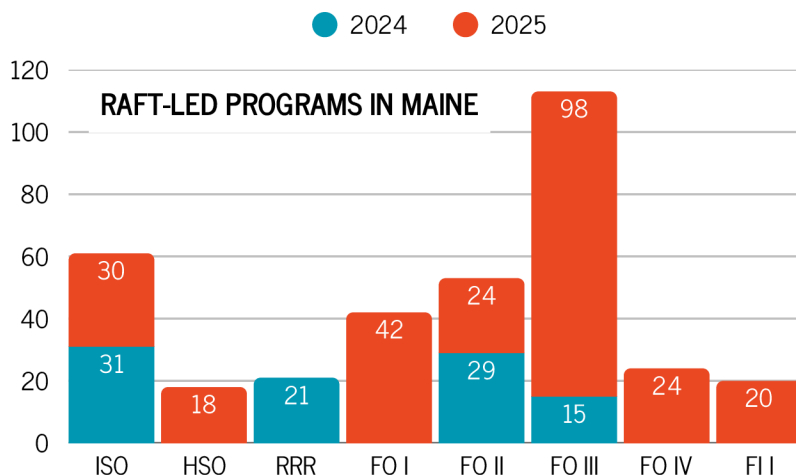
MFSI faced significant pressure from the potential OSHA mandates, particularly in officer-level certification. This has led to the creation of a schedule, designed to be balanced and equitable while addressing the state's certification needs. However, ongoing challenges arise from individuals demanding programming tailored to their specific schedules, putting strain on the Institute's planning efforts.



COVID-19 affected enrollment and delivery. The NFPA standard was updated in 2020 and curriculum launched for FO I in 2022 and FO II Academy in 2024. For 2022-23, certification levels reflect overflow and testing of previous year programs.

COLLABORATION WITH REGIONAL ALLIANCE FOR FIREFIGHTER TRAINING (RAFT)

The partnership between the Maine Fire Service Institute (MFSI) and the Regional Alliance for Firefighting Training (RAFT) continues to be a tremendous success for Maine's Fire Service. This ongoing collaboration fills a critical gap by providing access to Pro Board accredited programs that MFSI does not currently have the internal capacity to deliver. The team from RAFT has been outstanding to work with, professional, responsive, and committed to helping us raise the bar in fire service training. Through this partnership, we've been able to offer Fire Officer III, Fire Officer IV, Incident Safety Officer, and Health & Safety Officer programs here in Maine. Each of these programs carries Pro Board certification, provided candidates meet the required prerequisites.

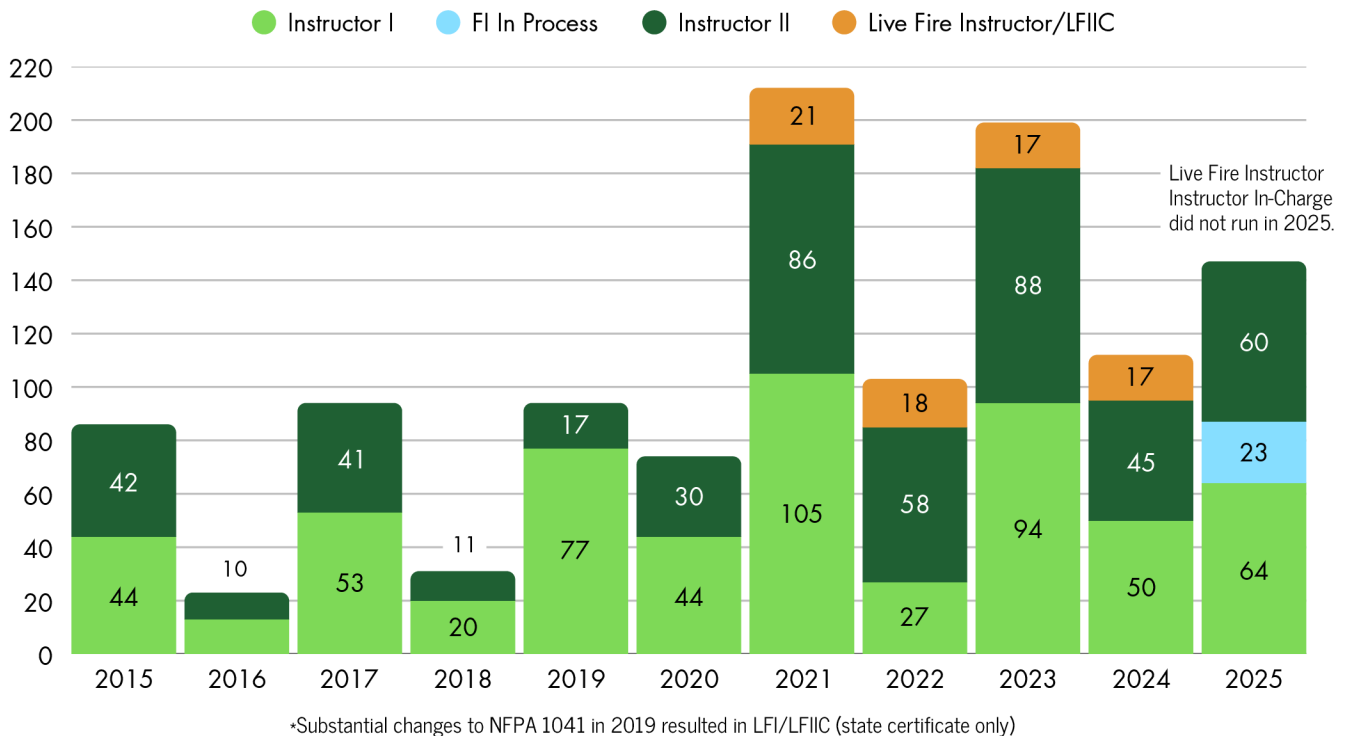


Looking ahead, Fire Officer IV programs are scheduled for December 2025 at MFSI and February 2026 in Augusta, with Fire Officer III planned for May 2026 and Incident Safety Officer in March 2026, both in Brunswick at MFSI.

Program information is published under Upcoming Events on the MFSI website.

These efforts ensure that Maine's firefighters have continued access to advanced professional qualifications and the opportunity to meet the complex demands of today's modern fire service. It's exactly the kind of collaboration that helps us strengthen the profession and prepare the next generation of fire service leaders.

FIRE & EMERGENCY SERVICES INSTRUCTOR I & II LIVE FIRE INSTRUCTOR/INSTRUCTOR IN-CHARGE



MFSI & FIRE COMMISSION

The partnership continues to strengthen statewide live fire training infrastructure. The Maine Fire Commission's work on Live Fire Training Facilities has made real progress. Two aging, but highly utilized facilities are being replaced, and key repairs are being made to others. Just a few years ago, this level of advancement seemed nearly impossible, yet here we are.

Live Fire Training Facilities Grant - current list of projects

- Auburn has received a payment from SMCC of \$341,462.50 for their Live Fire Training Facility Project and SMCC has received the reimbursement from State of Maine DAFS in the same amount. We've also received correspondence from Chief Chase indicating that, due to DEP permitting requirements, the project will not be completed by the current deadline of June 30, 2026. We believe at this time the state deadline will be extended.
- Bangor has received a payment of \$339,050.00. Reimbursement from Maine DAFS is pending.
- Yarmouth has signed the agreement for facility repairs totaling \$129,600.00. We are waiting for a signed copy of the contract with the vendor.
- Farmington has signed the agreement for repair work that includes the addition of a second-floor safety exit, totaling \$79,650.00.
- Fairfield has been awarded \$17,750.00 for a concrete pad.
- Ellsworth has been awarded \$4,200.00 to reroof the facility.



INTERAGENCY

Work continues between MFSI, the Maine Forest Service (MFS), the State Fire Marshal's Office (SFM), and SafetyWorks! at the Maine Bureau of Labor. Together, we're strengthening communication, coordination, and program delivery to expand opportunities for Maine's Fire Service. Programs such as the Basic Wildland Firefighter Course, Fire Investigation training, and National Fire Academy offerings delivered in collaboration with SafetyWorks! are just a few examples of this growing partnership.

The end goal is simple, to increase opportunities and improve access for firefighters across the state. Strong, clear communication between agencies is proving to be one of the most valuable tools we have in achieving that. MFSI continues to work hard with all fire service stakeholders to see the betterment of our state's fire service become a reality. Efforts with Maine BLS, Maine Fire Chiefs, and State Forest Service has seen some great improvements over the past year.

AI USAGE

Artificial intelligence is the newest of many challenges for fire training. MFSI is beginning to see the use of AI in our programs by the candidates/students, and this has become a serious concern for both Fire Instructor and Fire Officer programs. This issue will require strategies that continually evolve to stay ahead of the curve. Here are a few of the approaches we'll be implementing as we build out the new Fire Instructor and Fire Officer Programs:

1. Redesign Assessments
2. Live Discussions & Presentations
3. Use AI Detection Tools
4. Clear Policies on AI Use
5. Promote Academic Integrity
6. Require Drafts & Progress Submissions
7. Design AI-Resistant Assignments
8. Use Real-Time or In-Class Work
9. Stay Ahead of AI Advances
10. Encourage Ethical AI Use

NATIONAL FIRE ACADEMY

NFA programs were held this past September.

- Command & Control of Wildland Urban Interface for the Chief Officer (F0612)
- Shaping the Future (F0602)
- Executive Skills Series: Exercising Leadership Through Difficult Conversations (F0522)

Applications are open for the next In-State Weekend at MFSI in March 2026. The fliers for the following NFA programs can be found under Upcoming Events.

- Exercising Leadership Ethically (F0523)
- Wildland Urban Interface Fire Operations for the Structural Company Officer (F0610)
- Fire Investigation: Fire as a Weapon (F0756)

A federal government shutdown closes the National Fire Academy (NFA) and also potentially impacts MFSI's in-state and hand-off programming.

CTE PROGRAM COORDINATION & COOPERATION

Efforts continue to better align secondary fire training programs with MFSI certification processes and ensure consistency across our CTE partnerships. Following concerns raised at our June meeting regarding failure rates and program costs, Director Graves met with Scott Browning of the Mid-Coast School of Technology, and on October 1, 2025, together held a productive meeting with a few CTE leaders and SMCC-MFSI Staff to review the original MFSI-CTE agreement, exam data, student accommodations, and billing procedures.

Key takeaways included the development of CTE instructor best practices, new coordination with SMCC's Student Accessibility Services to ensure compliance with federal law, and a plan to update the MFSI-CTE program agreement for the 2027 school year. All agreed a \$130/candidate fee for testing would be reasonable. MFSI will invoice annually in May. To ease the transition, MFSI will waive the fee until CY 2027, allowing time for programs to adjust budgets and processes. Overall, the discussion was open and constructive, and we're encouraged by the collaboration.





As we close out the year, let us dedicate this December Bugle Echo to the memory of McNally, Bitting, Tuck, and the three children they so bravely tried to save. Their sacrifice calls us to reflect, to recommit, and to act.

May we honor them not just with a moment of silence, but with a renewed focus on safety, training, and the bond that unites us in service. Their legacy lives in every life we save, in every door we force, in every breath we protect.

This is a very dangerous job, and the Keokuk tragedy shows how quickly things can go wrong. Maine could face the same, so train and prepare yourselves to be ready, willing, and able to do what's required.

As your State Fire Training Director, I wish I could do more, but the hard truth is this: it starts with you. Nobody will prepare you better than you prepare yourself. Lift weights. Eat right. Take care of your mental health. Drill hard and teach those around you so when the alarm sounds you are ready to perform with skill and discipline.

When I worked in Waterville we were often short-handed. After this incident and the report came out I spent time studying this fire.

Here is the link to review the mathematical fire growth model. [NIST SIMULATION TRAINING OF THE 1999 KEOKUK, IOWA DUPLEX FIRE | Firefighter Close Calls](#)

I've asked myself how we'd handle that kind of rapid deterioration. You need to ask the same question and answer it with training, planning, and honest assessment of your resources. Think how your department would respond to a similar event. Prepare, communicate, and practice until it's second nature. Make us all proud when the bell rings.

In honor of those who gave everything, train like their lives depend on it. I for one, will forever remember these three brave firefighters and wish I had the opportunity to serve with such brave souls.

With the highest respect,
Jim Graves
State Fire Training Director

