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## KVFD boasts some of state's best times from call to response

By TODD GOTTULA , Hub Staff Writer

**KEARNEY — Jerry Canning smelled the smoke. He saw the flames and heard the fire growing bigger by the second.** Like many people, he thought he could put out the fire in his attic before firefighters arrived at his home on Kearney's west edge.

"Man was I wrong. The fire department was here before I could even get my garden hose hooked up," says Canning of the January fire that caused \$40,000 damage to his home. "It was extraordinary how fast they responded. They were absolutely heroic because we were within minutes of having the whole house consumed.

"Smoke was pouring from every crevice, flames were rolling in the attic, and I remember two firemen — Nick Shoemaker and Johnny Mason — just walked right in and took it on with flames lapping at their heels," Canning says. "The guys on that department are absolute heroes."

Canning is one of many Kearney residents whose property was saved as a result of the Kearney Volunteer Fire Department's fast response times.

KVFD's average response time to the 24 building fires it was called to in 2004 and 2005 was three minutes and 53 seconds, according to department records.

Kearney's response times are faster than most Nebraska fire stations similar in size, according to statewide records obtained by the Hub. KVFD responds to fires and accidents more than two minutes faster than the industry goal of six minutes and is far better than the national average of eight to 11 minutes, according to the U.S. Fire Administration.

"Our goal is to have a truck leaving the station within a minute of receiving a call," said KVFD Chief Jerry Thompson.

What happens to response times after that, said Thompson, depends on weather, traffic conditions, the fire or accident location, and other uncontrollable factors.

"Getting to a scene safely is our top priority. We stress that first," Thompson said. "With that in mind, fast response times have always been among our top priorities. It is something we take pride in, and we've done very well in that area."

Response times are measured from the time a call is received by a department's communications center to the arrival of the first truck at the scene.

In the past two years, KVFD responded to eight of 24 calls for building fires in two minutes or less, and only one response time was more than seven minutes.

"We typically have people on the scene even faster than what those numbers show," said Administrator Ken Tracy. "We have men responding from work or home in their own vehicles, and they are usually in their bunker gear and on the scene before the trucks even arrive."

While the department's response times are impressive, Tracy said the average turnout of 43 firefighters per fire call is just as noteworthy.

"No department, and I'd be willing to include Omaha and Lincoln in that group, averages as many firefighters on the scene," said Tracy. "Some departments out there answer calls with six to 10 guys. You're never going to see that in Kearney."



Hub file photo Kearney Volunteer Fire Department's average response time to the 24 building fires it was called to in 2004 and 2005 was three minutes and 53 seconds, which is among the fastest response times in the state and two minutes faster than the industry goal of six minutes.

Keeping response times short gets tougher each year in Kearney, where brisk growth has stretched city limits in every direction, Thompson said.

The central location of Station One at 2221 Ave. A has always been a key in helping the KVFD respond to calls quickly, said Thompson.

Tracy said the construction of overpasses and opening of Station Two at 3820 30th Ave. in 1998 also improved response times dramatically, especially to calls in northwest and southwest Kearney.

"We are constantly analyzing our operations, and I think the city has done a good job of working with the department, listening to our needs and making sure we offer the best fire service around," Tracy said.

Kearney is one of only a few large cities in the state that has a volunteer fire department.

"Volunteer departments like Kearney's are the envy of everybody. It's very impressive to provide the kind of service they do with all volunteers," said Columbus Fire Chief Dean Hefti.

Thompson said Kearney firefighters, paid or not, are among the most dedicated in the state.

"I'm not afraid to say we have one of the best departments around," Thompson said. "We are passionate about what we do, and we take great pride in serving the community."

After watching KVFD in action four months ago, Canning is among the department's biggest promoters.

"What I witnessed that day was absolutely fantastic," Canning said. "Those men and women saved my house. It was within minutes of being completely destroyed. I still can't believe how fast they worked and the amount of professionalism they showed. Kearney is very lucky to have such amazing people on that fire department."

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#### What's the Calls

A sampling of incident types and calls the Kearney Volunteer Fire Department responded to in 2004 and 2005:

Type No.

False alarm 120

Vehicle accident injuries 87

Smoke scare/odor 25

Building fire 24

Vehicle fire 22

Fire (other) 18

Carbon monoxide 14

Cooking fire 11

Grass/vegetation fire 10

Smoke/odor removal 8

Vehicle/pedestrian 6

Dumpster fire 6

Source: KVFD

#### Comparison: Number of Firefighters

- Kearney — Eight paid firefighters, one volunteer fire chief and 73 volunteer firefighters. There are 21 retired volunteers who serve as reserve firefighters. Department also includes a dive/rescue team of 15 volunteers and a hazardous materials team.

- Grand Island — 63 paid firefighters who also are trained as emergency medical technicians or paramedics; staff at least 18 per shift.

- Fremont — 27 paid firefighters who also are trained as EMTs or paramedics; staff at least seven per shift for three shifts.

- Norfolk — 27 paid firefighters who also are trained as EMTs or paramedics; staff at least seven per shift for three shifts.

- Columbus — 12 paid firefighters who also are trained as EMTs or paramedics, and 93 volunteer firefighters; staff at least four per shift.

Sources: KVFD, Fremont Tribune, area fire departments

Response times

Average response times to fire and medical calls in Kearney and other Nebraska cities:

- Kearney — 3:53
- Columbus — 4 minutes
- Fremont — 4 minutes
- Grand Island — 5 minutes
- Norfolk — 5 minutes

Number of stations

- Grand Island — 4
- Kearney — 2
- Norfolk — 2
- Columbus — 2
- Fremont — 1

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