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Customer Solution Success Story

Hall County Chooses APX Data for Inspection and Preplanning

Overview

Country or Region: Hall County, Georgia, United States

Industry: Emergency Services

Customer Profile: Hall County covers a population of over 200,000 and receives approximately 30,000 phone calls a year, making them the seventh-largest fire department in the state of Georgia.

Organizational Situation: Preplans and inspections were done using pen and paper. Hall County knew there had to be a better way.

Solution: Hall County selected APX CityScape for preplanning and inspections.

Benefits

- Increased preplans and inspections by 340%
- Achieved 100% preplan and inspection targets
- Improved ISO rating from 3 to 2

Hall County Fire Marshal's Office adopts APX SmartCapture and collaborates on SmartInspect, increasing preplans and inspections by 340%, reducing liability, and improving ISO rating from 3 to 2.

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- Bryan Cash, Fire Marshal

When it comes to being a first responder, Hall County Fire Marshal Bryan Cash has just about done it all. In his 26-year history with the Hall County Fire Department in Georgia, he's been a volunteer firefighter, a full-time firefighter, and a paramedic. Not one to be idle, he also worked two days a week as a police officer while employed full-time with the fire department.

Bryan first became interested in fire investigation while a full-time firefighter. It was this interest that led him into police work. When a position as a fire investigator became available at Hall County Fire Marshal's Office, it was a natural fit. He took the job and spent the next several years as an investigator, rising through the ranks at the FMO. He was promoted to Captain, then Battalion Chief, and then Brigade Commander. When the Fire Marshal retired in 2015, Bryan was ready to take on the job.

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Hall County Fire Department

Located in North Central Georgia, Hall County is home to nearly 200,000 people, and continues to grow by more than 1.5% per year (per US 2017 Census Data). It encompasses the beautiful Lake Lanier and the City of Gainesville. The Hall County Fire Department is big—they’re the seventh-largest fire department in the state of Georgia—and responds to 30,000 calls annually. Although Gainesville has its own fire department, Hall County provides its EMS services.

In the Fire Marshal’s Office, also known as the Bureau of Fire Prevention, Bryan oversees seven full-time staff and three more part-time workers. The work of fire prevention breaks down into three main activities: investigations, inspections and preplans, and education.

Department History

The HCFD was officially established in 1970; they were a volunteer force prior to that. At that point, they became responsible for doing investigations, inspections, and business preplans.

Back then, preplans and inspections, like everything else, were done with pen and paper. From 1970 all the way till 2000, preplans were done using a hard copy paper form issued by the state. Stations received a list of the businesses in their territory, and the firefighters would go out

and visit the businesses, and then submit the two-page form and a hand-drawn plan back to the FMO. Each station kept a box of these hard copy paper plans on the firetruck for use when they got to an incident scene. In theory, the preplans showed the building layout, as well as where gas and electrical shut-offs, exits, etc. were located—critical knowledge for those first on the scene.

In 2000, Bryan was working as an investigator. One of his duties was to oversee preplans of the businesses in Hall County, to make sure they got done. To his mind, the existing plans were too long and complicated, filled with obscure codes, and just plain difficult to understand. He asked the Fire Chief if he could take a stab at making the form more user-friendly. He called the Insurance Services Office (ISO) to find out what they really wanted to see in a preplan, and then eliminated everything else. The result was a much simpler, single-page form. Based on that, he redesigned the layout and came up with a “quick response card” (QRC), a card that was just a bit larger in size than an index card, containing all of the critical information. Contact details, potential hazards, electric and gas shut-offs—everything firefighters would need to know upon arrival at an incident scene—were all clearly and simply presented. Now the preplans went to the FMO,

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and the QRCs remained in a much smaller box on the fire trucks. This system remained in place until Bryan became Fire Marshal.

Never Enough Time

Bryan explains that before 2015, even with the simplified plans and QRCs, there was simply not enough time or manpower to inspect and preplan every business in the territory. The inspections were being done by dedicated inspectors, and there were simply too many inspections needing completion. The preplans were being done by fire suppression crews, who couldn’t keep up. It’s not hard to see why—there are enough businesses in the region that it would require firefighters to visit two or three per shift in order to complete all the annual preplans. It just wasn’t possible. They were only able to preplan about a quarter of the businesses, so, they picked the biggest ones in the areas of greatest risk.

The Risks of the Status Quo

When Bryan took over as Fire Marshal, the Fire Chief asked him what he would need in order to be successful. Bryan immediately responded that he wanted to inspect and preplan every single occupancy in the county. People die in fires at small businesses just the same as at big businesses. The liability is the same. He felt strongly that the fire department had to be proactive, visiting every single commercial establishment to find those sprinkler systems

that weren’t tagged properly, extension cords being used as permanent wiring, out-of-date fire extinguishers, blocked fire exits, and burnt-out exit signs, before they caused serious harm.

The Chief gave him the budget, and Bryan hired overtime staff, training them to do inspections. At ten inspections a day by each inspector, they soon hit their inspections target.

But the preplans were still not getting done. Bryan began to think that it would save time for the inspectors to do the preplans, too.

The Opportunity

On the one hand, since inspectors were going to every business in their jurisdiction anyway, it made perfect sense for them to do the preplans at the same time as the inspections. That would ensure Bryan’s goal would be met in the most cost-effective and labor-efficient way possible.

On the other hand, meeting that goal had to be balanced against the extra time that it would take inspectors to collect preplan information as well. Usually, an inspection would take about 15 minutes, but completing a paper preplan at the same time could extend the process to an hour or more. The inspectors were finally on track to inspect every business in the county, but doing the preplans would slow them down again from ten inspections down

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to two or three per day. It was a conundrum.

Not only that, but much of the information required in the inspections and the preplans was common to both documents. Bryan saw an opportunity to increase efficiency there, too. At this time, incident reports, PCRs (medical reports), inventory, and truck checks had already gone digital. Only inspections and preplans were still being done with pen and paper, as they had been since 1970. If Bryan was going to get all the preplans done, the process would have to be more efficient—it would have to go digital. He began looking for a product to help, and eventually found APX.

Going Digital with APX

When Bryan first came across APX, the company was focused solely on preplan software, and nothing comparable existed to help with inspections. Bryan really wanted a product that would integrate both to maximize efficiency.

Bryan initially felt APX was not quite what he needed. However, after working with the APX team and seeing the demo, he felt that SmartCapture could be modified to work for inspections as well. He began collaborating with the company to tweak the program to accommodate inspections, and—out of this collaboration—SmartInspect was born. Now, with

a single action by the inspector, the common data would instantly go to both the inspection and the preplan programs, eliminating duplication of work. He now had the total package he was looking for. Bryan credits APX’s CEO, Paul Martin, and CTO, Warren Gallagher, with the vision and insight to rise to this challenge.

Bryan reasoned that the annual preplans would slow things down only for the first year while they were being digitized. After that, if nothing changed at a business from one year to the next, the preplans wouldn’t have to be altered, and so would add no time to the inspections.

In fact, that is what happened. In the first year of going digital, the inspectors went from doing two or three inspections a day to completing five or six. In the second year, they were doing up to eight or nine.

Bryan credits the extra manpower allowed him by the Fire Chief, and APX with helping Hall County FMO achieve its goals. Without either of those elements, it would not have been possible. Even with all the extra staff, they would not have been able to do all of the preplans. “Up until we went with APX,” he says, “we never managed to preplan every business in the county. Never.”

For more information call APX Data at 1-888-240-0591 or visit the website at www.apxdata.com

For more information about Hall County Fire Services, visit the website at <https://www.hallcounty.org/196/Fire-Services>

ISO Rating Improvement

Another exciting development is that the Hall County Fire Marshal's office ISO rating has recently improved one level from 3 to 2. This was due in part to the increased inspections and preplans, and also to their adoption of APX's SmartView. SmartView provides first responders and other emergency services personnel rapid and easy access to information captured in SmartCapture.

Bryan had initially wanted to install SmartView in all department apparatus but did not have the budget for it. Realizing that ISO really only required Incident Commanders to view the preplans, he had SmartView installed in their command vehicles instead of in each truck, and the cost was minimal. This satisfied ISO requirements: but once Bryan saw how well it was working, he began asking for the budget to put it in all of the trucks. He submitted his proposal to the County Administrator, who approved it after seeing his presentation.

Getting the Job Done

When asked what difference APX has made to the Hall County Fire Marshal's office, Bryan says "We've inspected every business in the county, we've preplanned every business in the county, we've investigated every fire in the

county...[APX] has allowed us to go from not getting them all done to getting them all done. It's that simple.... I brag about the software all the time!"