



## **ACCREDITATION CASE STUDY**

### **Gwinnett County Department of Fire and Emergency Services**

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Gwinnett County Department of Fire and Emergency Services of Atlanta, Georgia, recently completed their self study and site visit as part of the Paramedic educational program accreditation process with the CoAEMSP under the auspices of CAAHEP.



**CHIEF BILL  
MYERS**

They are only the second accredited EMS education program in the state, and the first fire department in Georgia to receive accreditation.

Fire Chief Bill Myers, Chief of Training Rod Dawson, and Instructor Julio Diaz, TEMS, NREMT-P, shared their experience with the accreditation process, along with best practices, in order to help others minimize the challenges while maximizing the success of the accreditation experience.

#### **The Self Study: “If We Could Do It All Over Again...”**

When looking back on the self study, Chief Dawson stresses that first of all, accuracy in record-keeping is important. Chief Myers agrees, saying that documentation is the biggest change he would have made, explaining that documentation would have made the accreditation process easier. “We could have done an after-action review of our programs just like we do with major structure fires,” he explains. “The Fire Academy staff discusses lessons learned [after a major structures fire], and documentation is part of the after-action review.” Using this same type of documentation in their educational program, Chief Myers explains, would have been a great asset during the accreditation process.

Chief Dawson believes using a team approach would have made the accreditation process easier to implement. “Although you need a team leader, you can perform a better audit, gather more input, and get more done prior to the site visit with more eyes involved,” he points out. Instructor Diaz, who was given major responsibility for completing the self study, concurs. “I would have liked to spend more time in the areas of curriculum and agenda. I would have explored and expanded on other parts of the field study. I would have gotten more input from the field and faculty in these areas.”

Acknowledging the outstanding job that Instructor Diaz did, Chief Myers says he still would have made sure more people were involved in the self study process to support Instructor Diaz. “We didn’t realize the amount of work it would take. Resource-wise, we would have supported Instructor Diaz more.”

*“Tackle the self study with a team approach.”*

Fire Chief Bill Myers



CHIEF ROD  
DAWSON, NREMT-P

“Have confidence and be persistent,” Instructor Diaz advises, who was recognized as Trainer of the Year in 2010. “Most programs have a good chance of becoming accredited if they work on the [CAAHEP] *Standards* and the process.” Breaking the self study into components was also significant in helping Instructor Diaz see numerous accomplishments along the way. “It didn’t look so overwhelming,” he said about following this strategy. “Having small goals makes it an easier process.”

*“Break the self study into components. Having small goals makes it an easier process.”*

Instructor Julio Diaz

#### **Best Practices for the Site Visit**

Chief Dawson acknowledges that the department was nervous about the accreditation process. “You are apprehensive when you hear ‘accreditation’!” Chief Myers agrees with Chief Dawson’s sentiments, saying, “It’s a little intimidating at first when someone walks into your backyard.” But both Chief Myers and Chief Dawson were quick to point out the end result. “What is awesome,” Chief Dawson recalls, “is that the site visitors have gone through the same process! They are educators and program directors. They are just like us.” Chief Myers concurs, “The site visitors made it very easy for us to relax early on. I enjoyed the opportunity as a Fire Chief to showcase what my folks were doing.”

*“The site visitors have gone through the same process!  
They are just like us.”*

Fire Chief Bill Myers



JULIO DIAZ, TEMS,  
NREMT-P

“Chief Dawson stresses that the site visit definitely strengthened his department and program. “The site visit is not there to hammer you but help you better your program.” He says programs need to be willing to change if they want the site visit to be a positive experience. “The site visitors are friendly, open and honest,” Chief Dawson recalls. “They are not there to trick you. You should ask them for help. They are there for you.”

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Chief Rod Dawson

“The site visit will definitely strengthen your department and program,” Chief Dawson stresses. “It brings to light all that’s very good as well as all that’s very bad!” He also says it’s important to let the other departments within your organization assist in the accreditation process—whether its business services, clinical sites or others. “They all need to be on board, too.”

Chief Dawson shares the department’s philosophy, which most likely contributes to its overall success—not only with the accreditation process, but as a highly successful fire & EMS department: “Accreditation is not an easy task or cost-free, but well worth the effort. Any time you a program can become accredited, it gives the organization added value, especially in today’s economic times. People want to know they are getting value from something. Accreditation says our program holds value.”

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Chief Rod Dawson

#### **More About Gwinnett County Fire & EMS**

The energy Gwinnett County Fire & EMS has for their work is apparent in the first few minutes you speak with Fire Chief Bill Myers and his staff. “We have a passion for service,” Chief Myers states. Chief Dawson concurs: “Our core values are truth, trust, respect and unity.”

The department’s culture, according to Chief Myers, developed 25 years ago when their hospital-based-system was transformed “almost overnight” and they began providing EMS to the County. “We came to work one day back in 1986 and there were ambulances in our stations,” Chief Myers recalls. Back then, the supervisors in the hospital were Paramedics, who were then placed on the ambulances. “This probably generated the complete inclusiveness of EMS and fire. We became a completely integrated system. Everyone who is a supervisor has come up through the system with it being fire and EMS.”

Just recently, the department made it a requirement that all Lieutenants must be certified as a Paramedic. “There is no separate hierarchy” regarding fire and EMS, Chief Myers says. Chief of Training Rod Dawson points out, “The Chief, Assistant Chief and Battalions are all Paramedic-trained. EMS is a mindset from the top to the bottom.”

*“We want to help the community more, and one way is to look forward to EMS.”*

Instructor Julio Diaz

The majority of the calls received at Gwinnett County Fire & EMS are EMS-related—between 75% and 80%. “We see the future and that EMS is a part of the Fire Department,” states Instructor Diaz. Instructor Diaz supports their focus on EMS by saying, “We can’t just be based on fire [anymore] because the new codes and building construction [greatly reduce the number of fires that occur]. “We want to help the community more, and one way is to look forward to EMS.”

They also recognize that the high number of EMS-related calls received can affect its business model in a positive way. “From a business perspective,” Chief Myers states, “we understand EMS transport is a revenue-generator for the County. There are fewer fires nowadays. We love tradition and the history of fire, but it’s not the same as it was in the past. EMS is not a division but a function.”

### **An Education-Based Mindset**

The department is highly committed to education and currently provides training that exceeds state requirements. They have started to gain students from other fire departments due to their Fire Academy’s excellence and availability.

“[Our Paramedics] are highly trained, highly passionate folks,” Chief Myers says, explaining that their training consists of a “well-rounded program” in which they learn the core values, mission, and vision of the department. “We don’t just teach them *what* they need to know, but *why* it’s important to know it,” Chief Myers stresses.

Chief Myers is also proud of his instructors. “We are in the habit of seeking out the best in the business. Sometimes the best are our own employees and we train them to be an instructor,” Chief Myers explains. “Or we are introduced to someone somewhere else who is an extraordinary instructor. We are always scanning the environment for who needs to be riding on our bus! We don’t always know what seat they’ll be in, but we know we want them!” The bottom line,” Chief Myers says, “is that we have the best people in the profession.” Chief Dawson agrees by saying that while public safety requires a special kind of person, “it takes someone even more special to be an educator.”

Reflecting on the transition to accreditation by the EMS profession, Chief Dawson says, “Higher education has become the norm over the years. It’s a move taking place throughout the industry—and why shouldn’t it? U.S. citizens deserve the same standard of care across the country. This comes from education.”

***“EMS is not a division but a function.”***

Fire Chief Bill Myers

*Editorial Note: For those working on their self study or preparing for a site visit for accreditation by the CoAEMSP under the auspices of CAAHEP, Instructor Diaz would be happy to provide additional informal advice. He can be reached at [julio.diaz@gwinnettcountry.com](mailto:julio.diaz@gwinnettcountry.com).*

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