



JVA CONSULTING, LLC
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West Metro Fire Rescue

Focus Group Report Prepared By:

JVA Consulting, LLC

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INTRODUCTION

In July 2006, St. Anthony's Hospitals contracted with JVA Consulting, LLC to conduct focus groups with West Metro Fire Department staff and family members. The main purpose of the evaluation was to gather qualitative data on how a recent 48/96 shift change has affected the quality of family life for members and their families. This study served as a companion piece to a larger evaluation conducted by St. Anthony's Hospitals.

METHODOLOGY

JVA Consulting, LLC (JVA) worked with St. Anthony's hospitals to develop focus group protocols and structured discussion questions and to schedule participants (see Appendix A). JVA facilitators conducted a total of six focus groups, three with firefighters and three with spouses. JVA research associates facilitated the focus groups and transcribed audio-recordings of the discussions. A JVA senior research associate analyzed the data and prepared the final report.

Thirteen firefighters participated across three focus groups: four firefighters in the first group, three in the second, and six in the third. Eleven spouses/partners participated across three focus groups: two in the first group, three in the second and six in the third. Focus groups were conducted at West Metro Fire on August 29th, 30th, and September 1st at 6:00 in the evening. The West Metro Community Outreach Director scheduled the focus groups and invited all West Metro firefighters, staff, and spouses to attend. A final list of participants who had agreed to attend was sent to JVA in early August. These participants were mailed letters confirming the date, time, and location of the focus groups, as well as the focus group questions so that they would know what to expect. Firefighter/staff and partner focus groups were conducted simultaneously in different rooms to allow families who wanted to participate to travel together. Childcare and dinner were provided.

RESULTS

I. Firefighter Focus Groups

Length of time with West Metro Fire Department

The length of time that firefighters have been with West Metro Fire Department ranged from 6 to 20 years with an average of 11.5 years. Over half (7 out of 13) have been with the department for 10 or more years.

Shift Change Process

The majority of firefighters agreed that the transition to the new shift could not have been planned better. They were happy with how it was introduced and implemented. It was a matter of adjusting to a new routine, such as the new training schedule, which could not have been planned for. One firefighter stated,

“It was a lot easier than I thought. ... I expected the first day to be really long and the second day to be even longer, but it didn’t turn out that way at all. It was an easy transition.”

The general consensus from firefighters across all three focus groups was that the process of changing to the new 48/96 shift went smoothly and without problems. Firefighters had some discussion on how to handle minor issues, such as housekeeping/chores and morning wake-up times, during the new shift. Firefighters also adjusted the training schedule so that trainings fit into two days instead of three to accommodate the new shift. One person working in the office did not have any problem with the shift change. Several said that they liked the new schedule compared with the previous schedule because it gave them more time at home or with family. One firefighter who was a volunteer previously reported no schedule preference. In commenting about a two-platoon shift and Kelly days at a previous department, another firefighter reported,

“They went to the old schedule soon after I left, but I certainly hope we don’t go to a schedule like that ever again.”

Strengths of the 48/96 schedule compared with the previous schedule

Firefighters felt that there were numerous strengths to the 48/96 schedule, including financial, physical/mental health, and time benefits, as well as increased productivity and home/work balance.

Financially, firefighters in two of the three focus groups have found that they spend a lot less on gas since they have to drive to the firehouse fewer times a week. One person views the saving of \$300 a month on gas as the equivalent of a salary increase.

Most firefighters claim that they are less fatigued with the new schedule, which allows them to get more rest during time off. With the previous schedule, many felt that the in-between days were useless because they were so tired, or they couldn't sleep because they were so busy getting other things done. "It wasn't easy to switch gears," one firefighter said. With the new schedule, they claim to have less burnout and feel they can cope better so that tasks do not accumulate or overwhelm them as much.

Much of the feedback is related to the increased time firefighters now have in their new schedules:

Many like that they can now have more time for mini-vacations, especially if they go out of town. On the new schedules, staff have fewer days (10 vs. 13 days) per vacation, but they have a greater number of vacations per year (five times per year compared with three times).

They are able to schedule more personal time for projects and socializing with friends.

With the new shift, firefighters have more full weekends off. Many say they have more time with their children (especially with regard to custody time), to attend their extracurricular activities and school events. Some say that it feels like there are more days off, even though there are not.

Firefighters enjoy more rest time when they sleep at the firehouse on the second morning rather than waking up earlier at home to drive in.

Another strength of the new shift is the time saved by not driving to the firehouse as frequently. One person estimated that it is 10 hours less driving time per month for firefighters who commute from Castle Rock.

According to several firefighters, the new shift allows for increased productivity at work, because when they are at work for two days they are focused on work, and when they get off the shift they can go home and be focused on home life for four days. This equates to less stress and more balance between work and home. As a result, firefighters feel better physically and mentally and are able to exercise more frequently (on the second morning of the shift since they are already at the station).

They also find it easier to deal with family on the new shift because they are happier at work and at home. They report that their partners/spouses like the new shift because firefighters have more home time, and when they are home, they are easier to get along with.

Another plus is decreased stress and anxiety related to fewer shift changes in the mornings. Shift changes are stressful when a call comes in at the beginning of a shift change and the incoming crew does not have time to do inspections, etc. Since firefighters stay on duty for two consecutive mornings on the new shift, there are half as many shift changes to deal with. The result is greater efficiency and people receiving better service.

Several firefighters in one group agreed that they have more time to handle emergencies since they do not have to work the next day and can deal with contractors (i.e.,

pipes burst), or they can carry a project over from day to day.

Challenges of the 48/96 schedule compared with the previous schedule

Participants across all three groups felt that the 48/96 schedule does not pose many new challenges within their family/social life, and instead, it may relieve some of the challenges from the previous schedule. The main challenge reported was the initial adjustment to the new schedule for their children. For instance, one dad's young child misses him by the second night of the shift, but they cope by communicating by telephone. Another reported challenge was the stress for spouses/partners to manage the house for two days because they are more fatigued with home issues (i.e., taking care of the kids, appliance breakdowns, etc.), which they have to handle on their own. Firefighters see these as minor problems that are manageable. Special circumstances such as illness of a spouse/partner or children can also be difficult to deal with under the new schedule. Some of the single firefighters reported difficulty in caring for pets (i.e., feeding) when they are gone for 48 hours. Inevitably, they need someone else to help care for them or they have to give up their pets.

Another challenge is not getting enough rest for the second day of the shift. Firefighters have to get up early the next morning of the shift instead of sleeping in at home on the off day (previous schedule). Firefighters who work on ambulances reported that if they have a rough first day they will be tired for the second day shift.

Lastly, one person brought up the point that the 48/96 schedule makes it difficult to transition to another station. They reported feeling out of place and awkward. Similarly, with the 48/96, it is hard for people to move into busier houses (stations) with training and chores because it disrupts their routine.

Suggestions offered by participants for addressing challenges

Firefighter participants offered several suggests for how to address challenges posed by the shift change. For those who are busy on the first day of their shift, such as the ambulance workers, the solution is usually to have their schedules cleared until lunch (if there is not a training) so they can get some rest. Firefighters in all three groups feel it would also be helpful to have a supportive employer who lets staff take some hours to go home if they have a sick child or spouse without having to take the entire day (24 hour shift) off. Most are in favor of giving officers leeway to use their judgment to tailor their policies to the resources and needs of the individual crew. This can also be applied to caring for pets. They agree that additional support from the department, such as daycare for children, would help in critical situations. Others added that family support could be provided by team members and others they work with who are off duty and can go over to help spouses. Others seconded this idea by saying, "*It would be nice to have,*" and, "*It would make a lot more wives a little bit more at ease.*"

Other intended or unintended changes

West Metro Firefighters in two of the three groups reiterated that as a result of the new shift, they are able to spend more time with their children, spouses, friends and family. As one firefighter shared, he now gets to put his child to bed more often because of the four days off. It is an unintended benefit for young children, as one dad pointed out, because four days

home have more of an impact for young children than having a parent gone for two consecutive days. One dad speaking about his young daughter stated, “...It’s like I am never gone to her.” Another firefighter added that he would like to see families visit the firehouse more, now that firefighters have 48 hours away from home. Others in the group agreed that having families visit the firehouse would be a positive change and that it is already happening at other stations. Additional comments regarding time included that firefighters enjoy time in general more now and they are able to get more done on the new schedule. In fact, one firefighter shared that he/she has had less sick time on the 48/96 schedule and has not called in sick yet since its inception. Participants in one group all agreed that the pros and cons of the 48/96 schedule really depended on the personal choices they make in their lives (i.e., where to live, whether to have a pet, etc.).

Although questions in the focus group centered on quality of home life outside of work, firefighters in two groups spent some time discussing concerns about the enforcement of safety guidelines related to rest and hydration during the 48/96 shift. They reported a lack of consistent policy regarding when a firefighter is expected to work during the day shift following a busy night that allows for little sleep. This, according to one firefighter, is easily handled if the officers call in a shift change. Along these same lines, another firefighter would like to see some flexibility built into the schedule with regard to training, especially for busy stations. He/she feels that training should not be as strictly enforced if they have not had a chance to rest from a busy night. Also, if they have been training on a live fire the first day of the shift and then get a call for an actual fire, they don’t have a chance to rest, hydrate, recover, and eat. In other words, federal safety standards are not accommodated with this new schedule since some departments still expect the same activity level on a 48/96 shift. The department has not addressed this issue of a lack of flexibility with the new schedule and there has not been discussion around what small solutions have worked at other stations that can be implemented at West Metro. One example given of a “clever way to manage time” was of a station with a two-day shift schedule that posts all of its trainings, work to be done, and events as a means to splitting up the shifts. In the words of one firefighter, “It is important for the union or department to embrace ideas of what other stations are doing.”

Lastly, the discussion in one group centered on the issue of time efficiency. Firefighters feel they have to be more efficient with their time to get everything done (fire inspections, for example) in two days on the new shift instead of three on the old shift. One person would be interested in seeing the statistics tracked for building inspections on this new schedule. Conversely, if a station is not busy with calls and there is a lot of free time, and the staff does not necessarily get along (eat together, etc.), “it would be crazy,” as one person speculated. To which another responded that this was a departmental issue and the officer in charge would need to keep his staff busy in training as a potential solution.

II. Partner/Spouse Focus Groups

Shift Change Process

Spouses/partners of West Metro Firefighters across all three groups agreed that the process of

changing to the new shift was easy and that they were given plenty of notice (at least four months). As one spouse/partner shared, "...*After a couple of shifts you were used to it.*" Several spouses in one group noted that the shift change was an ongoing process in which they were involved, via letters sent home and discussion groups. They also said that vacation times were selected before the transition and that they are based on seniority. Partners/spouses in another group said that the new shift has made it easier to plan family activities and that their partners like not having to drive to work as much. One spouse/partner who also works outside the home shared that when his/her spouse was on the old shift they never had mornings together. None of the participants who were interviewed felt that the shift change process could have gone better.

Strengths of the 48/96 schedule compared with the previous schedule

Spouses/partners shared several strengths of the 48/96 schedule compared with the previous schedule, including the benefits of having more time (spousal, family, vacation and weekend time), less daycare needs, more continuity at home, less fatigue for their firefighter spouses, and more personal time for themselves.

- Having more spousal time together was noted across all three groups as a significant strength of the 48/96 schedule. In fact, several spouses in one group felt that the new schedule was less stressful on their marriages and strengthened their relationships. One spouse stated improved communication and less anxiety:

"We seem to talk more and he seems less distracted. We have a better relationship because the time is less distracted."

Another partner/spouse also felt that the new schedule was less stressful on their relationship.

"We'll make it work one way or another, but this is going to make it better. Maybe not better but easier."

One spouse who also works outside the home added that her husband's schedule is much easier to follow; they have more time together, in particular mornings.

Another partner stated that now she does not have to go to as many events alone.

Another strength of the new shift discussed in two groups is the need for less daycare. One partner/spouse has found it easier to obtain daycare for two days a week rather than the three days in the old schedule. Another does less driving with the new shift because she does not have to drive her children to babysitters as often.

Benefits of the new shift extend to the whole family in terms of more time and more quality interaction between family members. Spouses/partners reported that now both parents can attend children's activities, and spend quality time together as a family instead of watching TV and dosing off from fatigue. This strength was brought up in all three groups and applies to families with children of all ages (infants to teens). Those in separate households have more custody time with their children who may live farther away. Many agree that the new shift is easier on the whole family. Spouses/partners reported that firefighters are less irritable at home because they are not as tired. As someone reported,

"I see how much better he is, how much he gets done around the house, and how much more energy he has than me."

The new schedule also has the advantage of more time off, including weekends and additional vacation days. In the previous schedule, firefighters had weekends off once every three months, compared to once every six weeks on the 48/96 schedule. If they trade out vacation days, families receive 50 days with the new schedule, compared with 39 days previously. The new schedule also decreases the need to have trade time (which is difficult to arrange, especially for some positions such as captain) since Firefighters have more days off.

Spouses/partners in all three groups find that the new schedule is less emotionally stressful because they no longer have to mentally "gear up" for that five-day stretch of their spouses working on and off. They didn't have much time in the evenings on the days off in between because their spouses/partners had to go to bed at nine to get enough sleep for the next work day.

The 48/96 schedule also allows for greater continuity at home since firefighters work for two days and then are home for four straight days. As one spouse/partner put it, *"They're gone for their period of time, and when they're home, they're home."* On the old schedule, *"He's got to be a dad as soon as he walks in the door."* On the new schedule, according to spouses/partners in all three groups, firefighters can integrate back into the home with greater ease. Many commented on how much easier it is for their firefighter partners to start and finish home projects.

As mentioned previously, spouses/partners across all groups notice their firefighter partners are less fatigued, more relaxed and happier on this new shift. For example, one spouse said that, *"...Before, he was fatigued by the sixth day; it would take a day to make it up, and then on his fourth day off he was focused on getting back into the schedule again."* With the previous schedule, their firefighter partners could not do much on the in-between days, which left only two days a week to do anything.

Lastly, spouses/partners in one group have found that they have more personal time for themselves with the 48/96 schedule, because they are no longer feeling that they

The need to be home for family time as they previously did on the in-between off days.

Several said that they have more time to exercise or indulge in a little time for themselves.

Challenges of the 48/96 schedule compared with the previous schedule:

Spouses/partners did not come up with sizeable challenges, but instead discussed some minor issues resulting from the 48/96 schedule. As discussed in two groups, it is difficult for spouses/partners to have their firefighter partners out of the house for two days when they and their children are sick and need some extra help. Or as one spouse put it, *"Everything happens the day he's gone."* It is also tough when the spouse/partner works all week and then the firefighters work on the weekend; however this only occurs once every six weeks. Some

spouses/partners in one group expressed concern that their firefighter partners might be switched to a busier firehouse and the fatigue they would undergo on the 48/96 shift.

In addition, firefighters cannot do too many trades for vacation time because they cannot work three days in a row. Another spouse/partner who has older children ready to “leave the nest” does not look forward to being alone for longer periods of time on the new schedule. Yet another stated that the new schedule does not work well with her school schedule. One spouse/partner is inconvenienced more since they have had to move farther away from the grandmother who cares for their child.

Suggestions of spouses/partners for addressing challenges:

Spouses/partners offered several suggests for how to address challenges posed by the shift change. One suggestion made was to have an internal system to handle trades, like a bank of people who want to work or need a trade, instead of having to call someone. Another spouse/partner feels the new schedule would be more convenient if his/her spouse worked closer to home.

Changes in your partner/spouse since the onset of the 48/96 schedule:

Quite a few spouses/partners in all three groups said that their firefighter partners are not as tired since the onset of the new schedule. They are able to sleep in longer at the firehouse on the second day of the shift as opposed to waking up early and driving in from home on the old shift. One spouse/partner mentioned that his/her spouse is more comfortable at the firehouse and is more settled in since he/she is there for two consecutive days. Another said, “*He loves not driving as much.*” Spouse/partners report that firefighters also receive fewer shift change calls and TeleStaff calls since the onset of the new 48/96 schedule.

Other intended or unintended changes

The general consensus across the three groups was that they all like the shift change and have not heard of many others who do not like it. One mother of five appreciates the schedule so much more because her firefighters partner can be home and help out more with the kids, like volunteering at their school. There is more consistency for the children. Another mother finds that she and the children do not have to be quiet around the house and sleep in the basement when the children are sick so that her firefighter spouse can get sleep. As one spouse/partner put it, “*Going back to the old schedule would be scary.*”

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, 13 firefighters and 11 spouses/partners participated in six focus groups, with a majority of firefighters having worked for West Metro for over five years. Focus group participants included firefighters in several different roles within the department, many of whom are firefighters. The transition into the 48/96 schedule was seen by participants in both groups as rather effortless. They felt they were given enough time to prepare for the change and it

could not have been planned any better.

Both firefighters and their partners/spouses are in agreement as to the main strengths of this new schedule. These include increased time for family, spouses, vacations/weekends, rest, and personal time/projects, decreased fatigue, a greater work/home balance and continuity at home, and much less stress and anxiety.

Among the challenges of the new shift, firefighters and their spouses report only minor ones, such as a concern for increased fatigue on the second day of the shift. Families also struggle with two consecutive days without their firefighters partner when they and their children are sick or something goes wrong around the house. The solutions given to these problems were to have shift changes when there is not enough time to rest, and to have more departmental support for families (for childcare, time flexibility, etc.).

In conclusion, both firefighters and their spouses/partners approve of the change to the 48/96 schedule and would not like to return to the old schedule.

APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOLS

West Metro Fire Rescue Firefighter Focus Group

Introduction:

Thank you for joining us to share your thoughts about the 48/96 West Metro shift change. We are independent evaluation consultants hired by St. Anthony Central Hospital to conduct focus groups with firefighters and their families to gather more in-depth information on how the shift change has affected your family life. Many of you also took the time to complete the survey, and we thank you for your responses. These focus groups are intended to build on those responses in a more detailed way. All of your answers will be kept completely confidential. There will be an evaluation report submitted to St. Anthony Central Hospital that will summarize the conversation we have this evening. However, no names or other identifying information will be associated with responses, and all responses will be reported in such a way as to mask the identity of the responder. St. Anthony Central Hospital will submit our evaluation report along with the survey results to West Metro Fire Rescue administration and the Board of Directors.

Ground Rules:

We ask that you adhere to the following ground rules during this focus group:

- Be respectful of the opinions/responses of others
- Whatever is said in the room remains in the room, to allow people to be as open and forthright as possible
- Turn off the ringer on your cell phone
- Allow for everyone to have a chance to respond

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How long have you been with the West Metro Fire Department? What is your role with the Department? (*ask this only if there are different levels all present (chief, captain, lieutenant, etc.)
- 2 How smoothly did the actual process of the shift change occur? How could this have been done better?
- 3 In thinking about your family/social life, your ability to care for children (if you have children), and your relationship with your spouse/partner, What are the strengths of the 48/96 schedule compared with the previous schedule?
- 4 In thinking about your family/social life, your ability to care for children (if you have children), and your relationship with your spouse/partner, What are the challenges of the 48/96 schedule compared with the previous schedule?
- 5 Do you have any suggestions for how these challenges might be addressed?
- 6 Are there any other changes, intended or unintended, that have occurred as a result of the shift change that we have not discussed?

West Metro Fire Rescue Focus Group: Partner/Spouse

Introduction:

Thank you for joining us to share your thoughts about the 48/96 West Metro shift change. We are independent evaluation consultants hired by St. Anthony Central Hospital to conduct focus groups with firefighters and their families to gather more in-depth information on how the shift change has affected your family life. Many of you also took the time to complete the survey, and we thank you for your responses. These focus groups are intended to build on those responses in a more detailed way. All of your answers will be kept completely confidential. There will be an evaluation report submitted to St. Anthony Central Hospital that will summarize the conversation we have this evening. However, no names or other identifying information will be associated with responses, and all responses will be reported in such a way as to mask the identity of the responder. St. Anthony Central Hospital will submit our evaluation report, along with the survey results, to West Metro Fire Rescue administration and the Board of Directors.

Ground Rules:

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- Whatever is said in the room remains in the room, to allow people to be as open and forthright as possible

- Turn off the ringer on your cell phone
- Allow for everyone to have a chance to respond

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How long has your spouse/partner been with the West Metro Fire Department?
- 2 How smoothly did the actual process of the shift change occur? How could this have been done better?
- 3 In thinking about your family/social life, your ability to care for children (if you have children), and your relationship with your spouse/partner, what are the strengths of the 48/96 schedule compared with the previous schedule?
- 4 In thinking about your family/social life, your ability to care for children (if you have children), and your relationship with your spouse/partner, what are the challenges of the 48/96 schedule compared with the previous schedule?
- 5 Do you have any suggestions for how to address these challenges?
- 6 What changes have you seen in your partner/spouse since the new schedule?
- 7 Are there any other changes, intended or unintended, that have occurred as a result of the shift change that we have not discussed?