



Leaders in Critical Thinking



# STRATEGIC DIRECTION

2025 Board of Directors

## Mission

To develop and enhance effective, professional leaders of the volunteer and combination fire service by providing tools, resources and representation to lead their organizations effectively.



## Core Values

*Established March 2023*

- ✓ **Commitment** - Dedicated to the cause while staying true to the membership, organization, and profession.
- ✓ **Accountability** - Take ownership and hold others to the same standard.
- ✓ **Professionalism** - Being ethical, respectful, competent, skilled and humble.
- ✓ **Integrity** - Doing the right thing when no one is watching.
- ✓ **Teamwork** - Working together toward a common goal.
- ✓ **Innovative** - Looking for the new, now.

# CODE OF CONDUCT

- Maintain dignity, respect, and confidentiality.
- Be optimistic, open-minded, innovative, and flexible.
- Keep healthy humor alive and maintain a professional environment.
- Go to the person and not others when you have a disagreement/problem.
- Do what is ethical regardless of the consequences.
- Define the roles and responsibilities of various positions work within them.
- Communicate the priorities of assignments, provide specific work direction, including timeframes, ask for a summary to ensure understanding, and, as appropriate, place it in writing future reference.
- Foster the philosophy: “Asking for and accepting help is a sign of strength, not weakness.”
- Be dedicated to excellence in our performance, fulfill responsibilities, and “get it done.” Issue-oriented and not personal. Issue-oriented and not personal.
- Agree to disagree.
- Learn/Teach: If you don’t know it, learn it; if you know it, teach it.

## STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES, & THREATS (SWOT) ANALYSIS:

### Strengths

#### ● **STRONG RELATIONSHIPS:**

Board, foundational partners, Workforce Solutions, other IAFC sections, and membership.

#### ● **STRONG LEADERSHIP:**

Clear mission and vision, strategic planning, financial stability, engaged board, professional staff (Mikel, Kevin, Chelsea), SMEs in relevant areas, and transparent communication with members.

#### ● **EXCELLENT MEMBER RESOURCES:**

Symposium in the Sun, critical thinking curriculum, webinars, newsletter, ribbon reports, scholarships, and timely social media updates.

**Associated goals include strengthening relationships by leveraging strategic planning tools to set future goals and maximizing the fire service’s utilization of the section’s resources.**



# Opportunity

## ● COMBINATION FIRE SERVICE:

Becoming the leading voice for combination fire services, developing a National Strategy, and showcasing successes. With no dedicated national entity to provide resources for this rapidly growing department model, especially amid increasing mergers in the West, there's a significant chance to address unmet needs and guide future growth.

## ● EDUCATION:

Expanding top educational programs (Critical Thinking Academy, Transition to Combination Department, Beyond Hoses & Helmets), identifying an apprentice for the education coordinator role, staying updated on learning trends like podcasts and technology, utilizing the Critical-Thinking Academy to reach new audiences and elevate VCOS's image, and creating innovative leadership "toolbox" kits.

## ● PARTNERSHIPS:

Expanding sponsorship, strengthening ties with legacy partners and the USFA Administrator, enhancing engagement with IAFC Divisions, creating an annual calendar for key events, securing additional funding for staffing support, and fostering collaboration with IAFC Workforce Solutions.

## ● MARKETING

Collaborate with a contractor to create a documented marketing strategy tailored for VCOS.

## ● BOARD FUNCTION:

Leverage election cycles to plan leadership succession, improving orientation for new members, and capitalizing on renewed energy and fresh ideas brought by recent board changes.

**Associated goals include establishing VCOS as the key resource for combination fire departments, creating an education plan, facilitating a national strategic plan for combination fire services, leveraging a partnership committee for effective collaboration, and appointing an apprentice to support the education coordinator.**



## Weaknesses

### ● FINANCES:

Insufficient funding to fully utilize management and staff, declining income from membership dues and SITs revenue, lack of detailed and formal budgeting processes, and inability to access SAFER funding.

### ● SUCCESSION PLANNING:

The need to identify successors for the roles of education coordinator and treasurer.

### ● RELEVANCE:

Limited national influence, outdated marketing and messaging strategies, declining engagement with members, insufficient presence in the Western US, and a lack of alignment between resources and the needs of volunteer and combination fire services. Social media reach and participation in non-IAFC national fire events are also areas needing improvement.

### ● MAINTAINING STRATEGIC VISION::

Inadequate follow-through on IAFC strategic initiatives impacting sections, breakdowns in board member communication, and insufficient attention to commitments such as strategic initiatives, logistics, legacy partner relations, and partnerships with other sections.

**Associated goals include creating an annual VCOS budget, establishing succession plans for key roles, developing a marketing plan, defining the vision for SITs over the next five years, and assigning board member roles aligned with the strategic plan to address key issues.**

## Threats

### ● IAFC:

High IAFC staff turnover and instability in key roles, limited membership growth due to affordability and dues structure, lack of transparency in budget and finances, unclear association strategy from leadership, and barriers to membership caused by IAFC dues.

### ● EFFECTIVENESS:

Reduced influence in combination fire service resources, diminishing identity at the national level, and overextending initiatives leading to diluted quality. Limited board member time, overshadowing by other organizations, and misaligned focus on irrelevant issues further weaken impact. Additional concerns are restrictive federal education funding and election cycles favoring politics over productivity.

### ● FINANCES:

Insufficient partnerships expansion, over-reliance on legacy partners, limited funding for staff functions, high webinar costs versus benefits, rising operational costs amid declining membership, and slower revenue growth compared to increasing program and conference expenses.

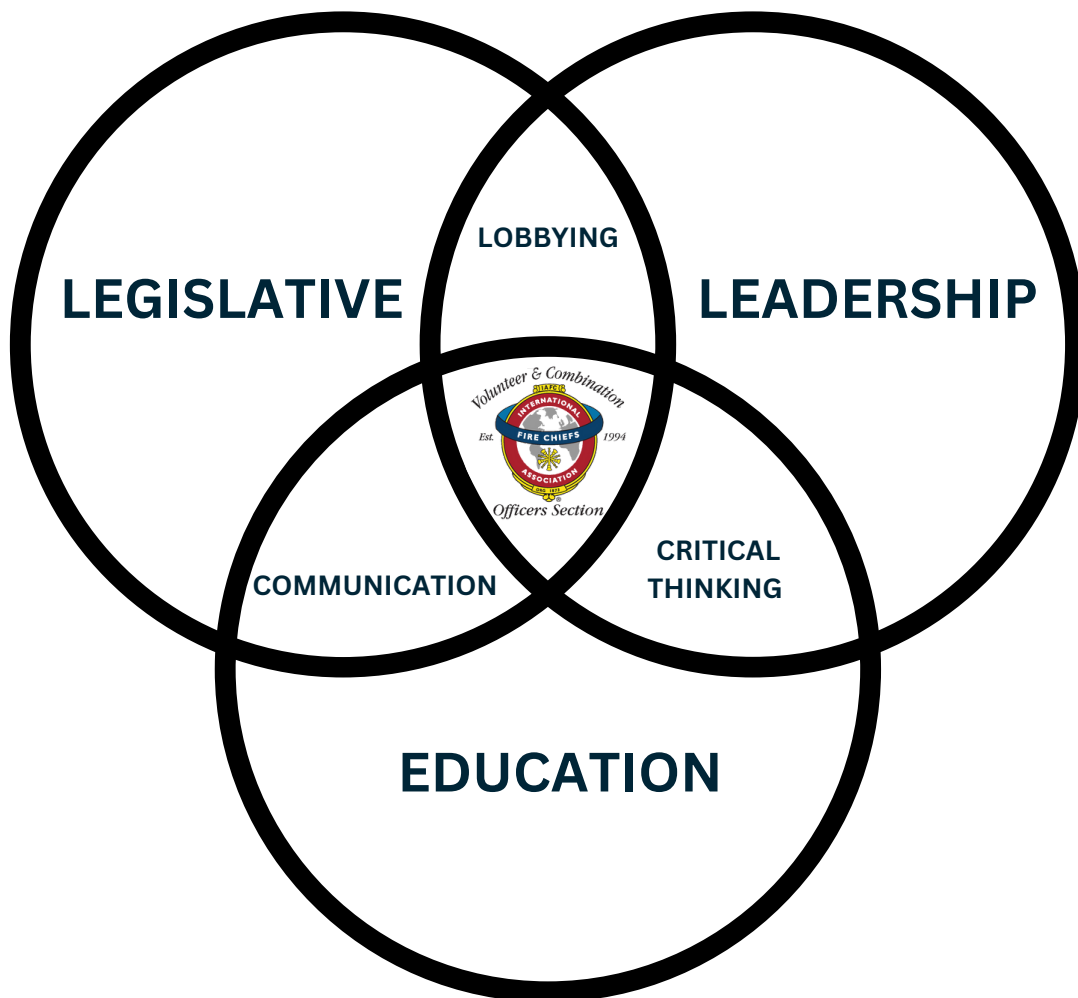
**Associated goals include strengthening ties with IAFC to enhance influence, updating the strategic plan with clear goals and actions for the section's progress, and implementing a structured budget process for effective annual planning.**

# 2025

## SECTION INITIATIVES

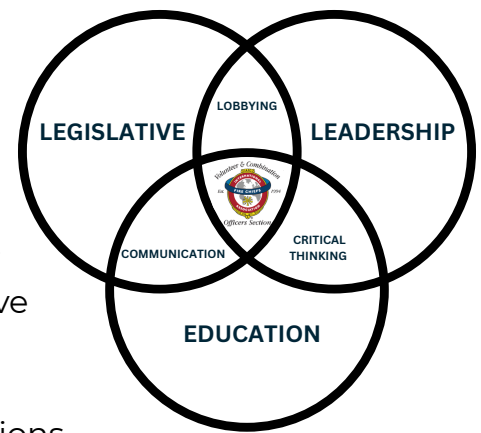
Three intersecting circles represent the domains that the Board of Directors of VCOS work within - **Leadership, Education and Legislation.**

Each circle overlaps with the other two, creating a central point where all three intersect — this center point represents the Volunteer and Combination Officer Section, who is influenced by and actively engages in all three domains. When developing a strategic plan, we look at whether we are addressing “leadership”, “education” or “legislation” priorities within our initiatives and at what level of priority that may be. We connect those domains with communications (social media), critical thinking, and lobbying (both in D.C. and with other organizations).



# 2025

## SECTION INITIATIVES



### Leadership

- Definition: Skills and qualities required to guide volunteer and combination fire departments, inspire peers, and drive organizations to mission success.
- Relevance: Volunteer and combination officers must lead diverse teams with varying experience levels and motivations.
- Examples: Decision-making under pressure; Team motivation and communication; Managing hybrid departments (volunteer & career).

### Education

- Definition: The training, and continuing education for leaders that is necessary for safety, performance, and advancement of an organization.
- Relevance: Officers require strong foundational and ongoing education to remain effective and compliant.
- Examples: Critical thinking; Recruitment and retention; Interpersonal relations; Community relations.

### Legislation

- Definition: Legal frameworks, policies, and compliance requirements that govern fire service operations.
- Relevance: Officers must navigate local, state, and federal regulations to ensure safe and legal operations. VCOS works to make sure this is effective but feasible.
- Examples: OSHA compliance; Fire codes; Grants and funding; Volunteer firefighter incentives and protections.

### Center: Volunteer and Combination Officer

- Intersection of All Three Circles
  - Leadership: Officers lead both volunteer and career personnel, often with limited resources. VCOS helps leaders think critically, define problems effectively and navigate the waters of leadership.
  - Education: Officers must receive education and training that is relevant to the challenges of the combination department and improves their ability to lead and meet training standards and community expectations on delivery of emergency services.
  - Legislation: Volunteer and Combination departments need an advocate for the legislation, funding assistance and programs that help in the delivery of fire services in the United States.

# Education

Caughey, Cheatham, Cramer, Sendelbach, Buckman

## 2025 Initiatives

- Develop training on “mergers and consolidations”, with an emphasis on providing coaching and producing podcasts to support these efforts
- Complete the Critical Thinking Academy pilot program and select future instructors to ensure its continued success
- Complete the updated Red Ribbon Report on transitioning to a combination department and offer coaching and consultation to support its implementation
- Reimagining Symposium in the Sun planning, expanding SITS On-the-Road, and advancing research and development efforts
- Evaluate current educational products to determine which should be retained, discontinued, or developed to better meet the needs of the audience
- Re-envisioning the Ribbon Reports

## 2026–2027 Initiatives:

- Fire Chief Summit: Focused on volunteer/combination departments, in partnership with NVFC
- Key Best Practices in Training: Exploring opportunities, addressing weaknesses, and utilizing technology effectively
- Wellness Strategies: Targeting small, volunteer, and combination departments.
- Road to Higher Education: Supporting advancement for volunteer/combination departments
- VCOS Board Representation: Adding a representative to the IAFC Training & Education Committee
- Politics 101: Educational programs for elected board members, chiefs, and board members
- Grant Writing Programs: Teaching effective grant-writing techniques.
- Education Collaboration: Developing and delivering joint programs with other sections





## **Leadership**

Cowger, Yancey, Windisch, Cramer, Catrambone

### **2025 Initiatives**

- **Expand subject matter expertise for VCOS**
- **Develop and implement a comprehensive marketing plan**
- **Strengthen collaboration with NVFC**
- **Establish a membership committee and drive initiatives to recruit new members**
- **Advocate to support FirstNet**

### **2026-2027 Initiatives**

- **Develop strategies to prepare the younger generation for board service**
- **Strengthen collaborations with groups like IAFF and Wildland Fire agencies**
- **Build and solidify connections with non-fire service and corporate partners**
- **Enhance membership benefits through exclusive access and value-driven offering**

## **Legislative**

Cowger, Stokes, Catrambone, Cooney

### **2025 Initiatives**

- **Strengthening VCOS - NVFC partnership through regular collaboration**
- **Explore the opportunities to develop a national framework for combination fire services**

### **2026–2027 Initiatives**

- **Promote OSHA safety and realistic standards**
- **Secure USFA support**
- **Address Congressional Fire Services Institute 4 Points**
- **Support cancer registry and screening programs**
- **Secure wildfire funding**
- **Advocate for FirstNet improvements**

# COMBINATION DEPARTMENT CHALLENGES

Many VFD's are struggling with staffing and coverage. The VCOS Board recognizes that many VFD's are looking for ways to continue to meet their mission of saving lives and protecting property with a lot less people to do so.

The VCOS Board wants to lean into this challenge throughout 2025 and focus on helping VFDs with transitioning challenges.

**Some focal points are:**

- ◆ **Combination leadership challenges**
  - Staffing dynamics (volunteers and paid)
  - Transitioning challenges (moving from volunteer to partial paid – financial strategy)
- ◆ **Combination ribbon reports completion**
  - Red Ribbon Report Update
- ◆ **Combination of leadership-based educational programming**
  - Transitioning from Volunteer to Combination
- ◆ **Build a stronger partnership with NVFC. Balance volunteer programming to combination programming.**
- ◆ **SME services extended to VFD's researching transitioning to combination fire department**

