



**Chowchilla Volunteer Fire Department
2425-10
Prepared by the
2024-2025 Madera County Grand Jury**

SUMMARY

Since 1923, the City of Chowchilla and its residents have been served by a volunteer fire department. The Chowchilla Volunteer Firefighters have been an integral part of the community for over a century.

As of April 2025, the City of Chowchilla had a population of 19,669 residents, yet the City of Chowchilla continues to operate with a volunteer fire department. Similar-sized towns in California, such as Soledad and the City of Selma, have transitioned to full-time or combination fire departments (a mix of career and volunteer firefighters) to address emergency response needs better. With Chowchilla's rapid growth in residential housing and commercial developments, the Madera County Grand Jury (MCGJ) recommends that the current volunteer fire department transition to a full-time state-certified fire department to meet the community's growth.

ABBREVIATIONS/GLOSSARY

CCWF - Central California Women's Facility

CDCR - California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

CVFDA - Chowchilla Volunteer Fire Department Association

MCGJ - Madera County Grand Jury

METHODOLOGY

- Interviewed key CalFire and volunteer personnel
- Toured Cal Fire Station #1
- Toured CCWF Fire Station #5
- Toured Chowchilla Fire Station #1

- Reviewed training materials and records
- Reviewed Equipment Inventory Lists
- Reviewed Equipment Capacity
- Surveyed response area maps
- Examined response records and type of incident
- Reviewed CalFire Strategic Plan 2024
- Reviewed the Major incident report
- Reviewed the City of Chowchilla’s Fire Department budget
- Expenditures funded by Measure N
- Reviewed the Memorandum of Agreement for Fire and Emergency Services between the City of Chowchilla and the CVFDA
- Reviewed the Site and Use Agreement between the City of Chowchilla and the CVFDA for the use of the Facilities and Equipment

BACKGROUND

Chowchilla is a rapidly growing city that has recently approved 225 new residential units and nine commercial development projects, including the 560,000-square-foot Auto Zone Distribution Center and the Chowchilla High School District’s 12,600-square-foot Transportation Center.

As of 2025, the city’s population exceeds 19,000 residents. Despite this growth, Chowchilla continues to rely solely on a volunteer fire department to provide fire protection and emergency response services.

The increasing frequency and severity of fires throughout California underscore the heightened risk to life and property, raising concerns about whether a volunteer-based model remains sufficient for the city’s needs. In response to these concerns, on January 10, 2025, the MCGJ visited Chowchilla Fire Station 1 at 240 North First Street within the Public Works Yard. During the visit, the MCGJ observed the department’s operational capabilities, reviewed its facilities, and attempted to examine training records to assess whether the current volunteer fire department model remains adequate for a City of Chowchilla’s size and trajectory.

DISCUSSION

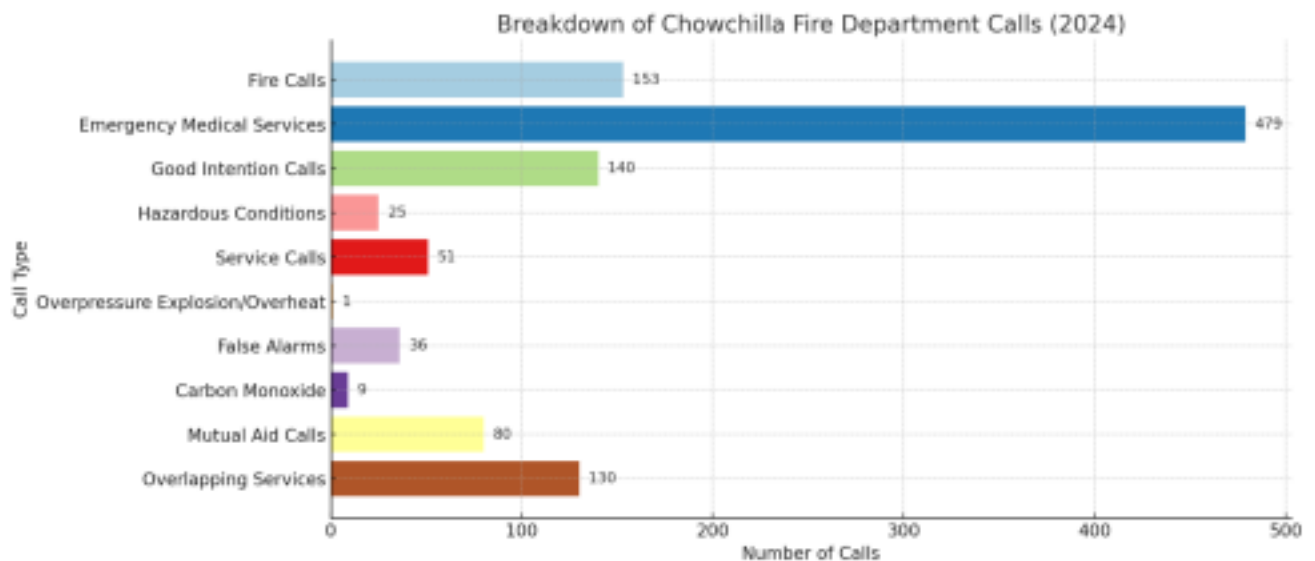
Department Overview

The CVFDA operates as an emergency response agency, providing fire suppression, medical emergency response, and hazardous materials mitigation. The department's primary objective is to protect the lives and property of Chowchilla's residents from fires, medical emergencies and other dangerous incidents.

Additional fire support, when needed, is available from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) Station 5, located at the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), and from CalFire.

Dispatch and Response Procedures

Emergency calls to the Chowchilla Fire Department are received and dispatched by the Chowchilla Police Department. The department receives the majority of calls for medical emergencies rather than fire-related incidents.



During the 2024 calendar year, the CVFDA responded to 885 calls. This represents a significant increase from the 473 calls reported five years earlier, according to the Madera County Fire Department 2019 Annual Review of Chowchilla. Of the 885 calls, 153 were fire calls and 479 were for emergency medical services, 140 good intention calls, 25 hazardous conditions, 51 service calls, one overpressure explosion (overheat with no fire) and 36 false alarms. Calls involving Carbon Monoxide were nine, 80 were mutual aid calls, and 130 involved overlapping services. Responding firefighters from the department remained on the scene for an average of 23 minutes, according to CVFDA records.

Funding

Funding for the City of Chowchilla's Fire Department comes from the City's General Fund, the Facilities District, property tax and tax money generated by Measure N.

Measure N generated \$936,797 in revenue in 2017, following the community's identification of critical needs for the Police and Fire Departments. For the Police Department, priorities included patrol officers, patrol vehicles, a detective, a community service officer and essential equipment. The CVFDA identified its primary needs as additional personnel, firefighting equipment and storage facilities.

In the initial proposal for Years 1 through 8, the Fire Department allocated \$100,000 for capital needs only in Year 1, with all remaining funds directed toward personnel and equipment. The original passage of Measure N in 2018, followed by its renewal in 2024 without a sunset clause, ensures a continuous and reliable funding stream. This sustained funding is intended to support acquiring additional equipment and developing a full-time firefighting staff.

In 2024, the City of Chowchilla added a fire inspector to assist businesses within the community with fire-preventative measures and planning. The fire inspector also provides fire prevention education for area schools. In addition to the fire inspector, a second command vehicle and four fire engine bays have been added to the fire department.

The fire department facility has undergone several renovations to enhance its functionality and accommodate the needs of its personnel. Additions include a large training room, a fitness area and improved living quarters featuring individual rooms for overnight firefighters. The facility also has a kitchen and a TV room, providing a more comfortable and well-equipped environment for the department's staff.

Facility and Equipment

During the MCGJ visit, Station 1 appeared well-maintained and adequately equipped. The CVFDA currently has access to the following equipment:

Engine	Year	Manufacturer/Model	Pump (GPM)	Tank (Gallons)	Status
Engine 63	2023	Freightliner Rosenbauer FX	1500	770	Active
Engine 64	2017	Rosenbauer Commander	1500	770	Active
Engine 65	2008	Ford 550 Hi-Tech	80	250	Active
Reserve Engine 67	2005	International Hi-Tech	1500	700	Reserve
Reserve Engine 6	1992	International KME	1250	600	Reserve
Reserve Engine 2	1936	Ford Van-Pelt	500	200	Reserve

Firefighting equipment must be regularly updated to meet evolving safety standards and technological advancements.

Training and Staffing

New members of the CVFDA, who the fire chief has approved, attend weekly training sessions at the city's only fire station. The basic training for probationary volunteers lasts one year, providing them time to gain and demonstrate their skills. Volunteers are assessed on their skill mastery by the fire chief. This hands-on evaluation ensures that trainees are learning and capable of performing the tasks they are trained for. The training system is based on performance, meaning that volunteers are expected to demonstrate competence in each task outlined in the task book. This approach is focused on practical skill application, not just theoretical knowledge.

The Office of the State Fire Marshall (OSFM) assesses fire stations in the State of California and is responsible for various aspects of fire safety and volunteer fire department regulations, including training and standards.

City of Chowchilla Firefighter Task Book

The Chowchilla Firefighter Task Book is an eight-page document that is a key part of the training process. It outlines the essential tasks that volunteers must master and provides a structured skill development and evaluation framework. The City of Chowchilla Firefighter Task Book indicates that firefighters are evaluated in one of three manners: in the classroom, through a discussion and by a performance or demonstration for the Evaluator. In-house trainers measure competency during the year-long program at several intervals.

Lack of Training Records

During the MCGJ visit, training records for the volunteer firefighters were requested. The MCGJ was advised that the password and login to the computer had failed. In addition to the computer failure, the department did not have any manual records as a backup for the MCGJ to review. The absence of these records readily available demonstrated to the MCGJ that improvements need to be made in this area of record keeping. Training records are essential

and necessary to show transparency and that the volunteer firefighters are meeting the performance standards required for this position as per the contract with the City of Chowchilla.

Observations and Conclusions

While the dedication and service of the Chowchilla Volunteer Fire Department Association is commendable, the city's rapid expansion presents new challenges that may outpace the capabilities of a volunteer-based model. The MCGJ recommends that Chowchilla explore alternative options, such as:

- Transitioning to a combination fire department that includes both full-time and volunteer firefighters to ensure round-the-clock coverage.
- Conducting a feasibility study on the financial and operational aspects of the requirements of moving to a fully staffed department.
- Seeking additional funding sources through grants, municipal budgets, or community partnerships to enhance fire services.
- Improving training and response strategies to reduce delays and increase efficiency.

As Chowchilla continues to grow, ensuring that fire protection services keep pace with development is essential for public safety and the well-being of its residents.

FINDINGS

F1. The Madera County Grand Jury finds that the Chowchilla Volunteer Fire Department Association has devoted numerous hours to protecting persons and property in the City of Chowchilla since 1923.

F2. The Madera County Grand Jury finds that the City of Chowchilla has grown substantially and the volunteers may no longer be adequate to provide the services needed by the community's residents.

F3. The Madera County Grand Jury finds no available training records upon request.

F4. The Madera County Grand Jury has found that volunteer training is provided by in-house trainers and that the in-house evaluation process lacks external oversight.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. The Madera County Grand Jury recommends that the Chowchilla City Council develop a plan to hire a full-time paid fire department crew to begin the 2026-27 fiscal year.

R2. The Madera County Grand Jury recommends that select Chowchilla Volunteer Fire Department Association members assist the City of Chowchilla develop a transition plan to a California state-certified full-time fire department.

R3. The Madera County Grand Jury recommends that the Chowchilla Fire Department maintain and make all training records available for firefighting personnel.

R4. The Madera County Grand Jury recommends that the City of Chowchilla requests the Office of the State Fire Marshall (OSFM) conduct a current Chowchilla Volunteer Fire Department assessment. The evaluation and the results will be submitted to the Court and the Grand Jury within 90 days of publication of this report.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code Sections 933 and 933.5, the Madera County Grand Jury requests responses as follows from the elected County elected officials within 90 days:

Chowchilla City Council
130 S. 2nd Street
Chowchilla, CA 93610

City of Chowchilla Mayor
130 S. Second St.
Chowchilla, CA 93610

INVITED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code Sections 933 and 933.5, the Madera County Grand Jury requests responses as follows from the elected County elected officials within 60 days:

City of Chowchilla Fire Chief
240 North First Street
Chowchilla, CA 93610

Chowchilla City Administrator
130 S. Second St.
Chowchilla, CA 93610

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury. The California State Legislature has stated that it intends the provisions of Penal Code Section 929, prohibiting disclosure of witness identity, to encourage full candor in testimony in Grand Jury investigations by protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those who participate in any Civil Grand Jury investigation.

*Note: This report was prepared using current information available on the websites listed.
