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Press Release

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IMMEDIATE

Metro-North's Grand Central Terminal Fire Brigade Celebrates 20th Anniversary

Grand Central Terminal, a city within the city, with 68 shops and 35 places to eat and three-quarters of a million people passing through each day, also has its own volunteer fire department - the GCT Fire Brigade, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary.

The 19 brigade members are all certified firefighters and licensed Emergency Medical Technicians. They are also employees of MTA Metro-North Railroad and hold ordinary jobs such as plumber, machinist, electrician or custodian.

But when their beepers and radios go off, they drop what they are doing and report to Track 14, where the brigade's fleet and gear are stored. Within moments help is on the scene anywhere within the 47-acre terminal complex.

"Brigade members are some of the best employees Metro-North has, dedicated, motivated, skilled and always willing to help," Cannito said. "And our customers, our employees and people who are just visiting the terminal are better off for them."

Most of the calls are medical. Last year the Fire Brigade responded to 744 medical emergencies - an average of more than two a day, including falls, dizziness, diabetic reactions and even cardiac arrest. The volunteers are trained to use defibrillators that on many occasions have saved heart attack victims. Patients get immediate care in the terminal before ambulance crews arrive.

"In the event of a fire, the New York City Fire Department is automatically dispatched to the terminal, while the Fire Brigade is on the scene and often has the fire out before they arrive," said Sal Oliva, Metro-North's Fire Chief.

In 2006, there were just 19 fire calls, mostly trash on the tracks. This is a sharp reversal of statistics from the early days of the unit. In 1987, the brigade responded to 176 fires.

This reversal is the result of concerted and ongoing efforts to clean up and secure the terminal. When a major fire engulfed more than a dozen empty train cars in the late 1980s, Metro-North employees decided to create a corps of first responders to assist the FDNY. The railroad embarked on intensive housekeeping to remove fire hazards and improve fire safety systems.

Flammable materials were removed and security in employee-only areas was increased with locks installed, passageways gated, and nooks and crannies sealed shut. Voids beneath platforms were welded shut or locked up.

"Fire prevention has improved overall and fires are way down, but false alarms are up because we have more alarm systems and devices," Oliva said. "All retail areas are now tied into one fire command center. Devices, such as smoke detectors, heat detectors, pull stations, speaker strobes, fire warden phones also have expanded throughout the terminal now totaling 3,500 devices. That was nonexistent decades ago. All are regularly inspected and tested."

The Brigade is equipped with a unique fleet of electric carts customized for firefighting and medical emergencies. There's a fire truck, which is a 200-gallon pumper with 300 feet of hose, a rescue truck, with air packs, forcible entry tools and turnout gear, and an ambulance with a stretcher, three oxygen tanks, defibrillators, a "long board" to immobilize spine, medical gear, a stair chair, and first-aid supplies.

"They all have sirens, lights, the whole thing. They're kind of cool," Oliva said.

In addition to responding to medical emergency and fire alarms, the Brigade is active in fire prevention, inspection and training of other agencies.

"With five or six miles of tunnels and passageways, we need to orient the NYPD, the FDNY and the MTAPD to the terminal," Oliva said.

The Brigade is responsible for all "hot work" welding permits in the terminal, maintaining the safety of the hazardous materials storage facility, CPR and first aid training for Metro-North employees, conducting semi-annual fire drills with all tenants and employees, including marking evacuation routes and establishing assembly areas. The Fire Brigade also supplies fire guards for all special events in the terminal, such as the recent squash tournament in Vanderbilt Hall.

Brigade members undergo intensive training, a minimum of 150 hours at the New York State Fire Academy in Valhalla, in Westchester County and at the Rockland County Fire Training Center. In addition, there's another 170 hours of training for EMS certification, which must be repeated every three years.

The Grand Central Fire Brigade is one of six volunteer fire departments on the railroad. The other five are at rail yards in Croton-Harmon, North White Plains, Stamford, Bridgeport and New Haven.



