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West Ridge Fire Department to Millcreek Township: Remedy Contractual Violations of Fire Services Agreement or We Will Terminate It

Dispute involves incident command structure, volunteer recruitment/retention, and the independence of West Ridge

MILLCREEK TOWNSHIP, PA – The West Ridge Fire Department notified Millcreek Township today that it intends to terminate its fire and emergency services agreement unless the Township remedies material breaches within 10 days.

In a notice emailed to the Township Supervisors and Township Solicitor this afternoon, West Ridge identified two primary contractual violations: the failure to develop a required recruitment and retention policy for volunteer firefighters and a new directive that changes the agreed-upon chain of command at emergency scenes.

"West Ridge Fire Department entered into the Fire Protection, Ambulance and Emergency Services Agreement in good faith, eager to be part of a hybrid model that would build a municipal fire department while supplementing and supporting the existing volunteer departments," said West Ridge Fire Department President Gary Carver. "Unfortunately, the Township has since changed direction, leaving the volunteer departments facing uncertainty about their future, their independence and their ability to continue serving their communities. We remain committed to working cooperatively with the Township, but that cooperation must be built on mutual respect and a commitment to honoring the agreement we signed."

Blue Card Incident Command Scheme

Effective Oct. 1, Millcreek Fire Chief Mike Cliff instituted a directive requiring Blue Card certification and the transfer of incident command to Blue Card holders. This directive conflicts with the command structure established in the agreement, which determines command based on the rank and succession provisions incorporated into the contract.

The agreement states: “Emergency Response Services triggered by an incident within Millcreek Township will be managed at the scene in accordance with the following standard incident command procedures: the senior ranking person on the initial apparatus arriving on the scene will assume command and be the Officer in Charge (“OIC”). If a more senior-ranking official from either the Volunteer Fire Department or the Township Department subsequently arrives, such official may assume command by notifying the original OIC, in which case, such official becomes the OIC.”

The Blue Card system also puts firefighter safety at risk.

Any firefighter who sits through a 35-hour online module and a three-day, in-person training course may obtain a Blue Card. This procedure ignores the decades of experience that senior officers in the volunteer departments and other municipalities who respond to mutual aid calls possess.

“The Blue Card command system would be dangerous,” said West Ridge Fire Department Vice President Jerry Lauer. “Incident command is at its best and safest when it is based on field experience and knowledge of senior officers, not an online training module. The idea that a lieutenant would tell a senior officer to step aside so he can play incident commander puts firefighters' lives at risk.”

The Oct. 1 General Order from Fire Chief Cliff stated, “Effective October 1, 2026, no person who is not Blue Card Incident Command certified may assume the role of the incident commander” at structural fire incidents in the township.

Introducing a competing command standard will create confusion at emergency scenes where firefighters from multiple departments must be able to rely on a clear, consistent chain of command.

Zero Recruitment/Retention for Volunteer Departments

The department also cited the Township's failure to establish a recruitment and retention policy, despite a contractual commitment to address the issue. West Ridge said the Township's municipal department has recruited firefighters from its volunteer ranks without a corresponding plan to sustain volunteer staffing.

The agreement states: “The Volunteer Departments shall cooperate with the Millcreek Fire Chief to create a uniform recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters policy ...” The original job description for the Millcreek Township fire chief also stated, “Direct the development of a unified process of recruitment and retention of MTVFD volunteers.”

“The Township cannot claim to be building a stronger fire service while failing to uphold its commitment to recruit and retain the volunteers who have kept these departments running for generations,” Carver said. “A municipal department should strengthen the volunteer

system, not draw from its ranks without a plan to sustain them. That was the commitment in the agreement, and it has not been fulfilled."

No "Standard of Cleanliness" for Borrowed Fire Engines?

The notification to Millcreek Township also details concerns over a fire engine West Ridge loaned to the Township department in June for what it was told would be a brief period. The engine remained in the possession of the Millcreek Fire Department for nine weeks and was returned dirty, muddy, and with significant damage, resulting in approximately $12,000 in repairs and leaving the apparatus out of service for an additional two weeks. Although the Township paid the repair bill, West Ridge said the incident raised concerns about protections for volunteer-owned equipment.

In addition to putting more than 2,500 miles on the truck over the course of nine weeks, the Township could not verify that a firefighter who had been driving the rig was qualified to operate the engine. Following that, West Ridge informed the Township that it would no longer provide access to its engines.

In a July 24 letter, Township Solicitor Mark Shaw said that West Ridge was required "to provide full access to apparatus." The letter also noted that there "is no mileage limitation in the Agreement" and that Millcreek Fire Department "is not aware of any standard of cleanliness" regarding fire engines.

"There is a fundamental difference between cooperation and entitlement," Carver said. "Our willingness to work under this agreement does not give Millcreek Township unrestricted use of equipment owned and maintained by an independent volunteer department, particularly when that department's concerns are not being respected. West Ridge has a responsibility to protect its equipment, its members and its ability to respond when our community needs us."

When Did "Supplement" Become "Merger" and "Consolidate"?

The dispute comes as Township planning documents and public statements by the fire chief have described proposals to consolidate the existing volunteer departments under the Township's control.

According to meeting minutes and the Township Ordinance that created the Millcreek Fire Department, the intent was to create a municipal department that would "supplement" the volunteer departments. The Township, instead, is aggressively pursuing a take-over of the volunteer departments.

The 2025-2030 Millcreek Fire Department Strategic Plan states as a goal: "Consolidate local volunteer departments into the Millcreek Fire Department ..."

A July 22, 2025, email from Fire Chief Cliff stated, “The second major initiative in the plan is the formal merger of the township’s four fire departments – Belle Valley, Kearsarge, West Lake, and West Ridge – into a single, combined agency under the Millcreek Township Fire Department.”

The leadership of West Ridge Fire Department has made clear that it intends to remain an independent, volunteer department. Cooperation among emergency service providers must respect each department’s independence, personnel, equipment and operational needs.

Millcreek Township has 10 days to remedy the identified breaches. West Ridge is seeking a recruitment and retention policy developed in consultation with the department and the rescission or revision of the Oct. 1 command directive to bring it into compliance with the agreement. The department has requested a written response addressing its equipment concerns.

West Ridge also wants a clear statement from the Township Supervisors that they will abide by the original ordinance and cooperate and supplement the volunteer departments instead of continuing a forced take-over.

If the breaches are not remedied within the contractual period, West Ridge intends to terminate the agreement as permitted under its terms.

West Ridge emphasized that its priority remains maintaining the equipment, staffing and operational capabilities necessary to provide emergency services to the community.

“Cooperation works only when the parties honor their commitments and respect one another's responsibilities,” the department said in its notice. “West Ridge must protect its members, preserve its equipment and maintain its ability to respond when the community needs us.”

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