In the early 1970's fire departments in the lower middle section of our county banded together to form the Mid-Fairfield County Foam Unit. Thirty years ago, applying concentrated firefighting foam was the best technique available to control petroleum-type fires and spills. The original charter municipalities of Westport, Wilton, Norwalk and Ridgefield wanted to have enough foam available to fight a major fire or control a major spill. However, the expenses involved in stockpiling significant quantities of foam proved to be an expense none of the municipalities were willing or capable of shouldering on their own. Organizing members from the original four member fire departments (Westport, Wilton, Ridgefield, and Norwalk) found that pooling their resources would allow them to create a foam response unit that would be big enough to handle potential problem incidents without wasteful replication of inventory. The Town of Wilton gave a surplus pumper to the group to transport the foam product and appliances; this vehicle was dubbed the name “Buttertub” for its bright yellow paint.

By the early 1980's there were 8 towns working together as part of the foam unit, they were: Westport, Norwalk, Fairfield, Ridgefield, Wilton, Stratford, Weston, and Darien. In 1984 the City of Norwalk loaned the team its first Haz Mat vehicle which was a surplus rescue unit that replaced the original foam transport vehicle, the “Buttertub”. For the next five years the old rescue unit serving as a haz-mat unit responded the needs of the member towns. During this period in our history no funding from any of the towns were allocated to fund the unit. Equipment was fire department surplus equipment and personnel worked the unit as a labor of love. In the late 1980's, tightening federal regulations changed the way hazardous materials were handled. Both the end users and shippers were required to inform the public about hazardous materials within the community, and significant impetus was placed on emergency response planning, and on training and competency requirements for agencies responding to haz-mat incidents.

Due to the changes in the way hazardous materials was regulated, these newly promulgated regulations and standards forced a change in the fire service and specifically changed the direction of the eight member towns and their mission as the Mid-Fairfield County Foam Unit. The name was changed but the faces remained the same. In May of 1991 the Mid-Fairfield County Hazardous Materials Unit was formed and its new vehicle dedicated. This vehicle a renovated 1972 vintage soda delivery truck donated by the Pepsi-Cola Corporation was ushered into service. The "Unit" as the team was known by its members responded to the new challenges of haz-mat response. The "Unit" met numerous new OSHA and NFPA challenges in a fast changing industry. The "Unit" members had every one of its members become certified NFPA Haz-Mat Technicians attending training that exceeded OSHA haz-mat training by 75 contact hours. The "Unit" members also attended training throughout the country at specialty schools such as Texas AM, Safety Systems of Florida, and the American Association of Railroads in Colorado to learn cutting edge procedures and skills in the rapidly changing industry.

As the team evolved a satellite paging service was provided to members in order to secure their response to emergencies, while the on-duty technician members of the Westport Fire Department transported HM 1 to the incident scene. As the organization evolved, a stream of funding was put into place with each member agency budgeting $1250.00 yearly to support the "Unit". Additionally each member department provided a minimum of two certified technicians whose salaries and overtime costs were covered by their respective departments.
Also during this period the "Unit" began billing for services rendered at an industry rate for vehicles, labor and materials expended. This billing provided a revenue stream to support the "Units" expenses, future equipment and vehicle acquisitions.

Jump ahead to the present day; the "Unit" has in excess of 75 certified Hazardous Materials Technicians from the 14 Town/Cities that comprise DEMHS Region 1 in addition to the Town of Ridgefield. We are an active organization whose commitment to public safety is widely acknowledged and which serves as a model for all other regions of the state. The technician members meet monthly dedicating many hours to ongoing training, and whose department Fire Chiefs meet every three months to oversee the organization's administration and its future endeavors. Cost recovery and financing is a major focus of the Chief's along with the utilization of domestic preparedness funding and a $3000.00 per year annual assessment to each participating municipality. What makes this all work is the regional approach, leveraging economies of scale to lessen the cost of operation, a concept that is generally foreign to Connecticut which is a home rule state.

Also the "Unit" has been very fortunate in the grant funding area. We have received our fair share of Federal funding through Connecticut DEMHS. This funding has contributed to the receipt of a Decontamination Trailer and its "Prime Mover" tow vehicle, in addition to a replacement response vehicle which retired the second generation HM 1 which was donated to the "Unit" by the Coca-Cola Bottling Company.

In late December of 2007 the "Unit" took delivery of a new Communications Command and Control vehicle which will serve the entire 14 town region. This vehicle will provide a mobile communications, command and control presence for emergencies and events of all types for the entire region. The vehicles cost was in excess of $600,000 and was funded with both DEMHS grant monies and "Unit" funds. Again we hope that we will be setting the bar for all the other regions with this specialty vehicle.

**Founding Members:**

Alfred Morton Norwalk Fire  
Christopher Ackley Westport Fire  
Edward Zygmant Westport Fire  
Bruce Kelly Westport Fire  
Richard Dingee Ridgefield Fire  
Jonathan Gottfried Westport Fire  
David Sanford Wilton Fire

For further information you may contact Chief Andrew Kingsbury Chairman, Fairfield County Hazardous Materials Unit c/o Westport Fire Department 515 Post Road East Westport, Ct. 06880 203-341-5000.  
Or at: akingsbury@westportct.gov

December 2011