

# Firefighter Strong

News for a Better You and a Stronger Crew



**WE HAVE YOUR BACK. LEARN MORE ON PAGE 2.**

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## ABOUT THE

# National Volunteer Fire Council

The NVFC is the leading nonprofit membership association representing the interests of the volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services. The NVFC serves as the voice of the volunteer in the national arena and provides resources, programs, education, and advocacy for first responders across the nation. Many of the NVFC's programs and initiatives apply to all members of the fire and emergency services, whether volunteer or career. Membership in the NVFC is low-cost and provides a wide array of benefits; find information at [www.nvfc.org/join](http://www.nvfc.org/join). Learn more about the NVFC and access resources at [www.nvfc.org](http://www.nvfc.org).

### DISCLAIMER

The information and resources presented in this document are for informational purposes only. They are not intended to offer a diagnosis or treatment of any health issue. Consult a healthcare professional if you feel you may be experiencing a health issue or for any questions you may have. This document does not provide a comprehensive listing of resources that are available.

# We Have Your Back

The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) is here to support you – the members of the fire, EMS, and rescue community who work every day to serve and protect your neighbors. We do this through a variety of initiatives, including advocacy, programs, resources, education, and more.

While our focus is on the volunteer fire service, there are many issues that transcend to impact the entire fire and emergency services. Health and safety are at the top of that list. It is critical that all responders are given the tools and information they need to make smart decisions that will keep them and their crew healthy and safe.

Health and safety impact everything we do. Making sure to take care of ourselves and our crew makes us stronger and better at our job, increases the efficiency and effectiveness of our department, ensures that we can be there for our community when they need us, and provides comfort to our families who are waiting for us to return home.

The intent of this newsletter is to provide information to assist all members of the fire service in understanding the critical health

and safety issues that impact you and offer resources and guidance to help make positive changes. Whether you are volunteer or career, chief or new recruit, these health and safety issues matter. Our job is to protect those in need, but we can't do that unless we protect ourselves.

The next step is up to you. Use the content provided here as a starting point to take action. Think about what you can do to improve your own health and safety as well as create a safer, healthier, and stronger workforce for your department. Share this newsletter with your team and challenge each member to do the same. Each one of us can make a difference in order to create a safer, healthier environment for all.

These last few months have been an unprecedented time for our nation and our responders, and we thank you all for stepping up in the face of the pandemic to continue your calling to serve your community. Your commitment to others is inspiring, and we will keep working to make sure you have the tools and resources you need to thrive. Find additional resources, including previous issues of the *Firefighter Strong* newsletter, at [www.nvfc.org](http://www.nvfc.org). If you'd like to join us and access even more benefits, visit [www.nvfc.org/join](http://www.nvfc.org/join). ■ ■

## NVFC SERVE STRONG

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# COPING MECHANISMS FOR STRESSFUL TIMES

BY ALI ROTHROCK

**W**e know that stress is inherent to our jobs. The emergency services is just that – a service we provide when other people are in an emergency.

To be able to operate in that environment, our bodies have to become very used to dealing with stress.

Stress usually gets a bad rap, but it is not always a bad thing. When we feel stress due to a fire call, for example, our body reacts in a variety of helpful ways. Our body floods with adrenaline and cortisol, and our heart starts to pump faster. These ways are helpful to us because they allow us to do things like make a split-second decision, fight a fire, or save a life. Usually with the knowledge that the crisis is over, the adrenaline and cortisol leave our system and we get back to whatever we were doing before the call came in.

Every once in a while there are incidents that bring an increased level of stress, fear, or panic into our jobs and therefore into every other area of our lives. That might be a large fire, a significant car crash, a severe weather disaster impacting our state, or an incident of mass violence that brings

chaos to our community. But we have never experienced a disruption like the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, we have never experienced levels of stress like this before.

Unlike fire calls, this is a stress that doesn't go away when we leave the fireground or the station. It's with us when we go to the grocery store or when we're getting gas. We are stressed about catching the virus and bringing it home to our families and our children. It's with us when we are trying to fall asleep and when we are trying to plan our immediate futures. Stress like that, stress that we can't put down or get away from, can take a serious toll on us if we don't intentionally choose to cope with it in a healthy way.

There are many ways to cope with stress, both positive (healthy) and negative (unhealthy). There are things we do when we are feeling stressed that we might not even realize are coping skills until we choose to look at them objectively and ask ourselves, "Why am I doing this?" or "What makes me feel better when I am feeling stressed?" We might have been dealing with stress, or rather not dealing with it, for

so long that we aren't even sure where to begin.

Positive or healthy coping skills are healthy things that we do to either make us feel better when we are stressed or to prevent or lessen the effects of stress before we feel them. This could be exercising each day, regularly spending time outdoors, journaling, or having meaningful hobbies and interests. To sum it up, healthy coping is anything we do to bring fulfillment, curiosity, and joy into our lives. It's any activity we do to pass the time that is not negatively impacting us or anyone else. Choosing to cope with stress in healthy ways means that we will be resilient when faced with adversity. It means that when something stressful happens at work or at home, we will have a variety of activities to do while our mind processes the event. It means that when something comes along like a global pandemic, we are prepared to deal with the increased stress levels.

Unfortunately, learning to deal with stress positively isn't something most of us have been taught in the fire service. It isn't a

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part of the emergency services culture to talk openly about our mental health and the impacts of extreme or chronic stress. People have this notion that “if you are bothered after that call, this job isn’t for you.” That couldn’t be farther from the truth, but so often we are overtly and covertly discouraged from sharing how we feel and encouraged to just keep it to ourselves. Given that this is the culture, is it any wonder that we have so many first responders who don’t know how to deal with the stress of the job?

Coping in a negative or unhealthy way often looks like not dealing with it at all. It can take the form of telling ourselves and others that we’re “fine” and attempting to dismiss our true feelings. That can only go on for so long. When that stops working, we might turn to drugs or alcohol to temporarily “turn off” the part of our brain that is feeling stress. We might use it to fall asleep or unwind after a shift. We

might find ourselves drinking way more than other people do. We might turn to anger instead of being honest about how we are really feeling. People know what to do with an angry person but are less sure of what to do with someone who is sad or struggling, so anger feels safer. Negative or unhealthy coping is any decision that prolongs our healing process by interfering, ignoring, or dismissing what we are feeling. If you are stuck in some of these negative coping skills, seeking outside help from an unbiased source like a counselor is a really good idea.

When helping first responders after critical, significant, or traumatic calls, I teach them to use the acronym **F.I.R.E.S.** The same principles also apply to atypical situations, like the pandemic.

**First, acknowledge its impact.** You have to be willing to acknowledge your stress levels to yourself first before you can acknowledge them to others. We are experts at saying “I’m fine” when asked. We think, “Who am I to complain when so many others have it worse.” That will always be true – someone will always have it worse. But you will not be able to continue to effectively help people if you are not taking care of yourself. It’s necessary to talk about the increased levels of stress the situation or this pandemic has brought to our life.

**Initiate resources and support.** In the emergency services, no one does anything alone. Make sure that dealing with the effects of stress are no different. Figure out what you specifically need to process this experience and make it happen for yourself. The same goes for your company, especially now. What can you do to promote team unity while being socially distant? How can you stay connected to each other for camaraderie and support?


**Respond to what you need.** This is different for everyone and we might need different help after different traumatic incidents. When it comes to the pandemic, you might need different things than other first responders. You might want to be surrounded by your fellow first responders, or you might want to spend a bit of time away. You might want to run all the calls that come in, or you might want to take a bit of a break. Either option works if it works for you.

**Expend stressful energy in a positive way.** This is where your positive coping skills come into play. That stressful energy has to go somewhere. Make sure you are expending it in a way that isn’t causing you harm or keeping you from your healing process. And in these uncertain times, you probably need to identify some new positive coping skills that you haven’t tried before.

**Spend time away.** This could mean just leaving the station after a bad call. This simple act can be enough to give our bodies and brains enough room to decompress. While you can’t really spend time away from the pandemic as it has permeated all aspects of our lives, you can still find ways to give yourself a rest. This could simply be spending a day without electronics to give yourself a break from the news.

Being a first responder simply isn’t sustainable unless we are proactive about acknowledging the stress we carry with us. In light of the pandemic and that increased stress load, we might need to go outside of our comfort zones to find new healthy coping skills. We need to intentionally incorporate more of these in order to combat the increased stress in our world and in our jobs. ■ ■

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# Recent Trends in On-duty Firefighter Deaths and Injuries

By Rita F. Fahy and Richard Campbell

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reported in its most recent annual study of on-duty firefighter deaths in the U.S. that there was a sharp drop in the total number of deaths of firefighters while on the job in 2019. A total of 48 firefighters died in 2019, compared with an annual average of 65 deaths over the previous five-year period and an average of 134 deaths per year in the earliest years of this study (1977 through 1986).

Several notable milestones were achieved in 2019:

- Lowest annual death toll
- Lowest number of volunteer firefighter fatalities
- Lowest number of deaths on the fireground
- Lowest number of sudden cardiac deaths
- Lowest number of road crash deaths

Of the 48 firefighter deaths, 25 were volunteer firefighters – this is the lowest total over all the years of this study and reflects a sharp drop from the yearly average of 36 volunteer firefighter deaths over the past 10 years. Twenty of the victims were career firefighters – marking the third time in the past four years that the total has been 20 or fewer. Two victims were employees of land management agencies and one was a civilian employee of the military.

There were 13 deaths at the scene of fires – 10 at structure fires and three at wildland fires. This is the lowest annual total seen to date. And in an even more encouraging

sign, this is the third time in the last four years that the total has been below 20. Five of the deaths were due to traumatic injuries, three to sudden cardiac death, three to burns, and two to asphyxia or smoke inhalation.

Historically, road vehicle crashes have accounted for the second largest share of deaths (after cardiac), but there were only three deaths in road vehicles in 2019, with another death in a helicopter crash. None of the road crash victims was wearing a seatbelt. Over the past 10 years, there has been an average of 10 crash deaths per year; this is the second time during that period that there were fewer than five deaths.

There were 22 sudden cardiac deaths in 2019, a new low that continues to show a downward trend from the more than 70 deaths that occurred in the earliest years of the study in the late 1970s.

Notwithstanding all the encouraging news, it is clear that opportunities for additional improvement remain. For instance, even as sudden cardiac deaths reached a new low, they still accounted for the largest share of deaths (46 percent in 2019), as they have almost every year. Many of the victims of sudden cardiac death had underlying health issues, including high cholesterol, arteriosclerotic heart disease, obesity, hypertension, and coronary artery disease. Basic firefighter health and safety programs should be capable of addressing these health issues in order to reduce cardiac deaths still further.

Violent death has begun to receive attention as a health and safety concern for firefighters in recent years. In 2019, one firefighter was a victim of homicide – the ninth such death in 10 years. In addition, one firefighter died by suicide while at work, an unsettling reminder of the stresses that can come with firefighting.

Of course, firefighter fatalities while on duty only tell part of the story. The impact of long-term exposures – deaths due to cancer and other illnesses, as well as the complete toll of cardiac issues and suicide – is not captured in NFPA's annual study. There are significant challenges in determining the number of deaths each year due to cancer, cardiac issues, and suicide. Other sources can provide some perspective on these aspects of the overall fatality problem. The International Association of Fire Fighters lists on its web site more than 130 firefighter cancer deaths that were reported to them in 2019, and the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance reports 119 current and former firefighters and 20 EMTs and paramedics died by suicide in 2019.

NFPA data for non-fatal firefighter injuries in 2019 will not be reported until November, but some positive findings are again apparent from the most recent available data from 2018, including a drop in total firefighter injuries to their lowest recorded level (58,250).

The largest share of injuries occurred at the scene of fires, but the 22,975 fireground injuries were the lowest since NFPA

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began to report on injuries in 1981. It is interesting to note here that injuries have decreased by 66 percent since 1981, faster than the rate of decline in the number of fires (54 percent lower than 1981). In fact, the non-fatal injury rate per 1,000 fires has dropped from 23.3 to 17.4 over that period – an indication that efforts at injury prevention have been effective even as more progress is needed.

The types of non-fatal injuries that occur at fires have also changed over the same period. For instance, injuries due to burns and/or smoke inhalation accounted for 30 percent of the fireground injury total in 1981, but these injuries accounted for 20 percent of fireground injuries in 2018. The estimated annual total of burn and/or smoke inhalation injuries fell from approximately 20,000 to 4,650 over that time span. “Strain, sprain, or muscular pain,” the most reported category of injuries at fires, dropped from 16,530 to

8,725, but now account for almost 40 percent of the fireground injuries.

Injuries at non-fire emergencies and injuries while responding to or returning from emergencies (including fires) have followed a different pattern. The estimated total of 11,625 injuries at non-fire emergencies in 2018 was 21 percent higher than that in 1981, and the number of injuries responding and returning were only down slightly, but the number of emergency calls, particularly medical calls, more than quadrupled over the same period. These increases speak to the reality of firefighters being all-hazards responders today.

Although it is never possible to determine what safety measures can be credited with the reduction in deaths and injuries at fires, there are several developments over the years that are likely contributors. Improvements in the design and use of protective clothing and equipment, stricter health and safety guidelines and procedures, improved training, the reduced incidence of fire, and the availability of high-quality medical care at emergency scenes all play a role. Increased attention to health and fitness, both in the general public and in the fire service, have likely led to the decrease in sudden cardiac deaths as well.

The sharp drop in the number of on-duty firefighter fatalities in 2019 shows remarkable gains that have been made over the past 40 years, but one year’s experience is not a trend. And with the large number of COVID-19 deaths that have already occurred in 2020, we know that the number of deaths will likely rise in 2020. But real sustained progress has been achieved, as evidenced by the reduction in sudden cardiac deaths, the decrease in crash deaths, and in deaths at structure fires.

Although hazards are going to be a continuing part of firefighting work, implementation of comprehensive health and safety programs can reduce the risk of injury. Future research can potentially contribute to this effort by examining some of the changes in the ways that injuries occur and identifying potential interventions. ■ ■



### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Rita F. Fahy** is a manager in the Applied Research group of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and has authored NFPA’s annual study of on-duty firefighter fatalities since 1981.

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# NO MORE EXCUSES

Firefighting is a TEAM sport. For companies to be successful in their mission, the team members must all be at their best, both mentally and physically. That means constant preparation – in the classroom, on the drill ground, and in the gym (or any area that you can exercise in).

Although firefighters worldwide are known as the bravest, we are sadly not known as the fittest. In recent years, however, there has been a growing trend to place the health and wellness of all emergency personnel as a priority. A cultural shift in the way we see how fitness, nutrition, and overall personal wellness play into the execution of operations on the fireground has aided in this change.

As the fireground evolves, we must evolve to combat it. We have successfully done this with new tactics and equipment, but we seem to be stalled when it comes to health and wellness. What I want to talk about is what you can do to make a change. This change goes far beyond the firehouse – it will benefit you both on the fireground and in your life outside of the station.

First and foremost, firefighters must change their thought process when it comes to fitness. We must ELIMINATE THE EXCUSES. One of these is that you need expensive equipment to exercise. With gym closures nationwide due to the global pandemic, Americans were forced to simplify their workouts and figure out how they could stay fit at home – without their gym and thousands of dollars of equipment. It's amazing how many bodyweight workouts are available on the internet for free. These workouts are perfect for firefighters to do in their station as well as at home. They are also completely scalable to all fitness levels and great for groups to do together. Several web sites even post basic instructional videos in case you are unsure of the movements.

Another excuse that must be eliminated is time. Sure, spending a greater amount of time working out is always a bonus. Think about it – professional athletes spend the majority of their time in the gym, training. The big difference between them and us, though, is that they are getting paid to spend that time in the gym. We are not.

We need those hours to work, to learn, to train, and to spend time with our families. But that's not an excuse to not get a workout in. In just 30 minutes you can do a quick warm up, a workout, and a quick cool down.

There is one last excuse we have to talk about – FEAR. I know, I know, you're a firefighter, the t-shirt says, "I Fight What You Fear." But that's just a slogan. We all have fears, and there is one about fitness that everyone needs to hear. It's hard, it's a challenge, and the hardest part of it all is just getting the motivation to start. And it's not just the starting from scratch part that is hard. It's starting each and every day. I'm a fairly motivated person, especially when it comes to fitness, but there are many days I would much rather stay on the couch then go out to my super cold or hot (depending on the season) garage gym to work out. Sadly, I don't have a magic tip or trick to motivate you to get moving. But what I can say is YOUR LIFE DEPENDS ON THIS and not just YOUR LIFE, but those in YOUR DEPARTMENT and those you swore an OATH to protect.

I'll step down off my soapbox now and give you some easy to follow fitness

tips to get the ball moving within your department and at home.

**1. Get moving.** Do something physical right now. Stand up and do four sets of 25 air squats, resting 60 seconds in between sets. If 25 isn't enough, do 50. It's just that simple to start.

**2. Challenge yourself, set a goal.** One of my favorites is to walk one mile a day for 30 days straight. Yes, I said it, walk, don't run. Now, if you can run, do it, but don't go overboard. The goal of this challenge is to take some time every day to give back to yourself. This will show you that you have the 20 minutes you need to give back to yourself.

**3. Get some accountability groups going within your department.** Chances are good all the motivation you need is sitting in the jumpseat next to you. Start dedicating times at the firehouse for group workouts. These can be done before or after meetings, drill nights, or anytime you're at the station. It can also be as simple as every time you're at the firehouse, you do as many push-ups as you can. Make it a competition by keeping a running log on the whiteboard.

Now there's much more to health and wellness than what I have listed above. These are just a few great starting points for a volunteer fire department to start making a change from within. Although the fire service as a whole tends to hate and resist change, no one can deny that the best changes have come from within. ■ ■



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# Adopting an All-Hazards Approach to Fire Department Planning

By Tom Miller and David Bullard

Since the 1970s, fire departments have been expanding their missions. First it was EMS, and then disciplines such as technical rescue and hazardous materials response burgeoned into primary mission components. But despite all that we have seen and experienced, many departments have still not grasped the concept of doing “all-hazards” planning. As it has been said, “Without a plan, there is no plan.”

Many departments spend 80-90 percent of their planning and training, along with the accompanying resources, for incidents that account for less than 5 percent of their call volumes. In the 1980s and 90s many communities around chemical facilities did “Worst Case Scenario” planning. After 9/11, communities and first response agencies had to take a long hard look at “critical infrastructure,” “hard” and “soft” targets, and “threat potentials.” Communities affected by school shootings or devastating hurricanes and tornadoes have extensive specialized contingency plans all based on threat management with available resources.

Yes, we recognize that NFPA 1001, 1021, etc. have specific JPRs that are crucial for survival in those 5 percent of calls. And yes, we recognize that, although low frequency, those 5 percent are potentially high consequence responses and thus require planning and training. But let’s look at the bigger, 30,000-foot viewpoint: What are you doing to plan and prepare for the other 95 percent of calls? Moreover, and perhaps even more appropriate for the current fire service situation, what are you doing to plan and prepare for all the other atypical event(s), e.g. the pandemics, exposures to fentanyl, the active shooter incident, the LODD, or, sadly, the member who commits suicide?

Progressive fire department leadership looks at that potential continuum and

starts to (a) assemble resources, references, and key contacts; (b) formulate plans for training administrative and response staff as to what will happen when and where should an incident happen, and; (c) begin the training process to ensure that everyone is properly trained for their role(s) and responsibilities should such an event occur. This “look” by leadership includes an assessment of risk that incorporates not only the here and now, but community trends as they relate to social and economic factors.

When NIMS first came out there was a lot of grumbling and fuss about its formalities and workflows. However, if you have ever been a part of a major incident or event you now see the value of the plan. Yet, after all that, we have recently fielded questions such as, “What does NIMS have to do with a pandemic?” from those who fail to realize that it is an event. It may not be an event in our traditional way of thinking with defined start and end points, but it’s still an event that (a) poses both a short-term and a long-term threat; (b) requires resources and their management; (c) requires messaging to responders and to the public; (d) has safety considerations that need to be identified and managed; (e) has required some sort of mobilization and will therefore require a subsequent demobilization; (f) has been overseen by an, at times, complex command structure often using a Unified Command approach; and (g) has been beset with information and intelligence challenges that have directly impacted the response. With all of that, how can you not use NIMS and its framework, including the forms, as part of your pandemic response?

We recognize that the planning process can seem daunting. In order to plan, you need a starting point such as identifying Internal Threats versus External Threats. Internal Threats can be issues such as limited manpower during certain times

of the day, an aging response force, dwindling staffing or membership, lack of training resources, lack of equipment, poor leadership, etc. External Threats can be the types of hazards, both real and potential, you encounter and/or are determined by a statistical review of response data compared to community dynamics and demographics.

The next step is to realistically identify all of your resources, both internal and external. Try to avoid the “if-then” trap when looking at resources; “if” may not happen and therefore the “then” subsequently fails to appear as well. Involve the entire organization in the planning process – from information gathering to response planning sessions. It will help with developing concepts of resource management and problem solving. Studies have shown there is more buy-in when people have a part in the planning processes. Try to use empirical data to review what resources have been consistently relied on for the same and/or similar responses.

Use the risk management and planning models developed by others and adapt them to your specific circumstances. For example, prior to March 2020 many fire departments asserted, “we don’t do hazmat” but are now knee deep in decontamination and disinfection operations against a bio-threat that has turned every call into a potential full hazmat response. FEMA developed a comprehensive guide to pandemic response planning in 2000 and updated it in 2008, yet when the COVID crisis happened, many jurisdictions failed to “dust it off” and see what key parts of those plans were applicable and which ones needed tweaking for the current threat.

Then it is a matter of realistically assigning resources to those threats. “What will we have to work with if (fill in the blank)

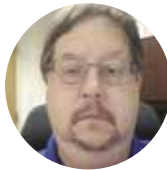


happens?" "What resources will we need but lack?" "Where can we get those resources that we lack?" Work with your strategic partners to build your plans. Seek interoperability on issues like training, PPE protocols, communication channels, resource procurement and management, basic response policies, etc. Build collaboratives and collectives to address resource gaps. Do research and gather guides, manuals, training, and other references to help you in your planning processes. Research NFPA standards, IAFC and NVFC guidance, white papers, NFA Executive Officer Research papers, and commissioned reports. Look at what other jurisdictions have done, and don't be afraid to ask for help. There are more resources out there than you realize.

Lastly, establish work groups and conduct regular planning meetings to ensure that the all-hazards plans stay fresh and realistic. Be open to feedback, even criticism. Be open to change, as it is a constant in this world. Be willing to put the safety of your crews and your communities above your egos.

As an example of atypical planning, the NVFC worked with its partners to develop a toolkit that includes risk assessment and planning tools that can be used to prepare emergency response plans for pipeline incidents. The toolkit is available at [www.nvfc.org/pipelines](http://www.nvfc.org/pipelines). Resources like this can help you gain a better understanding of the all-hazards emergency planning process.

In summary, truly planning for an all-hazards approach is valuable in ensuring that your department is prepared, not just for the 5 percent, but for the remaining 95 percent. It can also be a powerful learning and teaching tool for current fire department leadership as well as up-and-coming leadership. Solid planning pays off in solid performance. ■ ■



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**Tom Miller** is the West Virginia director for the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), chair of the NVFC Hazmat Response Committee, and represents the NVFC on the NFPA 470 technical committee. He is also a member of the Sissonville (WV) Volunteer Fire Department and active in the West Virginia State Firemen's Association. **David Bullard** is a board member and instructor for the Georgia Pipeline Emergency Response Initiative and Georgia director for the NVFC, member of the NVFC Hazmat Response Committee, and represents the NVFC on the NFPA 1021 Technical Committee. He is a lieutenant with Columbia County (GA) Fire Rescue and president of the Georgia State Firefighters Association.



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# Reducing Cancer Risks through Lifestyle Choices

BY DR. SARA JAHNKE

Cancer has received a lot of attention in the fire service over the past several years, and with good cause. Overall, studies have found cancers to be around 10-14 percent higher in firefighters than the general population. While some cancers are only at a slightly increased risk, others – such as mesothelioma – may have double the risk for firefighters than the general population.

Most work on firefighters and cancer have focused on what you can control on the fireground in terms of exposures, which is extremely important. Research that focuses on carcinogens on the fireground has found a broad range that make up what has been referred to as a “toxic soup of known and unknown carcinogens.” These exposures are often for a short duration but at a high intensity, which is particularly dangerous. Understandably, there has been a push to decrease exposures through proper cleaning of gear, gross decon on the fireground, limiting exposure to dirty gear, cleaning with wipes while still on the fireground, keeping the cabs clean, and showering within the hour.

While these interventions are definitely

necessary and deserve the focus they receive, risk factors that occur off the fireground receive relatively little attention. These modifiable risk factors, like sleep, nutrition, fitness, alcohol, and tobacco use, play an even more important role for firefighters than they do for the general population given the increased risk for cancer that is inherent to serving in the fire service.

## SLEEP

Sleep is one area that is being increasingly identified as a key player in firefighters’ risks for poor health outcomes. While career firefighters can expect to have interrupted sleep while on shift, the volunteer fire service often faces an even more stressful risk in that they are typically on call 24/7. Interrupted sleep not only affects your appetite and hunger, but it also leads to decreases in natural killer cells in the immune system (which can kill tumor cells or cells infected with a virus) and promotes inflammation. Research has shown that regularly sleeping less than 6-7 hours a night can lead to a doubling of risk for cancer. Good sleep is particularly difficult for volunteer fire service personnel who – on top of always being on call – often serve their communities as their

second or even third job, leaving little time for regular, consistent bouts of the recommended 8 hour per night of sleep.

## WEIGHT

Being in the range of obesity doubles the risk for several types of cancers such as liver, kidney, and esophageal that are already known to be increased among firefighters. Along with the increased cancer risk, obesity is also a significant risk factor for other critical illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease. While obesity is an epidemic throughout the U.S., studies have shown that the fire service has an even higher rate of obesity than the general population. The regularly interrupted sleep on top of irregular (and often hurried) eating, limited support and time for fitness, and traditions around eating and portion sizes all contribute to the risk and likely explain why rates are as high as they are in the fire service.

## ALCOHOL

Alcohol use also plays a key role in impacting firefighter health and likely increasing their cancer risk. Previous research found about half of volunteer firefighters reported binge drinking in

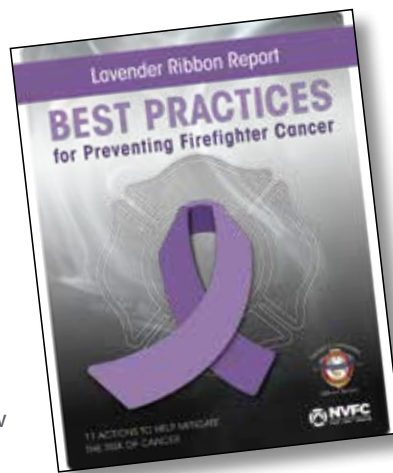
the past month (four drinks in a two-hour period for women, five drinks in a two-hour period for men). When firefighters were asked about their amount of alcohol consumption when they do drink, the average was 3.5 drinks per occasion. This is the same amount of alcohol that has been found to increase risk of cancers such as liver, colorectal, breast, and the esophagus. Moderating alcohol use is an important step that firefighters can take to manage their cancer risk.

## TOBACCO

Tobacco use also has been implicated as contributing to overall risk of cancer. There is no safe level of tobacco use, and the fact that tobacco products contain known carcinogens is widely accepted. Fortunately, the fire service on a national level smokes at rates relatively lower than the general population – which likely contributes to why rates of cancer aren't even higher among firefighters. However, rates of smokeless tobacco use among firefighters are extremely high. While cancer risks of smokeless tobacco are not as high as smoking, it remains a significant risk factor for several types of cancer. There is little data available about how prevalent vaping or the use of e-cigarettes is in the fire service or about the long-term health consequences. While they are thought to be a safer alternative to smoking, analysis of the chemicals from several e-cigarettes on the market have found the presence of chemicals thought to be linked to "popcorn lung" that causes scarring of the lung tissue. The science linking e-cigarettes or vaping to cancer will take years to establish (due to the long latency period of developing cancer), but early data suggests it should not be considered safe.

As departments and organizations focus on operating policies and procedures that can be taken to reduce cancer risk among firefighters and companies work to find ways to engineer out the exposure to carcinogens, it is important to realize there will never be a clean, safe, or carcinogen-free fire. That doesn't mean the efforts are futile. It means that it is even more important that we all do what we can to limit the risks beyond the fireground than it is for our neighbors who aren't

walking through and breathing the toxic soup of known and unknown carcinogens every time a call comes out. These are lifestyle changes we can all work to improve so that we can keep our risks of cancer and other critical illnesses as low as possible. ■ ■

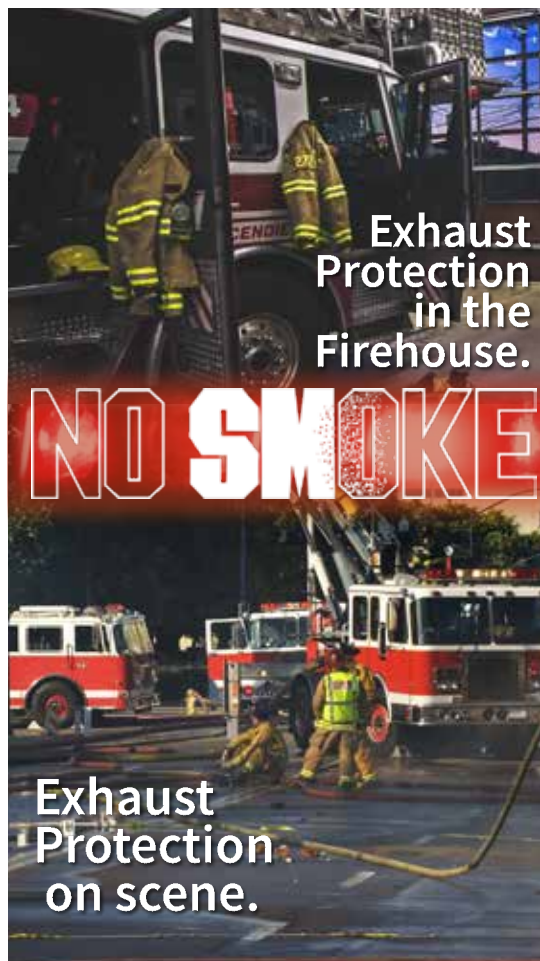


Learn 11 actions you can take to reduce your risks of occupational cancer. Download the *Lavender Ribbon Report: Best Practices for Preventing Firefighter Cancer* and implement it in your department. [www.nvfc.org/lrr](http://www.nvfc.org/lrr)



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr. Sara Jahnke** is the director of the Center for Fire, Rescue, and EMS Health Research. Her work has focused on a broad range of topics, including cardiovascular disease, carcinogen exposure, risk for injury, fitness, and behavioral health. Her current FEMA-funded project focuses on the health of women firefighters, including behavioral health, cardiovascular risk factors, cancer screening, and reproductive health.



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# New Toolkit Provides a Framework for Healthy, High-Performing Fire Departments

BY DAVID BALLARD

This fall, the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) will release its Psychologically Healthy Fire Departments (PHFD) Toolkit. The new resource, which is being developed in partnership with the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (FBHA), is made possible through a Fire Prevention and Safety Grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The toolkit is designed to help fire department leaders promote and support well-being among their members.

Creating healthy, high-performing fire/EMS organizations is a shared responsibility that requires commitment from department leaders and members alike. A department's culture and the way it functions can either help or hinder member efforts to stay physically and mentally well and perform at their best. The PHFD Toolkit is based on APA's Psychologically Healthy Workplace model and adapted to fit the unique characteristics of the fire service.

The types of practices that support member well-being and department performance can be grouped into the following six categories, which will be covered in the toolkit.

## Involvement

Efforts to increase involvement empower members, give them a voice in decision-making, and encourage them to work together to make the department better. Member involvement efforts can increase satisfaction, morale, and commitment to the department as well as improve performance and reduce absenteeism and turnover.

## Health and Safety

Health and safety initiatives improve the physical and mental health of members through the prevention, assessment, and treatment of potential health risks and problems and by encouraging and supporting healthy lifestyle and behavior choices. Health and safety efforts include a wide variety of practices that can help members improve their physical and mental health, reduce health risks, and manage stress effectively. By investing in the health and safety of their members, departments may benefit from better performance, less absenteeism, and fewer accidents and injuries.

## Growth and Development

Providing training and development opportunities beyond the minimum requirements helps members expand their knowledge, skills, and abilities and apply the competencies they have gained to new situations. The opportunity to acquire new skills and experiences can increase member motivation and satisfaction and help them more effectively manage stress. This can translate into positive gains for the department by enhancing effectiveness, as well as by helping the fire service attract and retain high-quality

members. By providing opportunities for growth and development, departments can improve the quality of their members' experience and realize the benefits of developing personnel to their full potential.

## Work-Life Balance

Programs and policies that facilitate work-life balance generally fall into two categories: flexible scheduling arrangements and resources to help members manage their other life demands. Conflict between work and home or family responsibilities can diminish the quality of both work and home life for members, which in turn can affect department performance. Efforts to help members improve work-life balance can improve morale, increase job satisfaction, and strengthen members' commitment to the department. Additionally, the department may reap benefits in terms of better performance and reduction in absenteeism and turnover.

## Recognition

Recognition efforts reward members both individually and collectively for their contributions to the department and the community. By acknowledging members



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David W. Ballard**, PsyD, MBA, is an organizational consultant with more than 15 years of experience as a nonprofit executive. His emphasis is on promoting employee well-being and organizational performance through the integration of psychology and business. During his time at the American Psychological Association, he led the Office of Applied Psychology, Center for Organizational Excellence, and Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program.

for their efforts and making them feel valued and appreciated, departments can increase member satisfaction, morale, and self-esteem. Additionally, the department itself may benefit from better engagement and performance, lower turnover, and the ability to attract and retain high-quality members.

### Communication

Communication plays a key role in the success of any department program or policy and serves as the foundation for all of the psychologically healthy department practices. Communication about department practices helps achieve the desired outcomes for the member and the department in a variety of ways.

Bottom-up communication (from members to leadership) is a way to get member input and feedback and provides information about member needs, values, perceptions, and opinions. This helps departments select and tailor their practices to meet the needs of their members.

Top-down communication (from leadership to members) keeps members informed and can increase utilization of specific department resources by making members aware of their availability, clearly explaining how to access and use the resources, and demonstrating that leaders support and value the resources themselves.

### The Importance of Context

It is important to note that the success of any effort is based in part on addressing the challenges unique to the particular department and tailoring practices to meet its specific needs. A department's practices do not exist in isolation. Each functions in relation to other programs and policies the department has in place as well as internal and external environmental factors. The complex nature of these relationships highlights the importance of taking a comprehensive approach to creating a department in which both members and the department can excel.

In addition to elaborating on the practices described above and providing concrete steps you can take to improve these

efforts, the toolkit will include a special focus on preventing and addressing problems in your department such as incivility, harassment, or discrimination, promoting diversity and inclusion in your department, building resilience in your personnel, and working to prevent and address trauma. Supplemental materials will include case studies from fire/EMS

organizations that have taken steps to promote and support a healthy, high-performing department and a list of additional resources to help support your efforts.

The PHFD Toolkit will be available on the NVFC web site at [www.nvfc.org/phfd](http://www.nvfc.org/phfd). ■ ■

## New Resource Available: Directory of Behavioral Health Professionals

BY JEFF DILL

You are a first responder – fire or EMS, volunteer or career – and you are sitting at home, finally wanting to face the issues that have you feeling depressed, drinking more, losing sleep, or any other internal struggle. How do you start that search for a behavioral health professional that is culture-competent? Is it through your Employee Assistance Program? Is it a recommendation from a neighbor or friend? Maybe your chaplain or peer support team?

These are all viable options, but thanks to the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), there is another resource available. Through a federal Fire Prevention and Safety Grant, they have created a Directory of Behavioral Health Professionals from across the country that are ready and equipped to help emergency responders. As the founder of the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (FBHA) and a partner on this initiative, I have vetted these counselors and other providers through personal phone calls to ensure they are ready to provide assistance to responders in need. In addition, each provider listed in the directory either has firsthand experience as an emergency responder or has taken the course A Firefighter's Life, which is designed specifically for counselors, chaplains, and other behavioral health professionals to understand the culture of the fire service and the specific challenges facing fire and EMS members.

Released on June 7, the directory features counselors, chaplains, peer support specialists, and other sources for behavioral health support. The initial number of providers vetted was approximately one hundred and sixty dedicated professionals across the U.S., and also a few from Canada! The numbers will increase as more behavioral health professionals send in their forms to be vetted by FBHA. The directory is updated monthly to keep information up-to-date and add in new providers.

This directory is intended to be a one-stop resource of behavioral health professionals available to assist first responders as they begin their search for someone to help them and their family members. You can access the directory on the NVFC web site at [www.nvfc.org/phfd](http://www.nvfc.org/phfd).

For comments or questions, please contact me at [jdill@ffbha.org](mailto:jdill@ffbha.org) or Caroline Stachowiak from the NVFC at [caroline@nvfc.org](mailto:caroline@nvfc.org). ■ ■



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Dill is the founder of the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (<https://www.ffbha.org>), a member of the National Volunteer Fire Council's Health and Safety Work Group, and a retired fire captain. He holds a master's degree in counseling.



# THE UPCOMING

# NATIONAL FIREFIGHTER REGISTRY

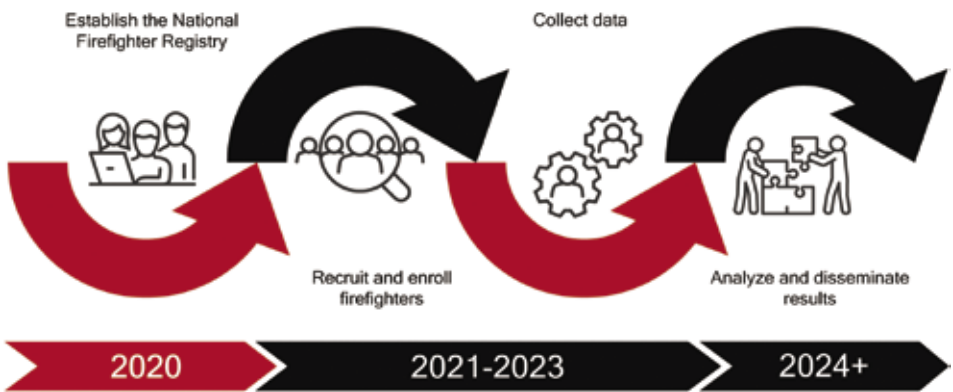
## BY THE NFR TEAM

Studies show that firefighters are exposed to chemicals on the job that are associated with cancer, and firefighters appear to have a higher risk of cancer than the general population. Previous cancer research has primarily focused on male career firefighters in urban environments, but many firefighters do not fit into this category. Unfortunately, we do not fully understand the magnitude of the cancer risk among all firefighters in the United States.

Growing concern over cancer in firefighters has led to many unanswered questions about how risk may vary across the country's diverse fire service. For example, volunteer firefighters, who make up almost 70 percent of the workforce, female and minority firefighters, and sub-specialties of the fire service may face unique exposure and cancer risks. Evaluating cancer among these groups of firefighters across the country would help scientists and the fire service better understand the link between firefighting and cancer nationally.

Currently, no national data sources exist that would allow scientists to answer these more detailed questions about cancer among firefighters. Congress passed the Firefighter Cancer Registry Act of 2018, which mandated the creation of the National Firefighter Registry (NFR) to help answer these questions and provide additional evidence to support interventions aimed at reducing cancer in the fire service. The National Institute for

## TIMELINE National Firefighter Registry (NFR)



Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has been hard at work getting the NFR set up and ready to register firefighters, with the goal of launching in 2021.

### What is the NFR?

The NFR will be a voluntary registry of firefighters with a goal to track and analyze cancer and risk factors for cancer among firefighters in the United States. NIOSH, which is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is developing the NFR with guidance from the scientific and firefighting communities.

NIOSH will use NFR data from firefighters with varied backgrounds to examine cancer characteristics, like the types of cancers, and whether cancer rates differ by types and levels of exposure, workplace characteristics, geography, sex, or other traits. These data will also help us analyze potential cancer risk factors, as well as protective measures, like the use of personal protective equipment,

decontamination, and other practices. Over time, we hope that findings from the NFR will help to guide interventions, trainings, daily practices, and policies.

Firefighters' voluntary NFR registration will take place through a secure web portal that will include a questionnaire on work and exposure history, lifestyle behaviors, and basic demographic information. Registration will be simple, and you will be able to complete it on any computer, tablet, or mobile device. You will also have opportunities to complete occasional follow-up questionnaires that will allow us to learn even more about your unique exposures and health effects. This information will lead to a much more comprehensive understanding of firefighters and the health risks they face.

*The NFR will be open to all firefighters, not just those with cancer. All firefighters, active and retired, and from all areas of the fire service, will have the opportunity to*



register once the NFR launches, including structural firefighters, wildland firefighters, instructors, investigators, and others. We need a large and diverse representation of the workforce to register in order to have meaningful data used to make sound conclusions.

### What is the status of the NFR?

We are currently designing the NFR. Our team at NIOSH includes staff that specialize in exposure science, epidemiology, physiology, exercise science, health communications, and data management and security. We are also continuously consulting fire service and cancer research stakeholders from across the country to create a system that will be inclusive, secure, and valuable.

We expect NFR enrollment to begin sometime in 2021, after finalizing our detailed plan and secure registration system. In the meantime, we are getting the word out to make sure firefighters and fire service stakeholders throughout the

United States are aware of the NFR. We will work closely with fire service groups to notify firefighters everywhere once enrollment opens. You can find more information about the NFR at [www.cdc.gov/NFR](http://www.cdc.gov/NFR), where you can also subscribe to the NFR Quarterly Newsletter.

### Your call to action!

Please join us by staying up to date on our developments and spreading the word about the NFR to your fellow fire service colleagues. By providing critical information needed to better understand

the link between on-the-job exposures and cancer, your NFR participation will help the public safety community, researchers, scientists, and medical professionals find better ways to protect those who protect our communities and environment. ■ ■

*The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The NFR Team currently includes **Miriam Siegel, DrPH**, **Andrea Wilkinson, MS**, **Will Wepsala, MPA**, **Alex Mayer, MPH**, and is led by **Kenny Fent, PhD**. Combined, we have experience working in federal, state, and local levels of government, academia, and healthcare settings. We have not only committed to reducing cancer in the fire service but have also been involved in other areas of public health, including cardiovascular and reproductive health, workplace violence, industrial hygiene, infectious diseases, and firefighter fatality investigations.



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# GOING VIRTUAL:

## Enhancing Training for Today's Fire Service

BY KIMBERLY QUIROS

The COVID-19 pandemic and related social distancing measures have had a significant impact on fire and EMS departments from many standpoints. Departments quickly had to change the way they respond, decon, fundraise, train, hold meetings, and recruit. While many of these changes are temporary until the pandemic is over, some of the changes may actually be good for the fire service and worth implementing for the long-term.

One of these is in the way departments train. Restrictions designed to keep people safe during the worst of the pandemic also left fire departments looking for alternative ways to provide department training, hold new recruit classes, and conduct department meetings. This meant going virtual.

For some departments this was a new experience, but others embraced virtual training long before the world had heard of COVID-19. The reason? Online training provides greater flexibility in an era when so many volunteers are pressed for time. In a recent survey conducted by the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) to better understand factors impacting volunteer retention, 47 percent of current volunteers and 44 percent of former volunteers cited "Offer online training for nonessential training" as something they think would have a positive impact on department retention.

While some training has to be done in-person, going virtual is a practical option for educating members on certain health and safety topics, providing supplemental training that can complement hands-on skill building, and even conducting basic

informational or orientation classes for new recruits.

Details such as what courses to provide online, whether the training is live or recorded, whether to develop your own training or utilize pre-existing training, and which platform to use vary by department. To get an idea of how virtual training can be an asset, the NVFC asked some departments to share their experiences and tips.

### Gilt Edge (TN) Volunteer Fire Department

Adam Hursh of the Gilt Edge Volunteer Fire Department reports that they were in the middle of a county-wide fire recruit class when the COVID-19 shutdown occurred. To keep the class going, they realized they had to look to the internet.

**Training provided:** Lecture portions of Firefighter 1 and 2 for firefighter recruit class.

**Platform used:** Blackboard CourseSites enabled them to conduct quizzes, tests, and class discussions. Instructors recorded class lectures using Microsoft PowerPoint, which were uploaded to YouTube.

**Engagement:** The department could utilize YouTube's analytics to track how many students watched the videos and whether they watched the entire lecture or were skipping to find answers.

**Member reception:** Students found the move to the online platform helpful during the shutdown, although some who were unfamiliar with virtual learning needed a little more assistance in the beginning.

**Tips:** Just like in an in-person class, not every student puts in the effort needed to

succeed. Instructors must work to ensure that students stay on task and fully utilize the virtual platform.

**Moving forward:** The department will continue to utilize the online environment for taking tests and watching supplemental videos that support hands-on training. Keeping the online components will enable them to spend less time during in-person meetings for things like PowerPoints and more time dedicated to hands-on work.

### Montgomery County (MD) Volunteer Fire and Rescue Association

Angelica Mufarrij from the Montgomery County Volunteer Fire and Rescue Association notes the organization switched to online training during the pandemic to hold their new recruit orientation class.

**Training provided:** Lecture components of the Volunteer Basic Orientation course. The in-person training components were put on hold until the stay-at-home restrictions lifted.

**Platform used:** Zoom and Blackboard

**Engagement:** Keeping the training conversational helps. Ask more questions than usual and use groups.

**Member reception:** Members have enjoyed the online platform and the way the organization adapted during the pandemic.

**Benefits:** Online training helped keep new members engaged and on-track when in-person meetings were not possible. Being able to teach/learn from home also resulted in a better work-life balance for instructors and students.

**Tips:** When video-sharing in a live Zoom presentation, it may work best to have everyone pause their camera and microphone and watch the videos on their own. Also, limit the number of participants in each session to keep students more engaged; this may mean offering the session more than once. Practice is key – test the platform and content delivery before the class starts. Practicing will help build the instructor’s confidence and enable them to relax more during the class. Don’t be intimidated by new platforms – with the shift to more virtual trainings and meetings, everyone is learning new things.

### Sheridan County Fire Department (Hoxie, KS)

Steve Hirsch of the Sheridan County Fire Department (and also chair of the NVFC) says the department utilized virtual meetings and webinars to keep members training while the state was shut down.

**Training provided:** Classes were provided on a variety of topics, including cancer awareness, COVID-19 awareness, forcible entry, wildland-urban interface mitigation, and first responder traffic safety.

**Platform used:** Zoom

**Tips:** Keep classes to under an hour.

**Moving forward:** The department will continue to offer virtual training on a limited basis.

### Orange (VA) Volunteer Fire Company

Whit Jacobs of the Orange Volunteer Fire Company notes that his department already had a webinar series for their membership in place prior to the pandemic; however, it expanded to weekly trainings during the shutdown phase.

**Training provided:** Weekly live webinar series that was open for all county departments as well as agencies outside of their jurisdiction.

**Platform used:** GoToWebinar

**Engagement:** The presenters asked questions and encouraged dialogue. Members were given credit for training

hours through the webinars just as if they were attending a weekly training at the station.

**Member reception:** Members enjoy the webinars and want to see them continue.

**Benefits:** Instructors from outside the area can be utilized since the format is remote. Also, having regular live webinars keeps members engaged, which is needed for a fully volunteer department.

**Tips:** Technical difficulties can happen, so it is best to plan ahead as well as have a walk-through with instructors beforehand to make sure they understand the platform. Also, find a platform that has audio controls that allows the host to minimize the background noise and feedback from attendees.

### Whitesboro (NY) Fire Department

NVFC New York director Brian McQueen says the Whitesboro Fire Department utilized virtual training prior to the pandemic but stepped up their efforts when shutdowns and social distancing went into effect.

**Training provided:** The department held a series of live training webinars on topics including initial attack, reading smoke, firefighter safety, highway safety, and more. They also took advantage of existing on-demand training programs, including those offered through VFIS and ESIP. In addition, monthly meetings, budget meetings, and committee meetings were held online.

**Platform used:** Zoom; existing training programs

**Engagement:** Q&A was facilitated throughout each webinar using the chat feature in Zoom.

**Member reception:** Older members seemed to enjoy having online trainings more than younger members.

**Benefits:** The online trainings enabled the department to stay current with their LOSAP points and also provided the ability for firefighters in quarantine to continue to stay up on training.

**Tips:** Mix up the topics so that trainings cover all of the jobs that firefighters do. ■ ■

## NVFC Launches New Virtual Classroom

Looking for ready-to-use training for yourself or to add to your department’s curriculum? Check out the new NVFC Virtual Classroom! This user-friendly, online training platform features a variety of courses and webinars on topics that matter to the fire and EMS community, including health, safety, recruitment, retention, leadership, funding, preparedness and prevention, risk management, and more.

Courses feature downloadable resources, quizzes, course evaluations, and certificates of completion. Continuing education credits are available for select courses.

All courses are FREE for NVFC members. If you’re not a member, you can join for just \$18 at [www.nvfc.org/join](http://www.nvfc.org/join).

Access the Virtual Classroom at [virtualclassroom.nvfc.org](http://virtualclassroom.nvfc.org).



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Kimberly Quiros** is the chief of communications for the National Volunteer Fire Council. In this role, she focuses on many critical issues facing the fire and emergency services, including health and safety, recruitment and retention, grants and funding, and reputation management. She holds a master’s degree in public communication.





# IT'S A TWO-WAY STREET: Making the "Pitch" for Local Government Support

BY KEN BROWN

**M**any times as a fire chief or administrator, we find ourselves scratching our heads trying to figure out why our local governing body does not seem to support our organization as we feel they should. After all, our personnel respond to emergency incidents at all hours of the day and night, maintain our equipment so that it is ready to go at a moments' notice, and have never been described or portrayed as undesirable citizens. So, what's up?

First, we need to assess the whole picture. Perhaps we should consider our local government as a customer, in fact one of our most important customers. We need to keep in mind that, even though there is not any competition for them to choose from, we still need to ensure they believe they are receiving a good product (service) for their money. To do that, we must determine what it is we are selling. Just like a business, we are selling a host of products such as responses to emergency calls for service, public fire and life safety education programs, building/site inspections, and emergency planning for events.

We can easily make the "pitch" for what is our most important service, emergency response. However, this service only

accounts for 20-30 percent of our time. We need to explain why the other 70-80 percent is also important. Often, this is where we fall short. Suppose you took your vehicle to a car dealership's service center and they only provided a bill for the total amount without itemization. What would you think? Many times, we make that same mistake by stating we need a certain amount of funding because we are the fire department and assume the local government understands exactly what we do.

Now, let's take a look at how the car dealership might explain their cost breakdown. It is easy to see how parts are a major component in the total cost. You must have the part or the vehicle will not run, and factory parts are usually best because they are made for your specific vehicle and backed up by a warranty. Then there are the labor charges, which we agree to because we know that their technicians have been through appropriate training and have experience with the problems our vehicle is having. The dealership also has previously determined how much expendable material is needed and its cost. These items include the utilities, shop towels, specialized tools, office support, office supplies, and more. While these costs

are shared by many jobs over time, their proportion still must be taken into account and that value added to the bill. There is also the knowledge that the dealership will stand behind its work and will provide additional intangible benefits such as immediate scheduling of an appointment.

Fire departments, and especially volunteer departments, do not usually adequately explain the how and why the items on our request list are necessary. We just assume that everyone understands it like we do. After all, we are the fire department and they should just trust us. Unfortunately, this approach often leads to an undesired result, such as our requests being partially or even fully denied.

We must show a need and justification of each item we request. An example would be the necessity to purchase new SCBAs. We should show how the cost breaks down over the expected life of the units as well as the cost of the units. This helps non-first responders to understand the high initial cost of the units, once amortized over the life of the unit, is much smaller. We should stress that having our own personnel trained in the basic maintenance of the SCBAs and the extensive SCBA training that our interior firefighting personnel undergo

helps to reduce the annual operating/maintenance cost. We could also show how purchasing a particular brand of SCBA may allow for better integration with surrounding response agencies and existing equipment. All these things enable the local officials to understand the total picture and not just the total cost.

Think about the other benefits your organization provides. These may be things like teaching CPR or fire safety classes, or lowering the ISO insurance rating for the locality and thus impacting the property values and/or economic development. These extra benefits help fire departments justify their worth to the community.

Therefore, we must become the salesperson for our organization. We must know what our products are and understand how to sell them. For volunteer departments, we must be ready to explain how just because we use "volunteers" we are not "free" of cost. (Although the NVFC has a cost calculation tool which can assist you in determining

how much volunteers save in personnel costs, thus further benefiting the local government.)

If your local officials have not had any fire department experience, they may not understand the cost and inter-workings of a fire department and the dedication of its members. Provide them with a notification device for several weeks so they can see the number, types of calls, and the times at which the calls for service occur. Most of

the time this is an eye-opening experience.

The relationship between local officials and your organization can be a valuable and fruitful one. We must become accustomed to providing clear and concise communications with our community leaders in order to sell them on what is needed to provide the level of service expected by the community and a safe and meaningful working environment for our members. It's a two-way street. ■ ■



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ken Brown** has a long career in the Virginia fire service, including serving as director of fire services for Prince George County, company officer with the City of Newport News Fire Department, fire chief for the 909th CES Fire Department USAFR (Ret.), administrative battalion chief with the Carson Volunteer Fire Department, chief of Goochland County Fire-Rescue, and a lifetime member of Gloucester Volunteer Fire & Rescue. He serves as the Virginia director on the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) and is the chair of the NVFC's recruitment and retention committee.

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# VOLUNTEER RETENTION: WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

BY SARAH LEE

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, people spend an average of 52 hours a year volunteering. Now, consider volunteer first responders, who may, on average, spend 6-10 hours a week volunteering, training, and participating in department meetings. This equates to 312-520 volunteer hours *per year* in a job that is both unpaid and inherently dangerous. Recruiting volunteer firefighters and EMS providers can be an exhausting task for even the most charismatic salesperson given the difficult sales pitch they have to work with. With all the energy and mental stamina that goes into recruiting volunteers, it stands to reason that the ability to *retain* these volunteers is paramount to the success of any volunteer emergency service organization.

Volunteer retention plays a key role in firefighter safety. According to the National Institute of Standards and Technology (2010), inadequate staffing poses a threat not only to the communities being served, but also contributes to increased risk of firefighter injury and death. While recruiting volunteers can increase staffing capabilities, *retaining* volunteers ensures departments have a level of knowledge and experience available both on the fire scene and off. These more experienced volunteers can mentor new recruits, serve in leadership positions, and play an active role in succession planning for the department – ensuring their successors gain the knowledge and experience to step up when needed.

The National Volunteer Fire Council recently conducted a survey of department leadership, current volunteers, and former volunteers to identify factors impacting retention. This study found that nearly 70 percent of department leadership feels their department has a problem with volunteer retention. Interestingly, only 14 percent of department leaders indicated having a clear definition of volunteer

retention along with trackable data. Most leaders seemed to consider retention successful if a member was kept active for three to 10 years.

The perceived reasons for retention challenges differed between leadership and non-leadership. While leadership attributed retention challenges to time-constraints and juggling volunteer responsibilities with other life commitments, current and former volunteers primarily attributed the retention challenge to department cliques and unsupportive leadership. While this may point to a disconnect between leadership and rank-and-file volunteers, it may also showcase a reluctance for leadership to look within or lack of clarity in just how important their role is to successful volunteer retention.

When asked what measures would have a positive impact on retention, current rank-and-file volunteers ranked a mentorship program between new recruits and more experienced members as their top choice, followed by “stay” interviews with volunteers who have lapsed attendance and may be considering leaving the department. Former volunteers ranked exit and stay interviews as their top two choices for positively impacting retention. Leadership ranked recognition (awards/honors) as having the most positive impact on retention, with mentorship following close behind. This data again points to a possible disconnect between leadership and non-leadership but ultimately indicates that rank and file volunteers seek two primary outcomes from their

volunteer service – to feel like they belong, and to feel like they are heard.

Given the difficulty of recruiting volunteers and the financial cost of training and equipping them, departments would benefit greatly from providing ample attention to volunteer retention. Listening to current volunteers and understanding what is important to them and what they hope to get out of their volunteer experience is imperative to overcoming any disconnects or assumptions that can result in volunteer attrition.

Conducting stay surveys can identify volunteers that are on the verge of leaving, with hopes of addressing their concerns before it's too late. Developing mentor programs can create an atmosphere of belonging, eliminate feelings of isolation, and break down barriers between cliques while preparing newer recruits to fill the shoes of their predecessors when the time comes. Identifying and quantifying retention goals can provide departments with a method by which to measure success and document trends over time.

Above all else, leadership and culture may be the most influential factors in volunteer retention and can make or break a departments' ability to sustain its volunteer force, ensure the safety of its members, and enable the department to provide the highest levels of service and protection to the community it serves.

The full NVFC *Volunteer Retention Research Report* is available at [www.nvfc.org](http://www.nvfc.org). ■ ■



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Sarah Lee** is the deputy chief executive of the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC). Among her roles at the NVFC, she manages the organization's health, safety, recruitment, and retention initiatives.



# Traffic Incident Management and Public Safety: TIM is Not Just an Acronym

BY DAVID JOLLY

Courtesy of Steve Weissman, Stafford Co. (VA) Fire & Rescue Department



**A**s we have evolved over the past several years, we have started to see a positive trend in safety across all public safety disciplines. One area where we have seen improvement is in responder safety on our highways. If we stop and reflect for just a minute, we will quickly see that every roadway response has an opportunity to put us in harm's way from the vehicles moving around us.

Back in 2013, Virginia created the Virginia Statewide Traffic Incident Management (TIM) Committee to address the efficient management of traffic at roadway incidents and reduce the number of responder injuries. Since that time, many improvements have been implemented to prioritize the safety of towing operators, local and state responders, and the motoring public at the scene of incidents. This has not been done without considerable efforts on the part of many partners, both private and public. To accomplish this objective, one of the top priorities was and still is to train everyone on how to respond quickly and operate efficiently and safely while working at incidents.

The TIM training was developed to ensure all responders are aware of safe, quick clearance strategies and takes a multi-discipline approach to delivery of services. The training covers the latest national, state, and local policies and best practices, including *NFPA-1091: Standard for Traffic*

*Incident Management*, to ensure we all are working from a common operating picture while providing services to the public we serve. Just seven years after launching, there has been a significant change in how most responders in the state operate at roadway incidents.

Even with the success we've seen in Virginia and in other states that have made TIM training a priority, we can't become complacent. As our localities change, roadways change, and as personnel turnover occurs, we must continue to train. It is critical that we look at the best practices and how we keep everyone safe. This effort has proven that for a small investment of time, we can see great improvements in how we respond, what we respond with, and how we partner with each other to achieve a safe scene, quick clearance, and a return to normal traffic flow as soon as possible.

The goal is to ensure that each member who responds to roadway incidents is trained for their safety and those working with them. In Virginia, the training has become easier to complete as the program is now offered both as a stand-alone course as well as integrated into entry level programs within public safety. For departments in states that may not have easily accessible TIM programs available, there is the National TIM Responder Training course through the Second Strategic Highway Research Program, available both online and in person. There is also a certificate in TIM available through

the ResponderSafety Learning Network at [learning.respondersafety.com](http://learning.respondersafety.com). All of these courses are free.

In addition to making sure all responders are trained, there are several best practices to keep focused on.

- **Keep the message in front of your customers.** Public outreach effort is needed in each fire, EMS, and law enforcement agency as they interact with their community. "Move Over or Slow Down" is not just a saying; it needs to become a way of conditioning for those driving on the roadway today.
- **Be visible while working in the roadway.** From placement of vehicles, lighting, and wearing of approved high visibility apparel to roadway markings, we need to place the effort in setting each and every scene up for the safety of everyone.
- **Always look for ways to improve the system** as vehicles are replaced, new technology is developed, and laws and regulations are implemented.

Hopefully the last seven years is just the beginning of what will become common practice for all of our response personnel. Safety needs to be a way of life, common practice, or learned behavior. If we take that approach, then each time we roll out the door to the next emergency we stand a better chance of arriving, performing efficiently, and returning to the loved ones we left to answer the call. ■ ■



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David Jolly** has been in public safety since 1975 as both a firefighter and EMS provider. He is a nationally certified officer, instructor, inspector, investigator, firefighter, and EMT and has served as a chief officer, fire marshal, instructor, and firefighter/EMT. He is a division chief for the Virginia Department of Fire Programs and fire chief for Namozine Volunteer Fire and EMS, Inc. in Dinwiddie County, VA.

# Exploring the Costs of Health and Safety Initiatives

BY DAVID DENNISTON

**W**e can all agree that health and safety initiatives play a vital role in protecting our first responders in fire service organizations. Our members come from a variety of backgrounds and have differing levels of understanding on just how dangerous our profession can be. Each department is also likely to have a wide range of members with various physical conditions. The question then, especially for volunteer departments, is how do we find the time, knowledge, and funds to make all the necessary training and equipment available to support our health and safety needs?

The first thing to realize is that your department is not the first, or the last, to struggle with that exact question. I have yet to hear a department say that they don't care, or even that they have done everything necessary to protect their members. Therefore, I want to share some ideas and solutions to get your program headed in the right direction.

One of the first steps is to figure out what you need. This includes realizing what you already do, what else is needed, and then what would be the ultimate if you had all the resources available to you.

Let us start by exploring what you need. Every time I read a line-of-duty death report, I ask myself the same questions. Was this death preventable? Could this happen in my department, tonight? What can we do to keep it from happening here? Over the years, health-related deaths are the number one cause of firefighter line-of-duty deaths. The second leading cause is motor vehicle collisions. If you concentrate your efforts on these two topics, you can go a long way towards protecting your most valuable assets.

The next step is to research what other departments are doing to protect their firefighters and how your department can step up its efforts. Do you know the current health of your members? Are you limiting their activities to what is appropriate for their health? Do you allow members with known heart conditions or who are overweight to strap on 50 to 75 pounds of gear and work in an overheated environment? Did you know that a recent report by the *Journal of the American Heart Association* indicated that the majority of firefighters who died from cardiac arrest had an autopsy that confirmed evidence of coronary artery disease? Are your members doing everything reasonable that they can to avoid toxic environments, and decontaminating when they can't avoid it? Do you have the policies and procedures in place to avoid vehicle collisions, such as wearing seatbelts, stopping at all negative right of way intersections, and traveling at reasonable speeds for conditions?

Most of these items cost very little to implement and just take some proper management to achieve. The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) and other major fire service organizations have tons of great resources on these topics that are free for the asking. Don't feel like you need to reinvent the wheel. Take advantage of what is already there.

Some items, however, do require funding. Here are a few things you can do to help increase your chances of securing funding for your health and safety program.

## **DEVELOP A PLAN**

Before you start spending, do some planning, and set a budget to understand what you need. Some departments think that more is always better. They believe the more money and time they throw at

an item, the better off they will be. This is often not the case. Once you understand what your program will actually cost, you can start looking for funding. Now is the time to think outside of the box. Often it will take a combination of tax dollar funding, grants, and fundraising to get the job done. The better you plan and communicate your needs, the better the chances of being successful.

## **COMMUNICATE THE NEED**

Properly communicating the need is a key step in securing funding. Don't just tell people what you want, tell them why it is important and what the benefits will be. The better laid out and organized your plan looks, the more responsive your audience will be.

## **BE CREATIVE**

Many organizations have found that the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced their ability to fundraise in the traditional ways. Field days, community dinners, and door-to-door campaigns have taken a huge hit in most areas. Explore ways to alter these events. Some departments have had success with pre-order, drive through chicken BBQs. Others have turned to social media, virtual fire station tours, and safety tip campaigns to connect with the public and then ask for support. Many departments have been very open with the public, telling their stories of how they have been financially hurt, and found the community has been extremely supportive.

## **CONSIDER COST VS. BENEFIT**

Fundraising is time consuming and taxing on your membership. Do a complete analysis of what it costs to put on one of these events and a true accounting of what is raised. Often you may be surprised by exactly how little profit there is. Consider whether the effort put in is truly worth the results you get.

## ASK LOCAL BUSINESSES FOR SUPPORT

Don't be afraid to look for business support from your community. Keep in mind, however, that many businesses and corporate partners have also been negatively impacted by recent events and may not be able to support you at previous levels.

## GET IDEAS FROM OTHERS

Fundraising takes some creativity and proper planning. As previously mentioned, a lot of resources already exist that your department can take inspiration from. If you have not watched the recent NVFC webinar on fundraising and sponsorship, there are a lot of ideas and tips you can gain from that. Talk to other area departments and see what has, and more importantly what has not, worked for them. Chances are they have tried some ideas and can save you both embarrassment and pain.

## LOOK FOR GRANTS

Most grant funding options score health and safety initiatives well. One of the main goals of FEMA's Fire Prevention and Safety Grant is to support projects that enhance the safety of firefighters. When applying for a grant, be sure you answer all the questions that are asked, give supporting documentation, and include your plans for how you will sustain this activity in the years after the funding is awarded. Consider applying for multi-agency projects. If you can show an increased number of firefighters benefited, and some cost savings by the economies of scale,

that may be just what is needed to elevate your proposal above the rest.

Hopefully by now your imagination is starting to wander. With some effort, and help from others, you can be well on your way to the health and safety initiatives that you can be proud of. Even more rewarding is the understanding that these initiatives, when implemented correctly and enforced, can actually save the lives of your brother and sister firefighters. Their families, your family, and all the members of the communities we protect will benefit from your efforts. Be safe my friends. ■ ■



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David Denniston** is the director of risk management for McNeil and Company (ESIP) and serves as executive director of the National FARMEDIC Training Program. He has been in emergency services for over 30 years and is past chief of the Cortlandville (NY) Fire Department. He serves Cortland County as deputy fire coordinator and serves the Town of Virgil as fire commissioner.

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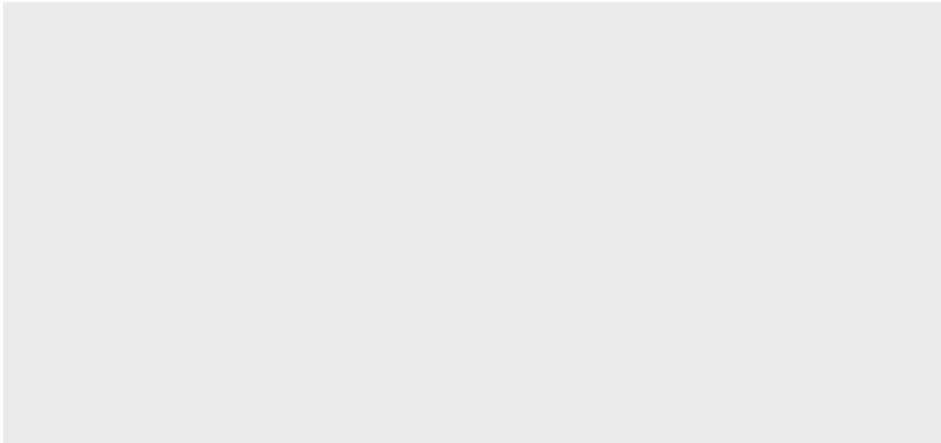
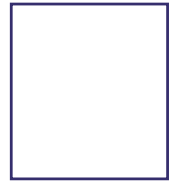


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