National Volunteer Fire Council

Firefighter Strong

News for a Better You and a Stronger Crew

Help your team be fit for the fight with free motivational materials, while supplies last.

SEE PAGE 23

In This Issue:

FREE Poster Inside!

PAGES 17 & 21 **What's Wrong With This Photo?**

NVFC SERVE STRONG

www.nvfc.org

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. Membership in the NVFC is just $21 and comes with an array of benefits, including access to the First Responder Helpline, free training in the Virtual Classroom, dynamic conversation in the Volunteer Voices online community, an AD&D policy, and much more. Find information and join at www.nvfc.org/join. Learn more about the NVFC and access resources at www.nvfc.org.

Fit For the FIGHT

As an emergency responder, you have a lot of people depending on you – your family, your crew, and your community. Make sure you are ready to respond at your best by focusing on your health and safety.

There are a lot of areas that factor into your wellbeing – proper training so you are prepared for the next call; knowledge of the risks responders face and actions to protect yourself; healthy lifestyle choices to keep you at the ready; self-care so you can stay in the game and be there for others.

The NVFC is with you every step of the way, supporting your efforts and offering free programs, training, and resources to help you thrive. Whether it's cancer prevention, heart health, behavioral health, community risk reduction, safety on and off the fireground, or another priority for your well-being, we have your back.

The NVFC is pleased to offer this free newsletter to volunteer and combination fire departments across the U.S. to help you delve further into topics that impact your health, safety, and overall well-being. We are excited to share with you critical knowledge from a roster of renowned fire service leaders and subject matter experts. From emerging issues to longstanding challenges, this issue of *Firefighter Strong* is packed full of information and resources you can use today and share in your department to create a healthier, stronger workforce.

We have some special features in this issue as well, including a challenge to identify the health and safety mistakes in "What's Wrong with This Photo," and a poster that you can hang up at the station. We are also giving away 200 packets of six health and safety focused posters and three stickers so you have even more materials to help motivate your members to Serve Strong.

We thank you for all that you do for your communities and encourage you to visit our web site at **www.nvfc.org** to find more tools and resources to focus on your health and safety and strengthen your department.

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FIRST RESPONDER HELPLINE:
Confidential Assistance When You Need It

Photo courtesy of Lauralee Veitch

The NVFC First Responder Helpline, offered through Provident, provides PTSD and mental health services to every NVFC member and their household family.

Find 24/7, confidential counseling, resources, and referrals to assistance for a range of issues, including:

- Stress management
- Depression
- Family conflict
- Anxiety
- Relationships
- Financial or legal concerns
- Substance misuse
- Grief or loss
- Problem gambling
- Child or elder care

Follow these steps to access the NVFC First Responder Helpline:

1. If you are an NVFC member, login to the members only web site and look under membership benefits to find the number.
2. If you are not an NVFC member, join for just $21 at www.nvfc.org/join to access the First Responder Helpline benefit.
3. NVFC members and their household families can call the First Responder Helpline to speak with master's level clinicians with an average of five years of experience specially trained in assisting and supporting first responder groups. Up to five coaching sessions are included.
4. In addition, consultations and referrals are available for everyday concerns including childcare, eldercare, adoption research, a 30-minute legal consultation, and referrals to consultants to assist with financial concerns.

LEARN MORE AT WWW.NVFC.ORG/HELPLINE

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Training in the Volunteer Fire Service

By Past Chief Brian McQueen and Retired Chief John Buckman III

Since 1736, the volunteer firefighters of this nation have been protecting our communities. Volunteer fire departments used to be the center communities around the United States. As in all facets of growth, things have changed, and the training needs of our volunteer firefighters have changed as well. The expansion of services, new technologies, and changes in the way we learn are a few of the factors that have impacted firefighter training in recent decades.

The importance of training comes down to two key concepts: firefighter survival and public belief. Well-trained firefighters are able to protect themselves, the other members of their crew, the equipment they are using, and the citizens whom they are charged with serving. Training for what the public expects and needs the firefighters to be ready for will enable the department to fulfill its mission and deliver high quality service. All of this takes a well-designed, well-thought out training plan with clearly defined objectives and performance measures.

To help departments develop an effective and relevant operational training plan, the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), International Association of Fire Chiefs' Volunteer and Combination Officers Section, and International Society of Fire Service Instructors developed a guide titled *Training Volunteers to be Combat Ready*. This document, which updated and expanded upon the NVFC's 10-year-old Training White Paper, was designed knowing quite well the difficulties our volunteer fire departments face with member shortage, aging equipment, budget cuts, and the increased demands on the families of today. Basically, we must understand that training saves lives – yours, those you walk into battle with, and those you are called to help.

Developing a training program that meets the needs of the community and the individual firefighter requires planning, commitment, and time. The person in charge of training should be enthusiastic about the job. Training has a direct impact on your firefighters' safety and ability to save lives and reduce property loss.

While training usually falls on the shoulders of the training officer, the development of the training classes should be a top-down/bottom-up design using the feedback from your officers, your firefighters, and the needs of your community.

Training gives firefighters a better understanding of their responsibilities in knowing and performing the job expectations and enhances their confidence to perform. The new training guide is broken down into 10 sections that we believe are the focus of training the volunteers of today. They are:

- Training Delivery and Engagement Methods
- Surviving the Job
- Why is Training Important
- Roles of the Training Officer, Instructor, and Student
- Planning Training
- Training Policies and Procedures
- Assessing Firefighters' Capabilities
- NFPA Standards and OSHA Regulations
- Developing and Implementing Training Best Practices
- First Due Recommended Firefighter Performance Criteria

These sections go over key components to a successful training program, including instructional styles, the steps to delivering a quality training lesson, training for health and safety, and training for your community's needs. There are also several appendices with sample documents and additional resources and information.

Training is a critical function of every fire department. Attending training is a requirement for every firefighter. A few tips for a successful training program include the following:

- Attitude – both of the firefighter and the instructor – is important in helping to make sure the time spent in training has a valued outcome.
- Instructors must realize the delivery of training is about the needs of the students, not the needs of the instructor.
- Preparation, Planning, Delivery, and Feedback are the four steps to delivering a quality training lesson. All four are critical to success.
- Students have to show up on time and ready to learn. This indicates professionalism, reduces stress, improves relationships, and builds teamwork.
- Starting and ending on time is important to show how the attendees' time is valued. Staying on schedule is the responsibility of the instructor and the students.

Download *Training Firefighters to Be Combat Ready* from the NVFC web site at **www.nvfc.org**.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian McQueen is a 44-year member of the Whitesboro (NY) Volunteer Fire Department, serving in many roles including president, fire chief, and currently safety officer. He is a state director to the NVFC and serves on the NVFC Executive Committee and Health, Safety, and Training Committee. **John M. Buckman** III served as a German Township (IN) fire chief managing volunteers for 35 years. He currently serves as education coordinator for the IAFC Volunteer and Combination Officers Section. He served as the Indiana Fire Academy Director for 15 years, is a past president of the IAFC, and has authored over 150 articles and several books.


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Available only to verified FirstNet Subscriber Paid Users. Credits start w/in 3 bills. Verification req'd. Add'l fees, taxes, charges & other restr's apply. Scan QR code for details.
FirstNet and Family Offer: Must confirm elig. at firstnet.com/eligibility. Req's FirstNet-capable device provisioned with a FirstNet Trio SIM or eSIM card. Max of 4 lines (1 smartphone, 1 tablet, 1 wearable, 1 connected device). 25% off AT&T Unlimited plan offer includes Unlimited Starter, Unlimited Extra & Unlimited Premium. AT&T may temporarily slow data speeds if the network is busy. Eligible line(s) of service will receive a monthly discount of 25%. FirstNet line(s) of service do not qualify for 25% discount. Discount is after autopay or paperless bill discounts which start w/in 3 bill cycles. If FirstNet smartphone line of service loses eligibility or is cancelled, the AT&T Unlimited line(s) will lose monthly discount. LIMITS: Max of 20 lines of service per account.
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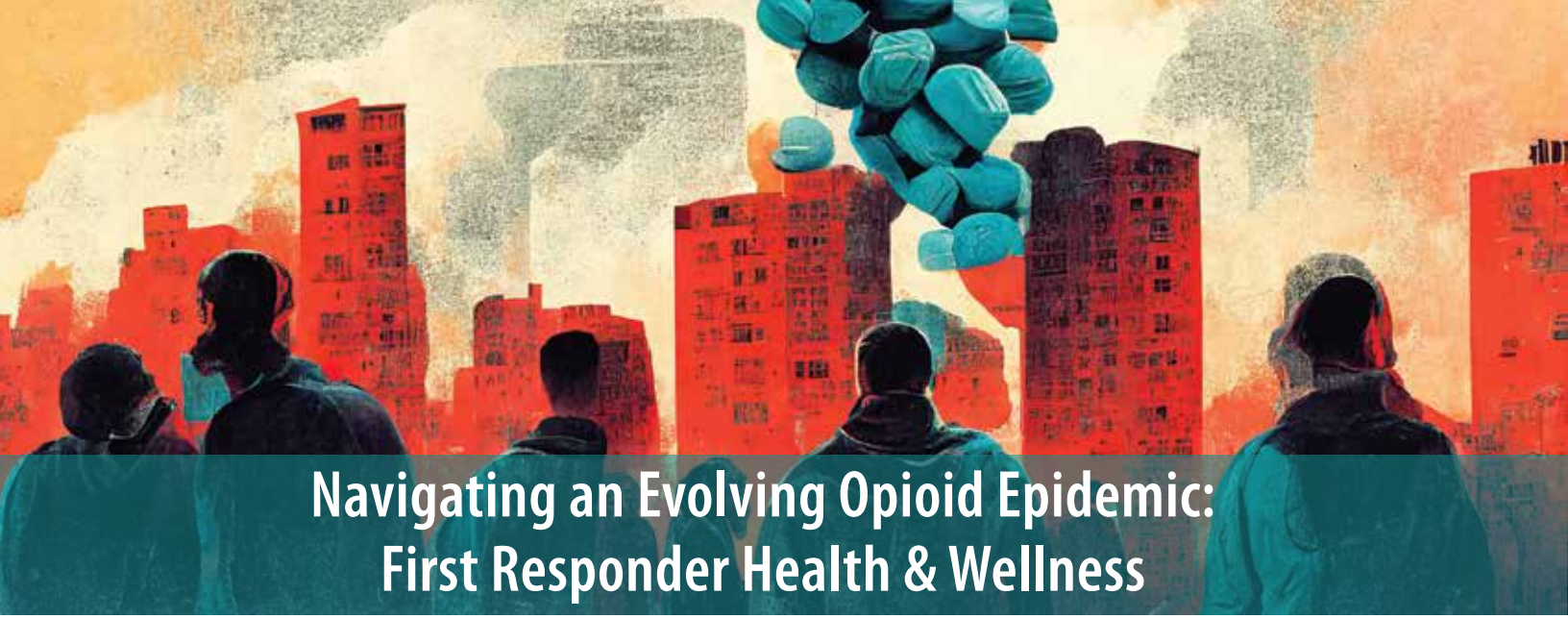


Navigating an Evolving Opioid Epidemic: First Responder Health & Wellness

By Chief Jan K. Rader (retired)

As the opioid epidemic unfolded across the United States, little did we know what toll it was taking on our first responders. Huntington, WV, a city of around 46,000 people, was once called ground zero for the opioid epidemic that still rages today. Regardless of whether that is true, our own assessment is that Huntington is the center of solutions. And one of our best solutions involves a program that is improving the overall health and wellness of our first responders. Before I get to this innovative program, I think it is imperative to share a little history.

The Crisis

During the early- to mid-2000s, first responders in the city of Huntington began to see occasional overdoses caused by pain pills legally prescribed to patients. Around 2007 Huntington experienced a rash of black tar heroin overdoses. Yet none of us realized that we were witnessing the beginning of one of the worst health epidemics of our time. Over the next few years pill overdoses continued to increase. Then beginning in the summer of 2011, heroin was back and overdoses started escalating. Each year seemed to bring a higher number of overdoses and deaths.

In the fall of 2014, Mayor Steve Williams realized he needed to do more, so he created the Mayor's Office of Drug Control Policy. The three-person team worked tirelessly to form partnerships and collaborations and was instrumental in the creation of many programs that continue to make a difference in the lives of those suffering from substance use disorder. For instance, by May 2016 all first responders in Huntington and the surrounding areas were carrying and utilizing naloxone on a daily basis.

Our plateau with overdoses hit in 2017. In Cabell County, population 95,000, we saw 1,831 nonfatal overdoses and 202 overdose deaths. 80-85% of those overdoses were in the city limits of Huntington, the county seat. With these basic statistics it is estimated that the average firefighter in Huntington saw and dealt with up to five overdose deaths per month during that year. Keep in mind, these deaths were mostly young people. Some were even classmates and friends of the responding firefighters.

The following year, 2018, the statistics indicated programs that were being initiated were making a difference in the lives of those suffering from substance use disorder and their families. The nonfatal overdoses for Cabell County were down 41%, while overdose deaths were down approximately 25%.

Yet, with positive changes being made, it remained evident that we were just beginning to scratch the surface. Our first responders where a neglected group, working diligently on the front lines with little training on what substance use disorder is and why their lifesaving efforts only kept people alive in the moment, not long term. Enduring trauma after trauma, many firefighters and police officers suffer from compassion fatigue and PTSD. At no time was this more obvious than when the Huntington Fire Department lost a firefighter in early October 2018 to suicide. Other first responder agencies in the surrounding communities have also lost members to suicide.

A New Solution for Compassion Fatigue

The City of Huntington applied for a Bloomberg Philanthropies' Mayors Challenge Grant in the fall of 2017. The goal was to tackle a difficult challenge facing our city in an innovative and replicable way. We proposed to address compassion fatigue among first responders. Huntington received the grant, and in June 2019 the Compass Navigating Wellness program was officially launched. A comprehensive program, Compass is designed to ensure that every first responder is equipped with the resources and support necessary to build personal resiliency and to cultivate a culture of wellness within their department and across the community as a whole.

With approximately 180 firefighters and police officers in Huntington, the first task for Compass was imbedding a mental wellness coach and a physical wellness

coach in the departments. Building a relationship and trust with first responders has been key. Through the use of surveys and focus groups, Compass staff identified that triggers for occupational stress, trauma, and compassion fatigue were much broader than just responding to drug overdose deaths. Much like an iceberg, the opioid epidemic toll was visible. What was below the surface was greater and involved a multitude of causes such as COVID-19, lack of personnel, relationship/marriage issues, and community perception, to name a few.

Designed by first responders for fire responders, the innovative program provides mental and physical wellness services. Mental fitness services include behavioral health education, referrals to vetted providers, coaching sessions, training, critical stress intervention management, and mental health check-ins. Physical fitness services include chiropractic services, nutrition consultations, acupuncture, massage therapy, coaching/workout programs, and body composition measurements.

Programming is developed and delivered by the imbedded mental and physical wellness coaches and is supported by ad-hoc specialists. The trusted coaches directly engage with first responders doing ride-alongs, sharing meals, and responding on difficult calls when needed. Their presence has increased engagement and has established feedback loops to ensure programming is aligned with first responders' preferences and needs. They also attend activities delivered by experts who come to the Compass Center to provide services like yoga, jujitsu, and chiropractic and therapeutic massage. Subject matter experts provide training on topics identified through feedback and data.

Even though COVID-19 initially slowed the progress of this unique program, early data indicates that Compass is having a positive impact. Many of the first responders were skeptical at first, having come up through the ranks with an attitude that dealing with trauma is their job and seeking assistance for "bad calls" or discussing mental health issues is a sign of weakness. Yet the stigma surrounding mental health conversations and assistance is slowly lifting in Huntington.

By the third quarter of 2022 data indicated that 73% of all police officers and firefighters were regularly utilizing Compass services. At least 1,863 coach interactions were facilitated annually and 52% of the total workforce have had a meaningful engagement (15 minutes or more) with a Compass coach within the previous three months.

An independent evaluation revealed that Compass has increased job satisfaction and improved soft skills. First responders that utilized Compass report greater job satisfaction and an increase in their ability to manage relationships, solve problems, and acknowledge and discuss mental and physical issues.

The Compass team has also assisted the leadership of both the fire and police department in implementing new job-wide policies geared toward normalizing mental and physical wellness. Both departments implemented new critical incident policies and also plan on implementing policies requiring mental health check-ins annually in the near future.

The Compass model is replicable and can be applied to different environments to yield meaningful results. We are frequently asked how to build a similar successful program. Placing the right people, in the right role, following the right process, is a recipe for success. Here are a few basic steps.

1. Assemble a working group of stakeholders who are respected, credible, and influential. This group should be a "safe place" where members can discuss issues candidly and in confidence.
2. Conduct focus groups with the target population to help identify and inform intervention strategies. Update frequently enough to identify trends and iterate intervention strategies accordingly.
3. When hiring coaches, they must understand the necessary soft skills to align with the workplace culture of the departments. Approach engagements by listening first, without an agenda. City leadership should support the coaches and give them time to build relationships.

Our first responders put their lives on the line day in and day out will little thanks. Huntington built the Compass program because we believe that healthier first responders can better serve their community. As a previous fire chief, I imagine a fire service where programs like Compass are the norm, not the exception or a luxury. I imagine a fire service where providing a mental health program is a basic function of local government, just like an apparatus maintenance program.

For more information on Compass Navigating Wellness, visit **https://compasshuntington.com/** or contact Austin Sanders, program manager, at **sandersa@huntingtonwv.gov**.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jan Rader joined the Huntington (WV) Fire Department in August 1994 and became the first woman to reach the rank of chief for a career department in West Virginia. She holds a Regents Bachelor of Arts degree from Marshall University and an associate degree of science in nursing from Ohio University. Rader was featured in the 2017 documentary "Heroin(e)" by Netflix and was chosen as one of *Time Magazine's* 100 most influential people in 2018. She retired from the Huntington Fire Department in 2022 and currently serves as the director of the Mayor's Council of Public Health & Drug Control Policy.

JOIN THE NATIONAL FIREFIGHTER REGISTRY

By Rick Markley

Conducting informative, accurate, and statistically valid research is difficult. Great care must be taken in selecting the research objectives, who and how many subjects are studied, how the data is collected, how the data is analyzed, and so on. This level of care helps ensure the findings accurately reflect what is truly happening, and not just a random blip.

For example, if researchers wanted to know which brand of vehicle firefighters were most likely to buy, simply jotting down what vehicles they observe in one fire department's parking lot is not enough. Here, researchers have two basic options to learn real brand preference: 1) use a proven process to ensure a sufficient number of random subjects were sampled to draw generalizable conclusions, or 2) attempt to record every vehicle at every fire department.

While learning if firefighters prefer one vehicle brand over another may be important to automakers, it doesn't hold much sway for firefighters.

Cancer, on the other hand, can have a major impact on firefighters. It has the potential to touch the lives of most everyone in the fire service, so getting the research right matters. Last year the International Agency for Research on Cancer reclassified the occupation of firefighter as a Group 1 Known Human Carcinogen – the same cancer-risk classification as tobacco smoke and asbestos exposure. To bring that point home, 75% of the names added to the International Association of Fire Fighters' memorial wall in 2022 were firefighters who died from occupational cancer.

Understanding the relationship between being a firefighter and the risk of cancer is critical to lowering that risk. In the past several decades there has been a lot of good research done on firefighting exposures and the relationship between firefighting and cancer. That has led to safer practices to lower exposures, more cancer prevention efforts, and better policies to help those diagnosed with cancer.

While many of these studies involved firefighters from individual departments or regions, researchers have been unable to look at cancer in a broad range of firefighters across the entire country.

In 2018 Congress recognized this research gap; it mandated and funded the creation of the National Firefighter Registry (NFR). The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), a part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, was put in charge of building and operating the NFR.

The NFR provides a way for firefighters who may be diagnosed with cancer to make sure that researchers know they were involved in firefighting. The NFR is open to all firefighters, including volunteer, part-time, and paid on-call firefighters — historically understudied groups in cancer research. The approach NIOSH is taking is similar to recording every vehicle at every fire department, but with the caveat that participation is voluntary. Hence, the more firefighters who enroll in the NFR, the more NIOSH can learn about their cancer risk.

This is key to the non-career firefighting community because we are more difficult to study than are our career counterparts. When a non-career firefighter is diagnosed with cancer, it is more likely that their primary non-firefighting occupation would be reported to the state cancer registry rather than their volunteer fire service. The NFR helps fill the missing piece by connecting its information reported by participating firefighters with any present or future cancer diagnoses reported to state cancer registries across the entire U.S.

Registration in the NFR is now open to anyone who is or has ever been a firefighter — career or volunteer, structural or wildland, public or private. But getting from a Congressional mandate in 2018 to a launch in 2023 was no small feat. This is a big deal for the fire service, and it had to be done right.

The team of NIOSH scientists and IT professionals had to build all the infrastructure necessary to securely collect and house the data. Because researchers need to know things like work history, lifestyle choices, and health history, the site had to meet the strictest security regulations.

After building the enrollment system, NIOSH spent several months testing it with hundreds of fire service professionals. This allowed NIOSH to fine-tune the system and address minor glitches to ensure optimal performance. Now, the system is open for enrollment, with a goal to enroll 200,000 or more participants over the next few years.

Here's what to expect when you go to register.

- Go to **NFR.cdc.gov.**
- Set up an account that is protected with an email address (preferably your personal email), password, and at least one other verification (like a text message to your mobile phone).
- Complete the questions that appear

on each page. They will cover your firefighting work history; any pertinent health history; lifestyle factors like sleep, exercise, and alcohol and tobacco use; health and wellness preventative programs; and fireground exposure risks.

- Click submit, log out, and you are done.

For most, the survey can be completed in less than 30 minutes — I did mine in 15. If you need to stop and come back, the system will save your progress so you can pick back up where you left off.

The best part is, when you are done, you are completely registered. Unlike exposure-trackers, you won't have to go back into the system unless there are changes in your life such as new fire department roles and responsibilities. NIOSH plans to send NFR participants a prompt every year or so to update any changes or provide additional information, but these will not impact the ability to connect your information to potential cancer diagnoses from state cancer registries in the future. And although information from the follow-up surveys can be very useful to NIOSH scientists, basic registration can be considered a "set it and forget it" tool. NIOSH will collect information on future cancer diagnoses from the states.

The volunteer fire service makes a huge difference in their communities every day. Now, we can have a big impact on firefighter cancer research. Our numbers are significant, and by joining the NFR we can greatly improve the scientific understanding of firefighters' cancer risk and whether that cancer risk varies for volunteer firefighters.

Firefighting is hard. Research is hard. Fighting cancer is hard. Signing up for the NFR is not hard, but it is one small way you can make a difference for yourself, your family, and your fellow firefighters.

Disclaimer: The findings and conclusions in this article are those of the author 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 AUTHOR

Rick Markley is a paid on-call firefighter and a career editor who has served as editor-in-chief of two firefighting publications. He is on the Science Alliance and Firefighter Behavioral Health Association boards and volunteers for Firefighter Close Calls. He is working with NIOSH to encourage non-career firefighters to join NFR.

The Importance of Getting Help Early to Stay Strong for Yourself, Your Family, and Your Department

By Thomas Britt

Firefighters are regularly exposed to potentially traumatic events, including difficult fire casualties, automobile accidents, various medical emergencies, and natural disasters, in addition to operational stressors of high workload, shiftwork, and time pressure. These types of stressors have the potential to result in firefighters developing mental health problems that if left untreated can result in secondary problems such alcohol and drug abuse, as well as family consequences, including divorce. Studies show that firefighters are at an increased risk for mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder because of events they encounter doing their duty compared to the rest of the general population.

Importantly, firefighters are embedded in highly cohesive departments that work together to accomplish difficult mission objectives. Therefore, firefighters are highly responsive to evaluations and feedback from their fellow department members and leaders. Furthermore, firefighters often have the expectation that they will remain resilient in the face of stressors they encounter so they can face the next challenge with their department. All of these factors can create an environment where firefighters are hesitant to seek help for problems that develop because of the stigma involved in both admitting one has a problem and then getting treatment for that problem.

Facing Down Stigma

Firefighters may experience three types of stigma surrounding recognition and treatment for mental health difficulties. The first is career-related stigma where they are worried that if they admit a mental health problem and get treatment for that problem their career will be negatively impacted in some way, either through a poor performance evaluation or not being able to get a desired position. The second type of stigma involves how the firefighter will be treated by his or her peers and leaders, such as being viewed negatively or not selected for difficult tasks. The third type of stigma might be the most important and that is self-stigma. Because of the expectations for resilience under even extreme stress, firefighters might not want to admit to themselves that they have a problem because they might feel like they're weak or not able to handle problems on their own.

Importantly, those in high-risk occupations, like firefighters, who get mental health treatment when their problems are relatively minor are likely to remain more resilient than those who wait for symptoms to interfere with their performance and well-being prior to getting help. Studies suggest that for employees experiencing high levels of stress following difficult work events, getting help within a month following the event can reduce the likelihood of a longer-term mental health problem. In a study involving military personnel, those who made the decision to get mental health treatment on their own did not experience any negative career outcomes. It is only when symptoms get worse and end up affecting mission-related performance that negative career outcomes can occur.

In terms of the potential concern of being treated differently by fellow department members for getting help, the climate surrounding psychological health in the department can have a major impact on firefighter perceptions. Firefighters embedded in departments that stigmatize and devalue mental health concerns are likely to report increased stigma for getting treatment and a stronger preference for trying to handle problems themselves. In addition, a negative climate for mental health may discourage the firefighter from reaching out to fellow department members when experiencing a problem or getting help from a mental health professional.

However, if firefighters believe they are embedded in departments that back the use of mental health treatment to address problems that are harming the performance or personal well-being of the firefighter, perceptions of stigma will be lower and beliefs about mental health treatment will be more positive. Firefighters should also be more likely to reach out to fellow department members for help and to seek treatment from a professional if necessary. In fact, studies with military personnel suggest that a more positive department climate for mental health is associated with a reduction in stigma over time.

A positive climate for mental health within the firefighter's department should also help reduce the self-stigma associated with admitting a problem and getting treatment. Normalizing the difficulties that can occur following potentially traumatic events communicates to firefighters that recognizing symptoms they experience should not be interpreted as a lack of resilience on the part of the firefighter, but rather as the first step in taking action to improve one's mental health in order to benefit the firefighter, their family, and their department.

Recognizing When It is Time to Get Help

Given the different types of stigma that may exist for admitting a problem and getting treatment for that problem, and the expectations for resilience, those in high-risk occupations may have a preference for self-reliance, or handling problems themselves. The use of self-reliance to address symptoms is fine if firefighters are able to successfully address the symptoms through their own coping strategies, such as seeking social support or help from fellow unit members. However, the use of self-reliance becomes problematic when it is not working, as indicated by the problem getting worse and negatively affecting the firefighter and their family.

To use an analogy involving physical symptoms, if you sprain your ankle, you may be able deal with it on your own by icing it and resting it. If you've sprained your ankle severely, you may try to address it, but it keeps hurting more. Then you may need to go to the doctor for professional help to treat it.

Because of the highly cohesive nature of firefighter departments, it is important that peers and leaders receive training in recognizing mental health symptoms, supporting firefighters, and recommending treatment when necessary. The International Association of Fire Fighters and National Volunteer Firefighter Council have a number of training programs that prepare all firefighters to be sources of support for fellow department members showing signs of struggle. Studies show these programs are effective at increasing utilization of behavioral health by firefighters. Ultimately, fire departments themselves are in the best position to get their firefighters the help they need.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Thomas Britt is a professor of psychology and the Prisma Health Sciences Center research director at Clemson University. He is also the editor-in-chief of the journal *Military Psychology*. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Florida in social psychology before serving active duty in the U.S. Army as a research psychologist from 1994-1999. His current research programs investigate how meaningful work, coping strategies, and other factors promote resilience among employees in high stress occupations, and how stigma and other barriers to care influence employees in high stress occupations seeking needed mental health treatment.

ACTING AS ONE VOICE:

USFA Strategies for Safer Communities and Stronger Fire Departments

By Dr. Lori Moore-Merrell

This year [2023] marks the 50th anniversary of the America Burning Report that told the story of the fire problem in America at a time when more than 12,000 people were dying in fires annually. While we have made great strides in reducing the threat and the death toll in the nation, America still has a fire problem. The fire and emergency medical services throughout this nation must continue to work to prevent fire and to reduce the risks associated with fires that do occur. We have the science that informs decision makers. Now, it is time to act on what we know matters.

In 2022, we had nearly 2,500 fire deaths, many that occurred in multiples of twos, threes, fours, and more across this nation mostly in poor communities of color. The same is true for the more than 850 deaths that have occurred in the first three-and-a-half months of 2023. This situation is one of the greatest inequities we face. Safe and affordable homes should not be a mutually exclusive choice. While addressing equity, we must also address personal accountability in fire safety practices. We must teach individuals to make themselves savable by observing well-known safety practices like having working smoke alarms and knowing their path of egress from any building they are in but especially where they live.

In structure fires today, fire moves fast due to light weight building materials and the vast amounts of plastics, foams, and other synthetic materials in our homes and businesses. Often the building itself may fail long before firefighters arrive, particularly in structures not built to codes and standards. Despite our vast technological advances, the fact remains that during a fire today, you have the least amount of time to safely exit your burning home than at any time in history. Your chance of dying in a fire today is higher than 40 years ago. Science-informed codes and standards that are adopted, implemented, and enforced in structures are an occupant's first line of safety in a fire. The second is having working smoke alarms, self-closing doors and residential sprinklers in multi-family and public housing, and knowing a path of egress so that you can get out and stay out. As firefighters arrive, they will engage expeditiously to intervene to suppress and stop the fire and will provide additional instructions.

To better communicate and amplify these messages, the U.S Fire Administration (USFA) launched the Fire and Life Safety Communicators' Initiative (FLSCI) in the spring of 2022. This initiative is intended to bring the nation's fire service communicators together monthly to discuss a common plan for messaging. The communicators share ideas, resources, and influence to change the narrative of the alarming number of fire deaths and curtail the amount of property loss throughout the U.S. The FLSCI has created a shared theme calendar so that the full power of the fire service can get behind the messaging and push information down to local departments then out to the public to change fire safety behaviors. Find the calendar online at **www.usfa.fema.gov/about/fire-life-safety-communicators-initiative.html**.

Beyond our national communication collaboration, in October 2022, the first USFA Summit on Fire Prevention

and Control was held at the National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, MD. Leaders from all national fire service organizations assembled to participate in a roundtable with top political officials from the White House and the Department of Homeland Security. A result of the Summit was the establishment of a Fire Service National Strategy that included prominent national organizations agreeing to speak with one voice on the issues. There are six National Strategy goals:

1. Prepare all firefighters for the climate-driven increase in wildfires in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) by providing them with the proper training and equipment.
2. Invest in a national apprenticeship program to address the shortage of firefighters and to make the fire service more diverse and inclusive.
3. Establish a comprehensive firefighter cancer strategy that invests in research, provides access to screening for firefighters, and reduces and eliminates PFAS exposure.
4. Provide behavioral health resources and suicide prevention initiatives for all firefighters.
5. Create safer communities by implementing and enforcing codes and standards, especially in the WUI and underserved and vulnerable populations providing affordable and fire-safe housing.
6. Elevate the fire service in federal policy development to an equal basis with law enforcement.

Based on one of our Fire Service National Strategy goals, the USFA will stand with our national partners to address the physical and behavioral health challenges that continue to affect our responders. For example, we will be working with our federal partners at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) to continue to study personal protective equipment and to assure we can share data with the National Firefighter [Cancer] Registry. We will also work with our fire service partners to promote and expand behavioral health resilience training programs to assure that responders have the resources they need to stay healthy both physically and mentally.

In addition to addressing the fire problem and the goals in the National Strategy, we must also prepare responders for the changing landscape of *All Hazards*. Our fire and emergency medical services (EMS) departments large and small, career, combination, or volunteer must also continue to prepare to respond to the consequence of the actions of violent extremists and during civil unrest that will inevitably occur. This preparedness may include continued or new methods of training with our law enforcement partners for integrated response. NFPA 3000 provides the standard for developing a plan for response to active shooter and hostile events.

Like many other federal agencies, our National Fire Data Center along with local fire and EMS departments is modernizing using advancements in technology and sensors, as well as non-traditional data sources coupled with community risk assessments, and historic response data to better understand the reality of today's risk environment including the impact of climate change on our resources.

For the USFA specifically, modernization will address the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) system. NFIRS has not been updated since 2002 when it became web based. The nation's fire service needs a platform that will use 21st-century technology for procuring, assembling, analyzing, and reporting information from available data. The modernization efforts will be twofold:

1. Build a new cloud-based system with modernized data capture, collection, assembly, analytics, and reporting capability.
2. Review, revamp, and redeploy a new streamlined data standard to be relevant, timely, and perpetuate good quality data entry and clean data capture while leveraging many data sources that already exist outside the fire service.

Finally, together we will continue to address diversity, equity, and inclusion in the fire service. This is a priority, and I believe that together with the fire service we have the ability and the desire to lead and implement programs to create an inclusive, diverse, and psychologically safe workplace. We can teach cultural awareness of the challenges faced by firefighters from underrepresented groups. I believe that there is a growing willingness to challenge and transform the harmful aspects of the traditional fire service culture.

It is my absolute honor to serve as your Fire Administrator. USFA stands ready to engage with our industry, and I look forward to working with you. Together, we can take action to change the trajectory of the ever-increasing fire threat in America and create resilient landscapes, safe affordable housing, and healthy responders for generations to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Lori Moore-Merrell was appointed by President Joseph Biden as the U.S. Fire Administrator on October 25, 2021. Prior to her appointment, she served nearly three years as the president and CEO of the International Public Safety Data Institute, which she founded after retiring from a 26-year tenure as a senior executive in the International Association of Fire Fighters. She began her fire service career in 1987 as a fire department paramedic in the City of Memphis (TN) Fire Department. She is a Doctor of Public Health and data scientist, whose work has changed fire and EMS deployment throughout the world.

Risk-Based Response and What it Means for Hazmat Emergencies

By Rick Edinger

Risk-Based Response (RBR) is a systematic approach to managing hazardous materials (hazmat) emergencies that uses information and tools available to incident commanders to make decisions based on the facts, science, and circumstances of an incident. RBR was developed to provide better information from which to make critical decisions during hazmat incidents, resulting in safer and more effective operations.

Dr. Ludwig Benner Jr. developed the concept of RBR while working at the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) in the early 1970s. During his studies of hazmat incidents, he observed that a lack of proper size-up, poor incident analysis, and overly aggressive tactics were placing emergency responders in unnecessary danger. Resulting from this analysis, he perceived that hazmat incidents shouldn't be managed with the same tactics used during firefighting operations and developed the concept of RBR to assist in incident management.

NFPA 470, *Hazardous Materials/Weapons of Mass Destruction Standard for Responders* defines risk-based response as a "systematic process, based on the facts, science, and circumstances of the incident, by which responders analyze a problem involving hazardous materials/weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to assess the hazards and consequences, develop an incident action plan (IAP), and evaluate the effectiveness of the plan."

RBR is a process of acquiring and applying information to incident management decision-making. It is not a checklist of things to do. Evaluating the facts, science, and circumstances of an incident allows for the development of sound incident objectives (what are the primary things we're trying to get done) and application of effective tactical operations (how do we accomplish those objectives?).

Having established the foundation of the RBR process, Benner then developed a decision-making framework to assist incident commanders with RBR assessment and incident management functions. That framework is the D.E.C.I.D.E Process. The premise of this process is that all hazmat emergencies are a sequence of related, cascading events which can be analyzed to predict possible outcomes. Benner's work proposed that the earlier that responders can intervene in this sequence in a proactive and safe manner, the more likely the event will be controlled with better outcomes. This philosophy is the essence of making risk-based response decisions.

The D.E.C.I.D.E Process was developed to assist with predictive analysis, developing incident action plans, and ongoing management of an incident. Using this process responders should:

1. **D**etect the presence of a hazardous material.
This is done by conducting a thorough size-up and using knowledge of hazardous materials characteristics, container shapes, detection, labeling and placarding clues.

2. **E**stimate the likely harm without intervention (doing nothing is always an option).
This step involves determining what the progression of cascading events would result in if no intervention is attempted. If doing nothing is not an acceptable choice, then additional response options should be considered.

3. **C**hoose the best response option.
The next step involves using the prediction of potential outcomes made in Step 2 to decide what actions are needed to mitigate the incident with the intent to minimize bad outcomes for the public and emergency responders. There will often be several action options available during this phase of the analysis.

4. **I**dentify action options.
Step 4 requires responders to look at each potential option and estimate the possible gains and losses that could occur with each action. The D.E.C.I.D.E Process is predicated on intervening at the best possible time to stabilize the emergency but in a way that minimizes the risk to emergency responders (i.e., risk-benefit analysis).

5. **D**o the best option.
It's now time to decide on incident objectives and tactics. In choosing the best option, responders should weigh all factors in the incident analysis along with other various organizational influences like duty to respond, risk aversion, available resources (including properly trained personnel), capabilities, and practices.

6 **Evaluate progress.** This is an important step that can be overlooked after a plan is put into action. Even with sound analysis and good decision-making, incidents can deviate from the sequential progression that was predicted. It is very important that incident commanders maintain a high level of awareness of the progress of tactical operations and any unpredicted outcomes that may be occurring. If the primary incident action plan isn't working, adapt to the changing conditions and revise that plan as needed.

Understanding the concepts of risk-based response and employing them as management practices during hazmat incidents has been shown through research to reduce deaths and injuries among emergency responders and result in better incident outcomes. After Benner's studies of hazmat incident outcomes led to the risk-based response approach and the D.E.C.I.D.E Process, he later developed a hazardous materials behavior model named GEBMO. That model reinforced his RBR and D.E.C.I.D.E Process work by mapping the typical behaviors of a hazardous material release. Benner, who passed away in 2021, left a legacy of research which changed the way that firefighters and hazmat responders manage hazardous materials incidents. His work has assisted responders in analyzing hazmat incidents, predicting outcomes, and intervening at the proper time and with the right tactics in a safer and more effective manner.

The National Volunteer Fire Council has developed a Risk-Based Response Train-the-Trainer course that is available for free to emergency responders. Additional information can be found at: **www.nvfc.org/hazmat/**.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chief Rick Edinger has worked in public safety for more than 50 years as a volunteer and career firefighter, medic, and hazmat responder. He currently serves as chair of the NFPA Technical Committee for Hazardous Materials/WMD Response. He retired in 2018 as deputy chief of operations in a large, combination fire and EMS organization in Virginia. Edinger is trained as a hazardous materials technician and served for 25 years as a member of his department's Hazardous Incident Response Team. He holds a bachelor of science degree in fire science technology from Columbia Southern University and is a graduate of the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program.

"Getting Old Ain't for Sissies"

By Roy Smalley

We're not getting any younger. Not just we as individuals, but "us." The fire service. As we attract fewer young recruits and seasoned personnel stay active longer, our average age has climbed to 48, and more firefighters are over 50 than under 30.

"Getting old ain't for sissies," Bette Davis said. While simply aging is easy, aging well – staying strong, healthy, and capable – takes effort. Let's look at three facts that can boost our fire service longevity, allowing us to perform at high levels well into our careers.

FACT#1
Physical decline results more from lifestyle than age.

On average, muscles and bones shrink 5% every decade starting in our 30s. This should be of major concern to firefighters, who need strength and stamina to work a job where trips and falls can fracture weakened bones.

Broken bones aren't as common as sprains and strains. Our risk of those increases with age, as does our recovery time. Meanwhile, joints become stiffer and less tolerant of impact, making crawling, climbing, and reaching tougher.

"Compliant aging" is the idea that resistance is futile, and we should just accept these things are going to happen to us. But all of these changes – all of them – have far more to do with staying sedentary than with getting old.

Listen up, fellow dinosaurs: strength and resilience IS possible well past our "silver years." Muscle and bone can grow at surprisingly old ages, and joints can get healthier, stronger, and more cushioned.

The adage is true – use it or lose it. Avoid exercise and expect feeble arms, rickety knees, and a bad back. If, however, you push past your comfort zone, you can slow time down and choose your retirement date, instead of being forced out of a job you love by a body you don't.

So how do we spend the later years of our fire service careers feeling strong, steady, and fireground ready?

Simply put, getting stronger makes life easier. Muscle is correlated with higher quality of life, and just 30 minutes of weekly strength training lowers all-cause mortality by 10 to 20 percent.

At any age, cardiovascular training improves heat tolerance, blood pressure, and resting heart rate, helping you work better, stay on air longer… and get out of rehab faster.

So training fights the aging process, but training as if we don't age invites calamity. This brings us to our second fact.

FACT #2
Aging bodies need smarter training and better recovery.

Trained older athletes (firefighters are tactical-operational athletes) can continue to perform at high levels – up to 80% of their adult peak, even into their 70s. Our biggest problem isn't performance, it's recovery. As we age, rest days need to be part of the weekly cycle or we risk overuse injuries.

Do a daily "personal 360," checking your physical condition and needs, and sizing up your "fires" – life stressors that can affect how your body responds. If you're approaching flashover, go transitional and reset that fire with "active recovery," a low intensity workout that keeps you moving without stressing your body.

Workouts shouldn't be all-out all the time. Use the "hard - light - medium" principle: The first weekly workout is "hard," with a lighter mid-week, and "medium" effort to finish the cycle. This balances intensity with recovery, and varies work across energy pathways.

For those seeking "gains," evidence shows moderate intensities don't promote soreness-inducing muscle damage yet are still effective at encouraging muscle growth.

Moderate-intensity cardio, too, is hugely beneficial. A 2001 study showed walking briskly (think "breaking a sweat") for 30-minutes four times a week can lower even a sedentary person's heart disease risk to "cardio queen" levels.

This can change the game for firefighters. Being overweight and sedentary (which most of us are, according to the data) compounds our job-related risk of cardiac events. Add age, and you're essentially begging for a heart attack. If we can slash that risk by simply walking, why wouldn't we?

As endurance improves, adding 30- to 60-second intervals of hard effort (think "difficult to talk") improves endurance for fireground tasks like axe work, carrying

heavy patients, or forcing doors, and slows declines in aerobic fitness as much as 50 percent.

De-conditioned personnel are ten times more likely to get hurt. Your overall "conditioning" depends on your strength and your cardiovascular fitness. So don't skip out on either!

Personnel with poor joint mobility and balance are also more likely to get hurt, which brings me to my third fact...

FACT#3
As we get older, small stuff is huge.

Mobile joints and better balance may seem like small stuff, but for aging firefighters they're huge. Think how often fireground tasks require stability – climbing, walking uneven ground, carrying loads. Balance naturally declines with age, and gait studies show that wearing SCBA and boots diminishes it even further. Add tools or a water can, and we old-timers might as well wear pendant alarms for when we've fallen and can't get up.

Fix it with daily single-leg balance practice, and by making balance part of workouts with lunges or tailboard step-ups. A few laps around the bay floor carrying a pail of foam builds balance plus stability and endurance through the "big 3" – the hips, back, and shoulders, which suffer most as we age.

Immobility through these areas can make it harder to crawl, climb a ladder, or pull ceiling, so I've included some simple exercises on my web site (**www.roysmalley.us**) to help you start fixing it. Feel free to reach out if you have any questions.

"We live in a youth-obsessed culture," Jack Lalanne once said, "that wants you to believe once you hit 40 you can expect only a steep, continuous physical decline." If we resist the idea that a "steep, continuous physical decline" is inevitable, we might surprise even ourselves with what we're capable of. That, compounded by our experience and wisdom, can make us "dinosaurs" some of the most valuable assets in the fire service.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roy Smalley, a certified personal trainer and co-owner of Center Circle Fitness, serves as a firefighter and health & safety officer on Mayville (WI) Fire Department, where he and his wife raise their two adopted children. Roy is online at **www.roysmalley.us** where your questions and comments are always welcome.

Don't be Shocked by Li-ion Battery Incidents

By Tom Miller

In almost 40 years in the fire service, I don't think I've ever seen a "hotter" topic (no pun intended – well, yeah, pun intended) than the issue of electric vehicles (EVs), energy storage systems (ESS), and lithium-ion (Li-ion) batteries. Their emerging prevalence has impacted the entire continuum of the fire service, from conducting risk assessments to fire cause and origin investigations. Sadly, deaths across the country are now being attributed to incidents that started from these types of energy storage systems.

Understanding the Hazards

Li-ion battery incidents pose several key hazards to first responders. The first hazard is the rapid development of a thermal event that can and may lead to a fire. That resulting fire may have lots of secondary hazards, not the least of which are high heat (1700° to 2000°F), fragmentation or "ejection" of battery components, and the emission of toxic byproducts of combustion such as hydrogen fluoride or phosphoryl fluoride. Then there is the issue of "stranded energy" which may pose a hazard of reignition or electric shock. Some EVs may have 100 kWh of energy stored in them and some commercial applications may have up to 3,000 kWh or more.

I would be remiss if I didn't state and stress that it is not just fires that responders have to deal with in regards to these energy systems. Li-ion batteries don't like water/moisture and incidents such as immersion in water or flooding, damage from external energy such as in a crash or accident, or other adverse events may lead to responses. Lastly, there is the burning question (oops! I did it again) of, "What do we do with it after the incident is over?" That question is going to have to be resolved within each AHJ and, from experience, that answer varies widely depending on where you are located.

Be Prepared for Response

Like it or not, this technology is out there and is not going away. To make sure your department is prepared, start with a practical risk assessment to determine the hazards that they may potentially face. That risk assessment should look at each of the eight domains shown in the graphic below. For many that concept is a foreign idea, but it should be the basis of properly planning, training, and preparing for incidents in your area – not just those involving Li-ion battery devices.

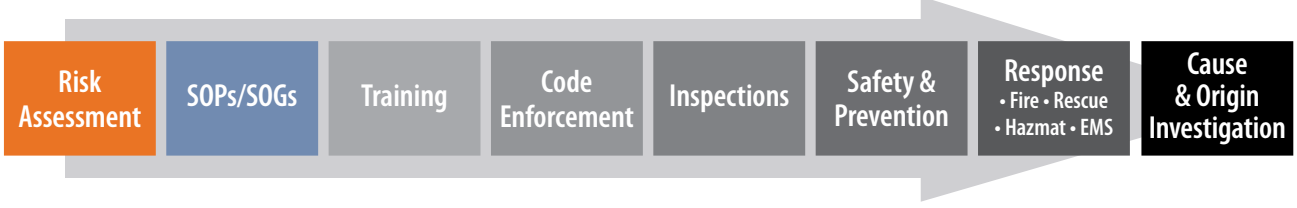
Gather information from your DMV on EVs registered in your zip codes; look at building permit data for solar installations with back-up battery units; drive your area – see what you didn't see before, i.e. wind turbines, solar panels, etc. Make the topic part of your life safety prevention and education events. Work to educate those you protect.

Once you know your risk(s), provide training for your members and automatic and mutual aid companies. There are online trainings and operational level hands-on trainings available in many jurisdictions. However, I would caution "buyer beware," as there are some who are charging as much as $14,000 a day for training that left some agencies with a bad taste in their budgets and their member's minds.

When considering which training program to use or adopt, go back to your risk assessment. I would suggest you ask the following questions:

- **What are my risks?** EVs, personal mobility devices, home energy storage systems, commercial energy storage systems, other?
- **What are my response expectations?** Does the training have practical applicability to the needs of my response area?
- **Where will we go to find the training we need?** Online? State training? Regional fire school or conference? Other?
- **How has that training been vetted?** Has the material been peer reviewed? Has the material been tested and/or accredited?

There are a lot of great resources out there with information that first responders can use to train and prepare for incidents involving these energy systems – whether



it involves power tools, e-bikes, EVs, or home energy storage all the way up to commercial applications of energy storage systems. The NVFC, NFPA, U.S. Fire Administration, IAFC, IAFF, General Motors, state training entities, and others have made getting information out to frontline first responders a priority.

Once you decide on your training program, the next step is to develop SOPs/SOGs so that your members have an expected plan and mode of response to these types of incidents. The NVFC has a draft SOP/SOG that your organization can use as a basis for general response. Your SOP/SOG should be a "living" document that can be updated as new information or technology is received.

Your SOP/SOG should also take into account resources that will be needed and/or used in an incident response. There are specialized containers, nozzles, suppression "blankets," specially engineered plugs, "dumpsters/immersion tanks," and other tactical equipment out there that departments are using. Each organization has to decide what mode/method they want to employ. For many fire departments, it is a budgetary issue. Whatever strategy and tactic you put in your SOP/SOG, it is your responsibility to ensure that all of your members are properly trained on the deployment of that tactical resource.

In summary, as with all risks we face, how you prepare will directly – either positively or negatively – impact how you and your department will perform should you encounter an incident involving Li-ion batteries or energy storage systems. Proper planning and preparedness can and will go a long way in ensuring responder safety and outcomes with minimal negative consequences.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Miller is a 38-year fire service veteran. He is a Pro-Board certified Firefighter II, Fire Instructor III, and Hazardous Materials Technician & Incident Commander, and is state certified to the Technician Level in various aspects of technical rescue. He is the West Virginia Director to the NVFC and serves as chair of its Hazardous Materials Response Committee and Pandemic Response Task Group. Miller has a bachelor of science degree from West Virginia State University and a master of arts degree from the School of Education and Professional Studies at Marshall University.

The Work-Life-Volunteer Balance:
TIPS FOR SELF-CARE AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

By Dr. Candice McDonald

According to the National Fire Protection Association, volunteer firefighters in the U.S. donate $46.9 billion dollars in time served in their communities. These professionals operate in an altruistic nature and sacrifice time from their personal lives for the well-being of others. Even without a shortage of volunteers, firefighting is one of the most stressful professions. Because of this, it is critical to protect what I have dubbed the "work-life-volunteer balance." Without a proper balance between these competing priorities, volunteers can experience burnout and other challenges to their mental and physical well-being.

Research shows that on-the-job stress can lead to the following:

- memory disorders
- mood disorders
- reduced cognitive functioning
- impaired immune system
- cardiovascular disease
- gastrointestinal complications
- changes in endocrine factors[1]

In addition, job stressors for those in the volunteer fire service may result in sleep deprivation, high levels of occupational and traumatic stress, poor psychological well-being, and time conflicts volunteer firefighters face between home and department life.[2] These in turn can lead to high turnover rates and compassion fatigue, which can impact the level of compassion a firefighter shows for the public they are serving.

As training demands and call volume for volunteer first responders increase, so does the risk of negative impacts from these job stressors. Work-life-volunteer balance must be a priority for fire departments looking to retain volunteers long-term. Work-life-volunteer balance is a critical self-care tool and integral to the health of the volunteer and the success of the department. Creating a culture that embraces a positive work-life-volunteer balance starts at the top. Leaders that acknowledge the need to reduce volunteer-related stress and promote self-care techniques will create a healthier fire department.

Here are six work-life-volunteer balance tips for self-care:

#1 Prioritize & Plan with a Purpose

Be realistic with the time you can commit to your fire department and communicate your plan of commitment with your officers. Talk with your loved ones about home-life expectations. Block time on your calendar for uninterrupted house chores and family and/or social time. Plan your free time away from the department doing quality activities with your loved ones that you enjoy. Communicate with your officers in advance if you have a family or work commitment that needs to take priority.

#2 Find Your Personal Purpose

Often being a firefighter becomes an individual's identity, their purpose in life. It is important for individuals to understand that they are more than a firefighter. They may be a spouse, parent, child, sibling, or friend. Their religion could be their greater purpose in life. The fire service, like any industry, will let individuals down at times. If one's identity is based solely on being a firefighter, they may feel lost when they are let down or retire. It is important to define your life's purpose and how you want to be remembered. What are your hobbies, dreams, and goals outside of the fire service? Are you allowing yourself time for purposeful living? Having a personal purpose outside of the fire service provides an outlet to de-stress.

#3 Protect and Nurture Your Emotional Health

Over 30% of firefighters report a concern for depression.[3] Firefighters, by nature, tend to be giving to others but may neglect their own emotional health. To have work-life-volunteer balance in the fire service, it is important that your emotional health is a priority. Meeting your emotional needs will lead to greater levels of energy, reduced mood swings, and patience with your loved ones and the community you are serving.

Find healthy ways to process difficult situations in your personal, work, and volunteer life. Call a trusted friend or fellow church member, write in a journal, join a support group, or consider talking with a counselor. If you find yourself in a place where you are unsure where to turn, the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) provides the First Responder Helpline, offered through Provident, to assist members and their families with a variety of behavioral health issues and work-life stresses. The NVFC also offers a Directory of Behavioral Health Professionals ready and willing to assist emergency responders and a toolkit to help department leaders promote and foster well-being among their members. Find all of these resources at **www.nvfc.org/help**.

#4 Cut the Clutter

Cut the clutter at work, at home, and in the fire department. Moving towards a life simplification does not have to be complicated, but it can help balance the work-life-volunteer scales. Studies show that if your home is full of clutter, it can impact whether your time at home feels restorative or stressful. An overabundance of clutter can make other things in your life feel more chaotic and disorderly.

Small investments of time lead to big accomplishments over time. Set a timer and spend one hour a day addressing clutter. Dedicate that time to cleaning out one small thing at a time, such as a kitchen drawer or closet. Find ways in the workplace and at the fire department to make things simpler. Use technology and apps to reduce overwhelming paper clutter, such as SOPs, medical protocols, and scheduling.

#5 Cut Conflict with Candor

Stressful work situations can lead to high emotions and snarky remarks. This can impact home, work, and volunteer life. Have candid conversations in your personal, work, and volunteer life to positively resolve conflict. Unresolved conflict takes up space and energy, which can lead to an imbalance. Learn to talk calmly about misunderstandings and wrongdoings. Enter these conversations with a desire to leave with peace. Seek a trusted advisor to help resolve any conflicts that cannot be addressed on their own. Learn to let go and not hold on to resentment. Find ways to nurture your personal, work, and volunteer relationships. Being positively connected to those you depend on can lead to a higher level of balance. Social connections are just as important as sleep and nutrition.

#6 Participate in Physical Fitness

Physical fitness has been proven to improve mental health and reduce stress. Engaging in routine exercise may help reduce feelings of depression and anxiety while improving brain health and reducing the risk of disease. The CDC indicates there are positive impacts on brain health right after a session of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. Engaging in exercise has also been shown to improve sleep. Physical fitness can be something you do alone or with a friend or loved one. Fire departments looking to improve health and fitness within their organization to support their firefighters can take the NVFC's virtual course *Creating a Health and Fitness Program in Your Department*.

Taking time for self-care and finding the right work-life-volunteer balance will help you be the best you can be in all aspects of your life. This benefits not only you, but also your loved ones, your fire department, and the community you serve.

[1] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5579396/

[2] https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4283&context=dissertations

[3] https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4283&context=dissertations

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Candice McDonald is the deputy CEO of the NVFC and has two decades of experience as a firefighter, EMT, inspector, and instructor. She holds an associate degree in health and human services, a bachelor's degree in organizational management, a master's degree in organizational leadership, and a doctorate in business administration with a specialty in homeland security.

Healthy Eating on a Budget

By Yvette Graham

Cardiovascular disease is a leading cause of death among firefighters, with obesity as an important risk factor. One behavioral risk factor for heart disease and stroke is an unhealthy diet.[1] The unpredictable schedule of the fire service may lead to fast and unhealthy food choices.

The desire to make healthier food choices is sometimes complicated by the belief that healthy food is not budget friendly. However, there are some easy ways to tame those costs and still make healthy food choices that lead to being a heart-healthy firefighter.

The price of food depends on many factors, and most are out of the consumers' control. Becoming a savvy shopper helps you gain control and save money. According to **MyPlate.gov**, having a plan before you head to the store is key to saving money and choosing healthy food options.

Tips for Meal Planning

1. Start with the concept that meals should reflect a healthy plate. By envisioning MyPlate, meal planning and preparation have a good foundation. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends making half your plate vegetables and fruits. This is also an area that generally is lacking in most American diets.
2. Start off with small changes to meal planning. Even meal planning/prepping for two or three days during the week will have an impact on your budget and ensure there is a healthy meal or snack waiting for your return from that unexpected fire call.

   The small changes will establish good habits and it will be easier to expand planning in the future. MyPlate offers a free Meal Planner calendar to jump start the process, which you can access at **https/go.osu.edu/mealplanner**. This easy-to-use calendar provides flexibility and a quick snapshot of the week's meals. Having a plan provides a roadmap for meals and helps avoid unhealthy options.
3. Select simple recipes using the MyPlate concept in the meal plan. You are more likely to stick to the plan if the ingredients are handy and easy. Hang the plan on the refrigerator or where it is easy to view to serve as a constant reminder of "what's for dinner."

   Make a list of the ingredients you need to buy from the recipes. Do not forget to check the pantry, refrigerator, and freezer for recipe ingredients you already have on-hand. This will save time and money by avoiding buying duplicate items.

Tips for Grocery Shopping

According to MyPlate, while at the grocery store use the following tips to buy healthy options and to save money.

- Check out the store ads or apps before shopping to adapt recipes to include bargain purchases.
- Buy fresh produce when "in season." It costs less and is at peak flavor. Be careful not to over buy to avoid waste. A seasonal produce planner can be found at **https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/seasonal-produce-guide.**
- Think about buying fresh, frozen, or canned fruits and vegetables depending on seasonality and store sales. Canned and frozen fruits and vegetables last longer than fresh. They also provide an easy way to make sure half your plate is fruits and vegetables.
- Rice and pasta are generally friendly to the family budget. Try to add whole grains to recipes as a healthier option.
- Buy low sodium and low sugar options when possible. Check the nutrition facts labels to compare products.
- Choose lean cuts of meat like chicken, turkey, or 93% lean ground beef. While eggs prices have gone up, they are still a low-cost item that is easy to make.
- Think about drinking water at meals instead of soda or other sugary drinks. Water contains no calories and can be enhanced by adding fruit and/or vegetables for flavor.
- Skip the chip and cookie aisles to reduce cost and avoid added sugar.
- Try store brand foods options; many people are surprised by the quality and the savings can be significant.
- Track your savings. It adds up over time.

Small Changes Can Make a Big Difference

Making healthy meal and snack decisions and staying on a budget takes some practice. Small changes make a big difference to your health and save you money. Challenge your fire service brothers and sisters to a "Healthy Eating Challenge" for your next department potluck. Who can make the healthiest but tastiest meal, on a set budget?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yvette Graham has been a program specialist of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) supervising the program in NE Ohio for 14 years. EFNEP works with limited-resource families and children to impact food security, encourage healthy food choices, and increase physical activity. She is a licensed independent social worker supervisor in the state of Ohio. In addition, she works on various federal, state, and local initiatives to improve the lives of families.

For more information, contact your local Extension Office. Extension Offices are located in all 50 states and territories and offer FREE services and programming to improve the quality of people's lives. Extension experts focus on healthy eating, money management, food safety, agricultural support, youth development, and much more. To locate an office near you, visit **https://go.osu.edu/extensionofficeslocations**.

Fried Rice with Chicken

Try this tasty recipe. It is easy, healthy, and it only costs about $1.60 a person.

Makes: 4 servings (1 ½ cups per serving)

Preparation Time: 10 minutes

Cooking Time: 15 to 20 minutes

Nutrition Facts
Serving size (without chicken): 1 cup; Calories: 210; Carbohydrates: 29 g; Fiber: 3 g; Fat: 8 g; Saturated fat: 1.5 g; Sodium: 240 mg

Ingredients

2 tablespoons vegetable oil
3 cups cooked and cooled brown rice*
1 carrot, peeled and diced
½ green pepper, diced
½ medium onion, diced
½ cup diced broccoli
2 tablespoons soy sauce
½ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon garlic powder
2 eggs
¾ cup diced, cooked chicken or other meat*

Directions

1. Wash all vegetables.

2. Collect, dice, and measure all ingredients before starting to prepare the recipe.

3. Heat oil in a large skillet over medium heat.

4. Add cooked rice, and cook for 5 minutes, stirring regularly.

5. Stir in carrot, green pepper, onion, broccoli, soy sauce, black pepper, and garlic powder. Cook until vegetables are tender, but still crisp.

6. Remove rice and vegetable mixture from skillet. Put on a clean plate.

7. Break 2 eggs into a small bowl, and beat with a fork.

8. Reduce heat to medium low. Add the eggs to the skillet, and scramble.

9. Once the eggs are cooked, add vegetables and rice back to the skillet, and mix. Add cooked chicken, and stir until thoroughly heated.

10. Refrigerate leftovers within 2 hours. Eat within 3 to 5 days.

** This is a great recipe if you have leftover cooked rice or chicken. If you don't have these on hand, cook them before starting the recipe. Cook the rice according to package directions. Cook ¾ cup of raw, small pieces of meat in 2 teaspoons of vegetable oil over medium heat until fully cooked. Be creative!*

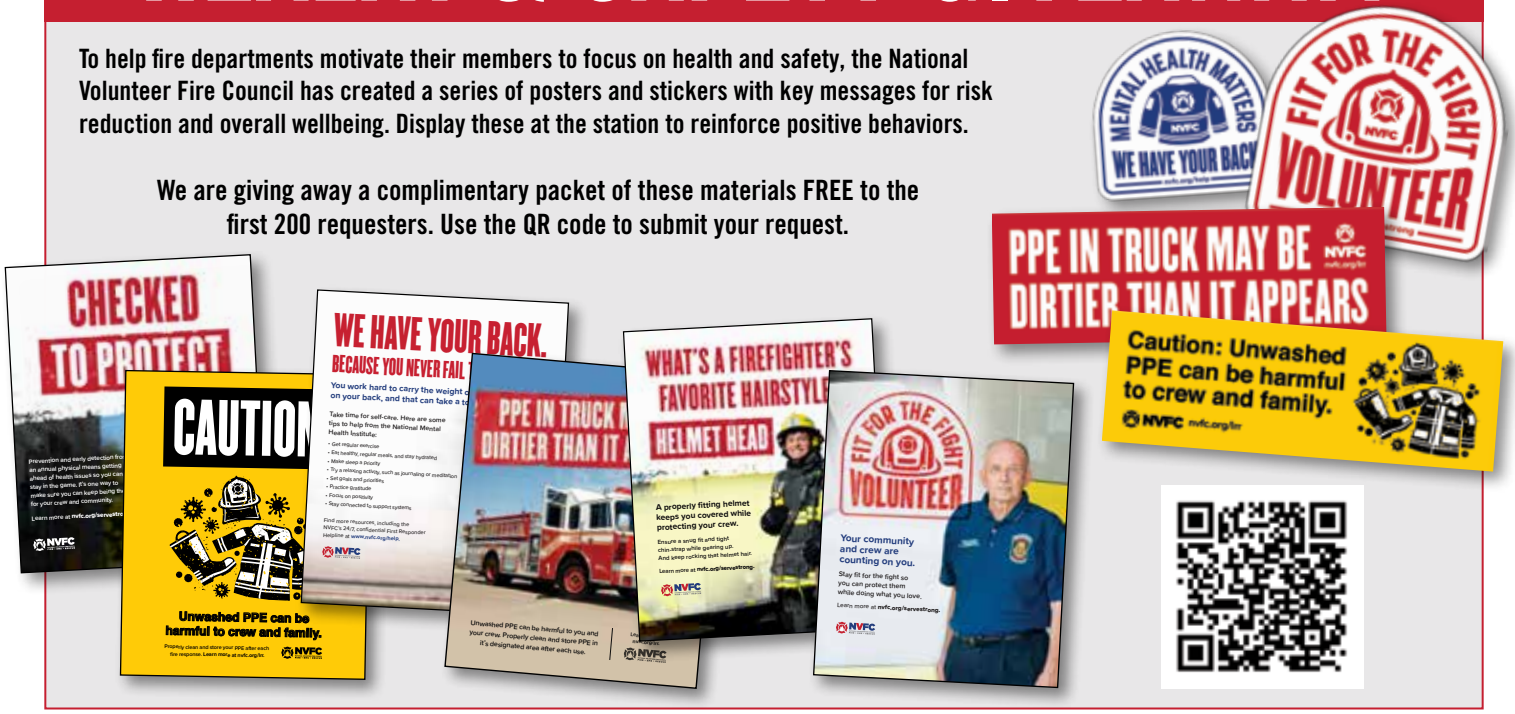
Use any fresh, frozen, or cooked veggies. If you use cooked vegetables, add them in step #9.

[1] https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cardiovascular-diseases-(cvds)

HEALTH & SAFETY GIVEAWAY!

To help fire departments motivate their members to focus on health and safety, the National Volunteer Fire Council has created a series of posters and stickers with key messages for risk reduction and overall wellbeing. Display these at the station to reinforce positive behaviors.

We are giving away a complimentary packet of these materials FREE to the first 200 requesters. Use the QR code to submit your request.



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