

Collaborating for Firefighter Safety and Health

BY CHRISTOPHER BATOR

THE FLORIDA FIREFIGHTERS Occupational Safety and Health Act requires that all fire departments adhere to strict safety and health procedures as identified by state statute. However, getting firefighters, officers, and even fire chiefs to embrace a cultural change pertaining to safety and health can be challenging. Firefighters rely on teamwork to identify the necessary resources to get tasks done. One such resource is the Florida Firefighter Safety and Health Collaborative (FFSHC), a free program that facilitates training, policy creation and implementation, and the sharing of standard operating procedures (SOPs) and best practices to help departments decrease the number of injuries, illnesses, exposures, and deaths (photo 1).

Collaboration

The nonprofit FFSHC was founded in 2016 by Florida firefighters wanting to focus on firefighter safety and health issues in the state and provide education, training, and the sharing of best practices to minimize the risks and exposures. The collaborative's impartial values are based on reputable information, national standards, documented research, and safety trends as they apply to the fire service.

The FFSHC is divided into northeast, northwest, central, southeast, and southwest regions. Within each region, fire department chief officers, safety officers, firefighters, and safety and health advocates meet quarterly to discuss and share information on firefighter safety and health issues such as firefighter cancer, mental wellness, health and fitness, and all-hazard incident safety. The collaborative's teams include the Firefighters Attacking the Cancer Epidemic (FACE) and those focusing on mental wellness, health and fitness, and firefighter safety.

Firefighter Cancer Prevention

In addition to fire service leaders, the statewide FACE team has partnered with community leaders such as the Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Miami Health Sciences and the Firefighter Cancer Support Network. The team, which includes fire departments statewide, develops training curricula and videos for cancer awareness and participates in the Firefighter Cancer Initiative research projects to solicit eligible participants in ongoing projects. The FACE team also recommends and secures industry experts to speak at local and national conferences to increase awareness of firefighter cancer exposure and prevention techniques.

Collectively, the FACE team has developed a statewide SOP for on-scene gross decontamination after fire incidents to reduce carcinogen exposure. The gross decon SOP includes rinsing gear while on air, designating a drop zone to doff gear, and using dermal wipes for cleaning exposed skin. After this, if the personal protective equipment (PPE) is to be placed back in the apparatus cab, it should be bagged to reduce members' exposure to volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that are off-gassing. The most permeable part of the firefighter's PPE is the hood. Departments are encouraged to perform a hood swap, exchanging the contaminated hood for a clean hood. Back at the fire station, departments can then use their washer/extractor or independent service provider for advanced cleaning and change into a second set of PPE. This SOP is part of a complete packet that contains a training outline and videos (photo 2).

Clean Cab Concept

The clean cab initiative originated with the Coral Springs-Parkland (FL) Fire Department, a FACE team member. It encourages designing new apparatus such that self-contained breathing



(1) Photo courtesy of FFSHC.

apparatus (SCBA) and firefighting equipment normally used in structure fires are stored in outside compartments instead of inside the cab; this is another way to reduce firefighter exposure to contaminated gear and off-gassing equipment. Also, creating a nonporous cab interior would allow the cab to be easily wiped down after a fire and eliminate the possibility of secondhand cross-contamination.

Research indicates that firefighter gear and equipment continue to off-gas VOCs immediately after the fire; implementing the clean cab concept would reduce firefighter exposure to these carcinogens. In the little time that it takes for firefighters to safely don SCBA at the scene, the officer can evaluate the scene and obtain a comprehensive size-up and determine the appropriate tactics. This process has also reduced firefighter injuries when getting into and out of the apparatus, since firefighters are not encumbered with bulky SCBA.

Additionally, in an apparatus accident, unsecured items can become moving projectiles that may injure firefighters. The cab interior is now rendered safer by relocating the equipment to outside compartments. The clean cab concept is gaining momentum, and this process needs to be considered in the future when designing fire apparatus.

Health and Fitness Team

The Health and Fitness Team is an integral component that assists each firefighter and the department in taking



(2) Photo by Assistant Chief Trevor Nelson, Jacksonville (FL) Fire and Rescue.

an active role and providing a platform to be a healthy first responder. Training programs and curricula are geared toward managing a complete approach to areas such as weight control, stress management, personal safety, nutrition, and substance abuse prevention. The team arms first responders through physical fitness, conditioning, and education, empowering them physically so they can perform at peak levels on and off the job and thrive long into retirement.

The team has developed and delivered several one- and two-day “Mutual Aid Fitness” workshops to encourage firefighters and fire service leaders to actively maintain their health through physical fitness. The team compiles information on nutrition, healthy habits, and physical conditioning and visits fire departments that want to implement fitness programs. Working with private industry, the team has developed financial incentives for departments and personnel. The team also maintains contact with other fitness partners statewide and monitors industry standards to promote firefighter safety through health and fitness.

Firefighter Safety

The collaborative also assists in programs that enhance firefighter safety in areas such as accountability, risk management, traffic incident management,

active shooter response, rehab, Mayday, and medical and physical requirements. It embraces the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation’s 16 Life Safety Initiatives and participates in the national Safety Stand Down supported by the International Association of Fire Chiefs and the National Volunteer Fire Council. The firefighter safety team works with industry, researchers, and fire service leaders to ensure that firefighter safety remains the central focus in decision making; it identifies emergency incident and workplace hazards and works to eliminate them or reduce the risk of exposure, injury, and death.

Fire departments can also avoid injuries, illnesses, exposures, and fatalities by implementing effective safety and health programs that meet National Fire Protection Association 1500, *Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety, Health, and Wellness*, and firefighter safety laws within their state.

Mental Wellness

The mental wellness team provides improved means of hope and healing through education and training. Since suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, and catastrophic addictions have become an epidemic that is taking the lives of our fellow first responders, the collaborative has taken a detailed

look at the current programs and protocols to which we have entrusted first responders’ mental wellness. This diversified team is effectively identifying the system’s shortcomings and is offering constructive alternatives to empower Florida’s first responders and their families.

The mental wellness team provides many tools and resources to create a more balanced approach to holistic and dynamic healing for first responders. Training, protocols, and informational resources are available to all members on the Mental Wellness page of the FFSHC Web site. It incorporates behavioral components such as educational awareness, suicide prevention, employee assistance, peer support, recovery centers, and chaplain programs.

The two-day Clinician Awareness class offers mental health clinicians an understanding of the firefighter culture, lingo, and lifestyle and specifically what the job entails. This training features classroom and live scenarios that cover wearing turnout gear, watching a live-burn training scenario, and visiting fire stations (many clinicians have never been inside of one). This offers them an opportunity to talk with firefighters at the stations and on the training ground. We will continue to work with all providers to assist Florida’s firefighters in getting the help they need (photo 3).

The mental wellness team has designed a portal program, Redline Rescue, which provides a standardized peer portal for firefighters and all first responders. This portal and the curriculum will be an outlet where the employee assistance program, clinicians, and mental wellness providers can obtain cultural awareness programs to facilitate a more effective and responsive interaction with first responders. Redline Rescue will be available also for family members and will offer educational opportunities and the tools to help the family become healthier and more resilient. First responders can obtain assistance anonymously. Redline Rescue will provide, maintain, evolve, and deliver a baseline curriculum to a department’s Bureau of Training and Standards for incoming firefighters as well as for Florida’s incumbent firefighters and fire officers.

Starting a Collaborative

The following will guide you if you would like to start a collaborative in your department.

1. Identify personnel to lead. Leaders are found at every rank and will work with support from their administration. They are in your region, state, or province; you may already know who they are. The chief officers need to identify these informal/formal leaders.
2. Hold a regional meeting. Everything starts locally. Invite your neighboring fire departments and safety and health advocates to attend. Present a topic on a safety and health issue relevant to your department or region. Listen and learn from each other; what's affecting your neighboring department is likely also affecting yours. Continue holding regional meetings quarterly to further build these relationships.
3. Build relationships. Work with your neighboring fire departments, local law enforcement, the state fire marshal's office, the safety division, and state fire training centers. Connect with a university, college, or research institute. Develop relationships with your insurance providers, unions, volunteer organizations, and fire chief associations.
4. Get connected. Connect with local, state, and national safety and health organizations and leaders.
5. Use social media. Take advantage of all social media outlets, create a state newsletter, and maximize the opportunity to share what is occurring in your region as it relates to firefighter safety and health.
6. Develop teams. Identify your subject matter experts from across your region and let them get to work and share their findings with the collaborative.
7. Share resources. Build a Web site that



(3) Photo courtesy of FFSHC.

- includes a resource management system to hold and share SOPs and other resources for others to access, upload, and share freely.
8. Consider founding as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Because we all work for different fire departments statewide, operating a collaborative comes with associated costs such as Web site development and maintenance, educational material and program development, and travel expenses. We found that many corporations and safety and health advocates want to support the mission. Starting a 501(c) 3 entity is a great way to support the statewide collaborative's mission.

The Future

Firefighter safety and health is bigger than any single agency; the FFSHC has succeeded by forming a cohesive, dedicated group of fire service, community, and industry leaders working together to improve firefighter safety.

The FFSHC now has more than 200 Florida fire departments and numerous state and national organizations that have partnered with the collaborative, including firefighter, safety and health, and insurance organizations.

California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin have begun developing collaboratives; initial conversations with Georgia, Indiana, New Jersey have started. This program is the bridge that has been built to close the gaps between departments and organizations and, most importantly, their firefighters. Through a collaborative approach to safety, everyone wins. Visit www.floridafirefightersafety.org for more information. ■

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