



It Starts Early

Recruit training is the best place to ingrain the importance of physical activity



By Chief Jeff Cash

In the fire service, chief officers are always quick to sing the praises of their department employees and/or membership to elected officials, management and the public. After all, I am certain that every fire chief would agree that our firefighters are our most critical assets and are the backbone of our organization. *The question:* As leaders, are we doing everything possible to ensure that they're operating as safely and effectively as possible?

HEALTH PROGRAMS & RESOURCES

There are so many emerging issues for chief officers to address that it's sometimes difficult to know how to tackle them all. We develop procedures, encourage safe practices and provide the necessary training. But are our crews really prepared for battle?

In this country, we average about 100 firefighter line-of-duty deaths (LODDs) annually. Alarmingly, more than 40 percent of these deaths involve cardiac events. To date, 63 percent of this year's LODDs were caused by heart-related issues. We can't take these numbers lightly. This is clearly a serious issue, and we need to prepare our firefighters in all aspects of the job, which includes training them physically *and* creating heart-healthy firefighters.

Fortunately, multiple fire service organizations are emphasizing physical fitness and wellness:

- The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC; www.nvfc.org) has the Heart Healthy Firefighter Program, which includes the B.E.S.T. Practices program.
- The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation's (NFFF) Everyone Goes Home Program (www.firehero.org) promotes its 16 Life Safety Initiatives, one of which states that departments need to develop and implement national medical and physical fitness standards that are equally applicable to all firefighters based on the duties they are expected to perform.
- The IAFC and IAFF offer multiple resources on their websites (www.iafc.org and www.iaff.org), including information on the Joint Labor Management Wellness-Fitness Initiative

(www.iafc.org/wfi and www.iaff.org/hs/wellness.html).

- Perhaps the most critical resource can be found on the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) website, www.nfpa.org. The NFPA has developed and established NFPA 1582: Standard on Comprehensive Occupational Medical Program. This standard helps ensure that our firefighters are physically capable of performing their duties.

INGRAIN FITNESS EARLY

With the abundance of available resources, you may be wondering, "Where do I begin?" The change catalyst must start with your recruits. Recruit training and recruit academies are the best place to ingrain the importance of physical activity. If we get our new members to concentrate on daily exercise when they start, they are more likely to continue their fitness regimens in the future. Create a pattern where the new recruits can see that exercise is an important expectation. As time passes, more and more recruits become seasoned veterans, and everyone on shift will be exercising. In my department, I have seen this very positive effect. (*Note:* For more information about recruit class training, check out "Ready the Recruits" by Monte Eggherman, p. 40.)

NFPA 1583 CAN HELP

Are you wondering what *types* of exercise should recruit training focus on? The answer lies in NFPA 1583: Standard on Health-Related Fitness Programs for Fire Department Members. The standard encourages mandatory, but not punitive, physical activity. It sets the minimum requirements for the development, implementation and management of health-related fitness programs to enhance firefighters' ability to perform occupational duties efficiently and effectively. The standard provides the basic components of all health-related programs that include educational programs, describing the components and the benefits of exercise on job performance and health, individualized exercise prescriptions based on

the results of a fitness assessment, warm-up and cool-down guidelines, aerobic programs, muscular resistance (strength and endurance) programs, flexibility programs, healthy back programs, and safety and injury prevention programs.

These components are just a few suggestions for how to establish an exercise program for a recruit class. Many other items from numerous other health sources, including doctors, hospitals and local gyms, can be incorporated into your department's program. *The main point:* Get your firefighters moving! It is vital to their health and life safety as well as the future of your department.

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FINAL THOUGHTS

The good news is that physical fitness is becoming more popular in both career and volunteer departments. It's another cultural change that must happen. We were able to tackle such changes as the NIMS and ICS directives, and we can overcome this challenge as well. With more than 40 percent of our LODDs coming from heart-related issues, we must work on the root of the problem, and recruit classes and new members are a great place to start. ☺

Jeff Cash, CFO, has 32 years in the fire service, and he is the fire chief of the Cherryville (N.C.) Fire Department. He has a degree in fire protection technology. A past president of the North Carolina State Firemen's Association, Cash has received the following recognitions: NCSFA Firefighter of the Year, NC Association of Fire Chiefs' Chief of the Year, the IAFC-VCOS Buckman Leadership Award and the NVFC Monihan Leadership Award. Cash serves as the first vice chair of the National Volunteer Fire Council, and is a committee member of NFPA 1021 and the NVFC liaison to the IAFC Safety, Health and Survival Committee.

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