

# Psychologically Healthy Fire Departments Implementation Toolkit



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# Introduction

Creating healthy, high-performing fire/EMS departments is a shared responsibility that requires commitment from department leaders and members alike. Fire service leaders who understand the link between the well-being of their members and the performance and success of the department take comprehensive steps to create a positive environment that supports and promotes good health and optimal functioning. In short, they create a psychologically healthy fire department (PHFD).

Creating a healthy, high-performing department requires more than simply promoting awareness of health issues or offering wellness activities. Done well, principles of health and well-being become ingrained in the very norms, values, and beliefs that are part of the department's culture. Core to this approach is a multi-dimensional view of well-being that includes mental health.

The *PHFD: Implementation Toolkit* is based on American Psychological Association's (APA) Psychologically Healthy Workplace model and adapted to fit the unique characteristics of the fire service. In their work as research consultants for the APA, Grawitch

et al. (2006) developed the Psychologically Healthy Workplace model by reviewing previous research from a variety of disciplines that have contributed to the understanding of healthy workplace practices and creating a framework for the types of practices that promote employee well-being and organizational improvements.

The *PHFD: Implementation Toolkit* is part of the National Volunteer Fire Council's (NVFC) Psychologically Healthy Fire Departments initiative, which is designed to help fire department leaders promote and support well-being among their members. The toolkit is brought to you in partnership with the APA and the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (FBHA) and is made possible through a Fire Prevention and Safety Grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The PHFD initiative falls under the NVFC's Share the Load™ program, which provides resources, tools, and training relating to firefighter and EMS behavioral health. Learn more at [www.nvfc.org/help](http://www.nvfc.org/help).

# The Psychologically Healthy Fire Department

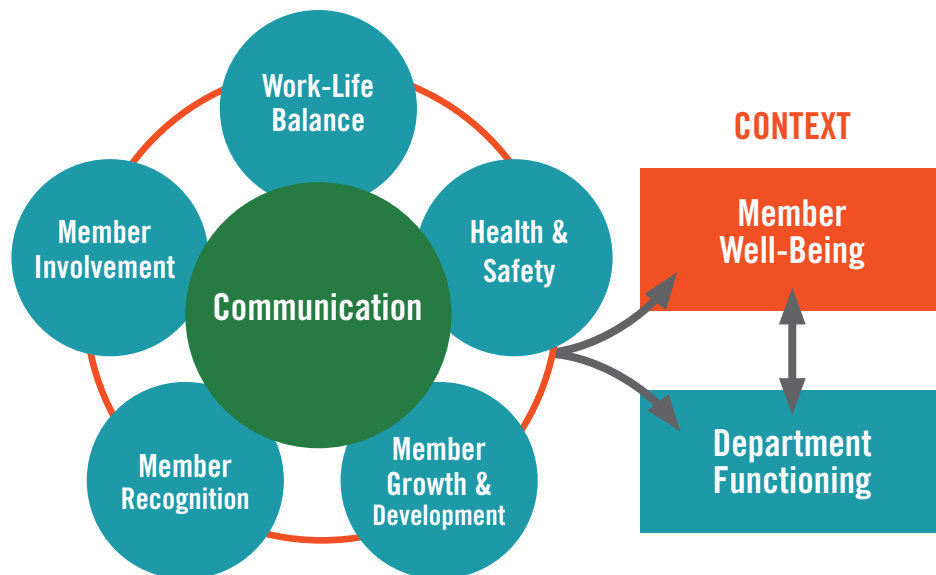
A psychologically healthy fire department fosters member well-being while enhancing department performance. Although there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to creating a psychologically healthy fire department, the types of practices that support well-being and performance can be grouped into six categories:

1. Member Involvement
2. Health and Safety
3. Member Growth and Development
4. Work-Life Balance
5. Member Recognition
6. Effective Communication

Collectively, these practices promote member well-being and department functioning, which, in turn, support each other, creating a virtuous cycle that benefits fire service personnel, the department, and the public.

Firefighters and EMS personnel benefit from increased job satisfaction, higher morale, better physical and mental health, enhanced motivation, and an improved ability to manage stress and be resilient in the face of the challenges they deal with in the line of duty.

Departments reap the benefits of better performance and productivity; reduced absenteeism, presenteeism, and turnover; fewer accidents and injuries; improved public service and satisfaction; and the ability to attract and retain top-quality personnel.



**The Psychologically Healthy Fire Department**



# Key Practices

The following sections describe the key practice areas and how they can benefit your members and the department. Each section includes concrete examples of actions you can take to strengthen that practice area. It is important to note, however, that *more is not always better*. Simply increasing the number of initiatives you have in place will not necessarily be the most effective approach, and not every action will be a good fit for every department. It is more important to identify the efforts that will best meet the unique needs of your members and department and deploy those strategically.

## Member Involvement

Efforts to increase involvement empower members, give them a voice in decision making, and encourage them to work together to make the department better.

Member involvement efforts can increase satisfaction, morale, and commitment to the department as well as improve performance and reduce absenteeism and turnover.

### Actions You Can Take

- Routinely encourage member participation in problem solving, decision making, and goal setting for the department. This is especially important for issues that will directly affect members.
- Use time-limited problem-solving teams, task forces, and work groups to address critical issues. Tap into your members' strengths, interests, and expertise to solve persistent problems and improve department processes.
- Make decisions at the right level. Empower your members and crews to step up and take action, as appropriate to the situation.
- Establish member committees or task forces for ongoing or major department functions. This can create a sense of shared responsibility and provide opportunities for members to contribute in ways they find interesting and meaningful. Rotating terms also allow members to cross train and broaden their knowledge about department functions.
- Take a continuous improvement approach and involve members in monitoring outcomes and working to improve

results. Continuous improvement teams can be especially useful for tracking and adjusting department efforts toward identified goals.

- Have an open-door policy with department leaders and be accessible, so members feel comfortable raising issues, asking questions, and seeking help when needed.
- Implement multi-level performance evaluations where, in addition to the typical supervisor evaluation of subordinates, members also evaluate leaders and weigh in on their peers' performance.

## Health and Safety

Health and safety initiatives improve the physical and mental well-being of firefighters and EMS personnel through the prevention, assessment, and treatment of potential health risks and problems; encouraging and supporting healthy lifestyle and behavior choices; and emphasizing safety in all aspects of training and operations. Health and safety efforts include a wide variety of practices that can help members improve their physical and mental health, reduce health risks, manage stress effectively, and avoid injuries.

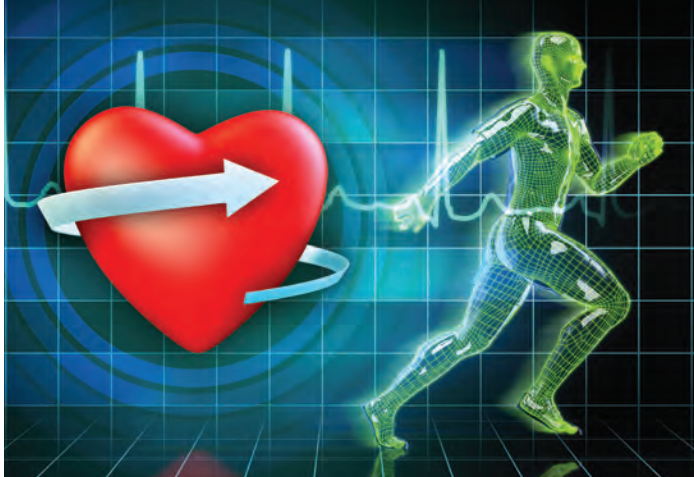
By investing in the health and safety of their members, departments also benefit from better performance, less absenteeism, and fewer accidents and injuries.

### Actions You Can Take

- Include health and safety issues in new member orientations and other training sessions.
- Establish programs and policies to prevent harassment and discrimination. Training alone, however, isn't enough to change member behavior or a department culture where counterproductive behaviors are more likely to occur. An effective approach requires comprehensive efforts that incorporate fair policies that are clearly communicated, ongoing training, leadership support of a civil and respectful culture, and the recruitment and promotion of diverse members into leadership roles.
- Provide educational seminars targeting physical and mental health issues.



When new standard operating guidelines are in development, Kensington (NH) Fire Rescue asks members to review the drafts. This provides practical feedback from the people who will ultimately use the guidelines and also helps to get buy-in from the very beginning of the process.



- Reduce the negative health impact of tobacco use with a tobacco-free policy for department facilities, events, and activities. Offer smoking cessation programs and resources to encourage members to quit.
- Make healthy food options available in vending machines, in the kitchen, and at department events.
- Encourage physical activity during shifts, offer exercise classes and sports activities, and have fitness equipment available onsite.
- Partner with local health and fitness clubs to offer free or reduced-cost access for firefighters and EMS personnel.
- Conduct safety and ergonomic checks to ensure equipment (including office equipment) is adjusted and used correctly to avoid strain and injury.
- Develop standard operating procedures/guidelines that are aligned with the department's occupational safety and health policies and include a formal risk management framework for preventing accidents and injuries. Clearly describe and communicate the individual responsibilities of all members in managing risks and the related expectations for how they operate during emergency incidents. Offer weight loss/weight management programs and provide access to resources that support healthy diet and nutrition.
- Provide disease management programs to help members manage chronic health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, and depression. If resources aren't available to support these programs through the department, encourage members to access them through their health insurance provider or local health department.
- If members have health insurance through the department, be sure information about covered mental health and behavioral health services is widely distributed and easily accessible.

- Make employee assistance program (EAP) and chaplaincy services visible, provide clear instructions for accessing these resources, and actively encourage their use. EAP resources are often significantly underutilized, which can be addressed by highlighting the services and support designed to help everyone manage life challenges and function at their best.
- Offer stress management training and resources to help members identify stressors, eliminate unhealthy coping strategies, and develop skills to manage stress effectively.
- Create a department culture that promotes safety. Leadership emphasis on safety practices and positive peer pressure where members hold each other accountable for following safety guidelines can help create a department culture where safety is the norm. With a shared commitment to safe practices, members are more likely to raise safety concerns and report violations when they arise and to view safety protocols as supportive rather than punitive.
- Conduct regular health screenings to identify risks that can be addressed before they lead to more serious problems.
- Extend health and wellness benefits to members' families and domestic partners and include them in initiatives that promote physical activity. Healthy behaviors are more effectively established and maintained with family support, and including family members also promotes their well-being, which contributes to a healthy family environment for all.

## Member Growth and Development

Providing training and development opportunities beyond the minimum requirements helps members expand their knowledge, skills, and abilities and apply the competencies they have gained to new situations.

The opportunity to acquire new skills and experiences can increase member motivation and satisfaction and help them more effectively manage stress. This can translate into positive gains for the department by enhancing effectiveness, as well as by helping the fire service attract and retain high-quality members. By providing opportunities for growth and development, departments can improve the quality of their members' experience and realize the benefits of developing personnel to their full potential.



The Oshkosh (WI) Fire Department conducts department-wide trainings on topics including suicide prevention, PTSD, healthy sleep, and other available resources such as the EAP.



## Actions You Can Take

- Provide in-house training that goes beyond mandated drills and other requirements. Tailor these additional trainings to fit the needs of the department and interests of members. Training can include job-related tasks, interpersonal skills, and leadership competencies.
- As resources allow, provide tuition reimbursement or establish partnerships with local or online educational institutions to offer free or discounted opportunities for members to earn GEDs, college degrees, and other technical qualifications.
- Offer career counseling and development support. This can take place informally, such as through fire service leaders taking a personal interest in their members' development, providing guidance for those interested either in advancing in the volunteer department or in pursuing a career in the fire service, and pointing members to job-related resources in the community. More formal efforts could involve bringing in speakers to discuss progressing through the ranks or transitioning to a career position, or partnering with local human resources organizations or universities that have career counseling services that may be able to provide pro bono support for volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel.
- Send members to the fire academy or other outside training centers for specialty training or certification programs.
- Use online or virtual training and education resources to expand the offerings available to members and allow them to complete training at their own convenience.
- Fund members' attendance at trade shows and conferences and have them report back and share the knowledge gained with other members of the department.
- Provide opportunities for advancement and promotion within the department for those who are interested in taking on new responsibilities and leadership roles.
- Offer coaching or mentoring. While formal programs can be established, this is often accomplished by pairing new members with more experienced firefighters or EMS personnel who can share their experience and provide guidance.
- Train department leaders in the skills necessary to effectively manage conflict, promote diversity and inclusion, develop members, address performance issues, and provide supportive supervision.
- Host brief educational seminars on a variety of topics of interest to members. These sessions can provide an opportunity for members to share their own areas of expertise with each other. Service organizations, educational institutions, and nonprofits often provide pro bono expert resources in their communities.
- Schedule periodic member or leadership retreats when you can carve out time for extended trainings, strategy sessions, and team building.
- Review job duties periodically and enlarge or enrich them to ensure that members have enough task variety, as well as opportunities to engage in interesting, meaningful, and challenging work, remaining mindful of your volunteers' time availability to ensure no one person is overwhelmed.
- Plan ahead for your department's leadership needs. Have a succession plan, identify high-potential members, plan for retirements and other transitions, and actively work to develop department leaders.
- Build diversity issues into your training to ensure the department is welcoming to and inclusive of members from all backgrounds. Addressing specific issues that are unique to the communities and populations you serve will also improve community relations and the department's reputation with the public.



When a new volunteer joins the department at Chelan County Fire District 5 in Manson, WA, the department pairs online self-study and formal classes with mentorship to help the new recruit rapidly build competencies. As a result, recruits feel valued and included as part of the department and the senior firefighters who serve as mentors get to know them quickly, which accelerates acceptance and helps build camaraderie.





## Work-Life Balance

Programs and policies that facilitate work-life balance generally fall into two categories – flexible scheduling arrangements and resources to help members manage their other life demands.

Conflict between work and home or family responsibilities can diminish the quality of both work and home life for members, which in turn can affect department performance. This challenge can be even more complex for volunteers, who may be simultaneously juggling other full- or part-time work demands, as well. Efforts to help members improve work-life balance can improve morale, increase job satisfaction, improve family relationships, and strengthen members' commitment to the department. Additionally, the department may reap benefits in terms of better performance and reduction in absenteeism and turnover.

### Actions You Can Take

- Ensure that requirements for the number of hours or shifts that volunteers work are not overly burdensome, so members can meet their other life demands.
- Schedule shifts, drills, trainings, and other activities in a way that allows for as much predictability as possible. This helps members plan ahead for family and other obligations, relax during time off, and minimize the stress related to potential disruptions.
- Be respectful of members' time. Start and end training sessions promptly and conduct them as efficiently as possible. When working with volunteers, the value of the individual's time is critical.

- Provide orientation sessions and materials for families of new members, including age-appropriate content for children. Educating family members about how the fire service functions and what to expect can help them successfully adapt to the demands, support their loved one, and have a healthy family life. Involving families also strengthens their relationship with the department and connects them to a broader community of support.
- Coordinate childcare when members are in high demand or required for extended periods. Provide mechanisms for members' families to connect with and support each other and share information about community resources for child and elder care.
- Have policies that allow for extended leave options when members have demands related to issues such as maternity, paternity, adoption, and family medical problems.
- Offer flexibility in both when and how many hours or shifts members work or are on call.
- Consider phased transitions related to leave, return to work, and retirement. Members returning from extended time off may need to ease back into a regular schedule or work reduced hours while they get back up to speed. Similarly, while many people look forward to retirement, letting go of long-established routines and meaningful parts of their lives and identities can be stressful and more difficult than most people anticipate. A retirement process of cutting back and reducing obligations gradually over a period of time can help people transition into retirement while maintaining the connections and social supports they need.
- Provide members with time off to compensate for additional shifts or extra time they put in at the department. This can help members get the stress recovery they need after particularly demanding periods of work.
- Coordinate with local businesses to provide discounts or easy access to services members and their families need to manage their daily lives. This might include grocery delivery, laundry and dry-cleaning services, home cleaning, and afterschool activities.



Chief Arnold Baker from Chelan County Fire District 5 advises, "Call them when you need them. Say thank you when they come. Don't call them and expect them to stand around – use them."



Mt. Gilead Volunteer Fire Department in Sparta, TN, works with spouses to help them understand the challenges first responders face as well as strategies for supporting them. Monthly meetings also include a family meal where spouses and children are encouraged to attend.



## Member Recognition

Recognition efforts reward members both individually and collectively for their contributions to the department and the community. Recognition can take both formal and informal forms.

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

### Actions You Can Take

- Reward individuals, crews, and the entire department for exceptional performance or notable accomplishments.
- Establish awards that recognize service excellence.
- Host award ceremonies or recognition events where accomplishments can be celebrated and appreciation for notable length of service anniversaries can be acknowledged.
- Highlight members' accomplishments or contributions verbally at department meetings or in print and electronic communications.
- Train department leaders and supervisors to use effective recognition practices.
- Build verbal acknowledgement and reinforcement into day-to-day department activities.
- Launch a member referral program with rewards or recognition for referring new recruits.

- Publicly display and communicate member and department accomplishments. This can include names inscribed on plaques that hang permanently on the wall, posted progress charts, formal acknowledgement by government or community leaders, and stories and postings in local newspapers and on the department web site and social media pages.
- Set up a formal peer-to-peer recognition program that encourages peer nomination and/or selection for awards and mechanisms for members to thank or acknowledge each other.

## Effective Communication

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

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

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

### Actions You Can Take

Communication between members and leadership:

- Clearly communicate the department's mission, values, and goals to members; what is expected from members; and how each member plays a role in the department's success.
- Provide regular, ongoing opportunities for members to provide feedback to leadership.
- Communicate regularly with members.
- Consistently share communications about progress toward department goals.
- Monitor the satisfaction of members and make changes when necessary to improve member satisfaction.



Kensington Fire Rescue uses a variety of rewards and positive reinforcement, including challenge coins, letters of recognition, small tokens of appreciation such as water bottles and uniform pins, and sharing thank you letters the department receives from the public.



- Ensure that the actions and motives of the department and leadership are clear to members.
- To the extent possible, be open and transparent about budgets, decisions, challenges, major issues, and key activities.

Opportunities for members to provide feedback to department leadership:

- Conduct regular member surveys to assess engagement, satisfaction, and needs.
- Host periodic all-hands meetings that include opportunities for Q&A with department leaders.
- Implement a formal system with a physical and/or virtual suggestion box.
- Hold regular crew and department meetings.
- Conduct formal after-action review sessions.
- Establish an anonymous hotline or whistleblower mechanism for members to report concerns.
- Schedule one-on-one sessions between members and leaders.

Communicating support for psychologically healthy practices:

- Incorporate member health and well-being into the department's vision/mission statement.
- Identify an individual and/or a committee that is responsible for developing and leading psychologically healthy department activities.
- Assess and consider the needs of members when formulating department policies and practices.

- Regularly communicate the integral role of members in achieving department success.
- Consider the diversity of members (gender, ethnicity, cultural identity, sexual orientation, ability, socioeconomic status, educational background, age, parenting status, marital status, etc.) when formulating department policies and practices.
- Provide the necessary resources to support psychologically healthy practices, including budget, materials, administrative support, staffing, time, and meeting space.
- Ensure that department leaders regularly participate in psychologically healthy activities in ways that are visible to members.

Keeping members informed about psychologically healthy practices:

- Include information regarding the department's psychologically healthy practices during orientation for new recruits.
- Publish a department newsletter that contains relevant information regarding psychologically healthy practices.
- Communicate information to members about community resources related to health and well-being, such as local educational opportunities, mental/behavioral health provider information, and free health screenings in the community.
- Promptly inform members about any changes to psychologically healthy practices, such as new or discontinued benefits or options and availability of programs and resources.
- When appropriate, recognize member contributions to and involvement in psychologically healthy department practices.
- Share information with members about the outcomes and success of specific psychologically healthy practices.
- Provide a department web site or intranet with information about health, wellness, and other department programs.
- Use multiple methods (print, electronic, bulletin boards, intranet, verbal, etc.) to communicate the importance of a psychologically healthy department to all members.



To promote effective, two-way communication, Marion County Fire District #2 in Goessel, KS, selects the best communication tool for each situation. For critical, real-time information, chiefs use the Active911 mobile app, while details about training and drills are sent via email. When input is needed to inform bigger decisions such as truck builds, the department relies on face-to-face discussion to ensure that every member has a voice.



# Department Factors

The success of any effort to promote well-being and performance is based in part on addressing the challenges unique to your department and tailoring practices to meet its specific needs. A department's practices do not exist in isolation. Each functions in relation to other programs and policies the department has in place as well as factors such as department culture and leadership. The complex nature of these relationships highlights the importance of taking a comprehensive approach to creating a department in which both members and the department can excel.

## Organizational Culture

A department's culture and the way it functions can either help or hinder member efforts to stay physically and mentally well and perform at their best.

An organization's culture is the set of norms, values, and beliefs that guides its members' behavior. Culture is developed over the entire life of a group based on what is experienced and learned. Culture can have a strong influence, and group members may not even be aware of how much it shapes their behavior.

According to Edgar Schein, professor emeritus at the MIT Sloan School of Management, culture functions at several levels, from highly visible symbols and imagery such as uniforms, patches, logos, mottos, equipment, and protocols to stated values and beliefs and the deeper underlying assumptions and unspoken rules that govern how people make decisions, behave, and interact with each other.

Rather than suddenly trying to impose new norms or values, Schein suggests that a better approach is to focus on addressing identified problems, recognizing that there are aspects of the existing culture that can help you solve the problems. From this perspective, you can leverage cultural strengths to help you solve problems and address barriers to success.

A closer examination of the norms, values, and beliefs already in place in the fire service suggests that the existing cultural foundation can actually serve to promote the behaviors necessary to improve firefighter health and performance.

- **Service mentality:** Firefighters have a strong sense of duty and service to others, even to the point of risking their lives to help total strangers. Psychological well-being is not just about emotions and how people feel. It is also a driver of job performance. Encouraging firefighters and EMS personnel to take care of their mental and emotional health can be framed as an important part of staying sharp and focused in the high-

stress, high-risk settings where first responders operate, so the department can provide high-quality service to the community.

- **Loyalty:** Firefighters take care of their own. Having each other's backs doesn't start when boots hit the fireground. Being there for colleagues means encouraging them to stay physically and mentally strong, paying attention to signs that someone is struggling, supporting them during challenging times, and having difficult conversations from time to time. By providing social support and encouraging their fellow firefighters to tap into available resources, members can demonstrate the strength of their bond and willingness to step outside their comfort zones for the welfare of those they care about and the functioning of the department.
- **Seniority and experience:** Seasoned veterans in your department play an important role as authority figures in the fire service and flag bearers of its culture. Beyond helping rookies develop job skills and knowledge of the community, senior firefighters set the tone when it comes to expected behavior, pass down the department legends, and serve as role models for how to cope with challenges, both on and off the job. A veteran firefighter who openly shares their story or lessons about the importance of good physical and mental health can encourage an environment where those topics are no longer taboo and department members feel safe to raise issues or concerns they may have.
- **Command and control leadership:** The hierarchical nature of fire departments presents an opportunity for leaders to directly address member well-being and its link to a high-performing department. By actively encouraging involvement in department activities, sharing information about opportunities for training and development, promoting strategies for maintaining work-life balance, recognizing excellent performance, and modeling healthy behaviors themselves, department leaders can set an expectation that part of being an effective firefighter or EMS provider is self-care and maintaining good overall well-being.
- **Assertiveness, courage, and risk taking:** As first responders to fires, automobile accidents, medical emergencies, and other hazardous situations, firefighters are regularly exposed to dangerous and potentially traumatic events. Despite bravery in the face of life-threatening events, admitting they need help can feel overwhelming to even the most seasoned firefighter, who is used to being a pillar of strength in service to others. Instilling the value that true courage includes actively seeking help when needed and relying on each other to make it through challenging times can encourage members to access resources that can keep them functioning at their full capacity.



# Creating and Sustaining a Psychologically Healthy Fire Department

## Process

One of the most challenging aspects of creating a psychologically healthy fire department is knowing where to start. While there is no universal set of practices or single roadmap to follow, there is a general process that can help you stay on track. This dynamic process starts with a needs assessment that informs the development and implementation of evidence-based practices that meet those needs, and then continues with an evaluation of those efforts in an ongoing manner, which provides feedback that is used for continuous improvement.

**1 Assessment:** Determine your strategy for identifying the member and department needs that you want to address. It is important to use a multi-method approach that includes both quantitative and qualitative data. This will provide you with hard data to track and use to set goals for improvement, as well as descriptive information that can help you better understand the underlying issues, needs, and opportunities for improvement.

Start with data you already have. This may include performance data from drills and calls, absenteeism and turnover rates, member suggestions and feedback, injury and illness rates, health risk assessment data, member survey results, utilization data from your EAP and wellness providers, and cost data from budgets, worker's compensation, and disability claims.

Once you pool your existing data, identify any gaps and collect the additional information you need to make informed decisions. Remember to include all members of your department and ask for their input. Leaders often assume they know how members of their organization feel and what's in their best interest, but front-line personnel typically have different experiences from those of leaders, so these assumptions can miss the mark if not tested.

Look for convergence across data sources and select the issues or needs that can realistically be addressed and are likely to make a difference for both member well-being and department functioning. Be sure to provide members with feedback regarding the results of the assessment so they know their voices were heard, have realistic expectations about how their input will be used, and understand how any changes will affect them.

**2 Development and tailoring:** Once you have identified the initial issues you are going to address, plan the necessary interventions. If you do not have the internal competencies to design and implement good, evidence-based programs and policies, seek outside experts for consultation. Some efforts can best be developed in house, while it may be more effective and efficient to obtain others from outside vendors or consultants.

Consider both member and department needs when designing new programs or policies, and try to balance the benefits to each. While you can learn from what worked well in other departments and model your efforts after those practices, be sure to adjust them to fit the unique characteristics of your department and the needs and preferences of your own members.

Just as during your initial assessment, involve department members in the development of new programs and policies or changes to existing ones. This will help gain early buy-in and ensure that what is developed is a good fit for your members and aligned with their actual needs and preferences, both of which will increase the likelihood of success.

Also consider your members' readiness for change with regard to the issues you plan to address. Many otherwise excellent programs have failed miserably because they overshot the readiness of members to participate in the programs or change behaviors. If a need is identified that your department members are not yet aware of, do not understand the importance of, are not confident in their ability to address, or do not have the prerequisite skills to be successful with, take the time to adequately prepare before launching your initiative. Raise awareness of the issue, make the case for change, provide education and training, and prepare your members for success. A well-timed effort with a ready and willing crew will more than make up for the time and energy spent preparing them and can help preempt unnecessary stumbles along the way.

**3 Implementation:** A well-designed, evidence-based plan still requires effective implementation. Enlist a department member with strong project management skills to help identify and line up the necessary resources for success. You need the right people, processes, resources, and supports. At its core,

department leaders must support the effort through both their words and actions. This demonstrates that the activities are important and communicates the expectation that department members will participate in and help support the effort.

Identifying a designated leader for the initiative is a critical step that establishes accountability and authority and ensures that the project stays on track. In addition to a project lead, recruiting additional champions, especially among influential or well-respected department members, can help foster grassroots support, member buy-in, and a sense of shared responsibility. This also lends support to the project leader, who may otherwise feel like they are shouldering the full weight of the project on their own.

Some efforts may require a committee or workgroup in order to make headway. Enlist the help of department members who have the skills needed to implement the project, work to help members acquire any new skills necessary for the project, and obtain the necessary resources, which may include information, allocated time, space, and equipment. Establish goals, timelines, budgets, and performance metrics and provide progress updates to leaders and the full department regularly.

**4 Evaluation and feedback:** Evaluating your department's psychologically healthy practices is an ongoing process that completes a feedback loop and allows you to continuously improve your efforts. In addition to evaluating your programs and policies relative to the goals you established and how much results have changed since your baseline assessment, you should periodically review the programs and policies to ensure they are aligned with the department's vision, mission, and goals. This ongoing evaluation also allows you to identify and address any opportunities or challenges that emerge along the way.

Member and department needs can change over time, as can a variety of internal and external environmental factors. Regular evaluation of your efforts allows you to refine programs and policies, make course corrections, balance outcomes so they are benefitting all stakeholders, and address barriers to utilization on an ongoing basis. This makes adjustments quicker, easier, and more incremental than they would be if you waited until the programs were experiencing major problems or required a major overhaul.



## Key Success Factors

A number of studies have examined best-practice programs in both health promotion and organizational effectiveness in an effort to identify keys to success. Common factors that have emerged include:

- Aligning efforts with the department's mission, values, and goals.
- Coordinating comprehensive efforts across the department.
- Customizing practices to address issues and needs that are important to members and the department.
- Involving members in the design, implementation, and evaluation of department programs and policies.
- Demonstrating leadership support.
- Using effective two-way communication mechanisms.
- Conducting ongoing evaluation of the practices.
- Taking a continuous improvement approach and refining efforts over time.

# Special Issues

In addition to the psychologically healthy practices described above, there are a variety of psychological issues that can affect well-being and performance in the fire service. Many of these special issues are covered below.

## Leadership Support

When leaders see well-being as critical to the department's success, practices can be linked more closely to the department's goals, thereby supporting its mission and driving performance.

A 2016 survey by the APA found widespread links between senior leader support for well-being efforts and a variety of positive outcomes, with more than 9 in 10 working Americans saying they feel motivated to do their best (91 percent vs. 38 percent of those without leadership support), are satisfied with their job (91 percent vs. 30 percent) and have a positive relationship with supervisors (91 percent vs. 54 percent) and coworkers (93 percent vs. 72 percent). Those with support from leaders were also less than half as likely to say they intend to leave their job in the next year (25 percent vs. 51 percent).

Leaders can demonstrate support by providing their department with clear information about available resources and how to access them. But leadership support doesn't stop with just hanging posters and distributing helpline phone numbers. Actions speak louder than words, so when department leaders actively participate in psychologically healthy department practices themselves, they set a good example for members and serve as role models for others.

Other supportive behaviors include:

- Setting clear expectations and providing constructive performance feedback.
- Managing conflict effectively.
- Demonstrating an interest in members' personal lives and career development.
- Directing members to relevant resources and programs.
- Providing members with sufficient autonomy and control.
- Involving members in problem solving and decision making.
- Being transparent in communications.
- Monitoring overwork and scheduling conflicts.
- Ensuring that all department members have the opportunity to engage in meaningful tasks.
- Recognizing outstanding performance and service excellence.



## Stress

Stress is a normal reaction designed to help us cope with dangerous situations. Faced with a threat, this automatic response kicks us into gear so we can deal with the problem at hand. The brain triggers the release of hormones that prepare us for a “flight or fight” response to the threat. This causes a number of changes – it raises blood pressure, heart rate, and blood sugar; suppresses nonessential body functions like digestion; and alters the immune system. Psychologically, it affects our mood, attention, and motivation.

Although the stress response is helpful in high-pressure situations, the human body needs recovery experiences and is not designed to withstand the physiological changes that occur over extended periods of time. Chronic stress causes wear and tear mentally and physically and can wind up damaging health, relationships, and job performance.

In some cases, chronic stress can lead to burnout and affect motivation, confidence in one's ability to function effectively, and actual job performance. When someone is experiencing burnout, they have an extended period of time when they feel exhausted, unmotivated, and ineffective and their job performance can suffer. Symptoms of burnout include exhaustion, lack of motivation, frustration, cynicism and other negative emotions, cognitive problems, a decline in job performance, problems with interpersonal relationships at home and work, a decline in self-care, being preoccupied with work during leisure time, decreased life and work satisfaction, and health problems.

Research also suggests that burnout can negatively affect people's decision-making abilities, resulting in more risky, irrational decisions. This is of particular concern to firefighters and EMS providers, who are required to think on their feet in situations that have life-or-death implications for themselves, their fellow first responders, and the people they serve.



Recovering from chronic stress and burnout requires removing or reducing the demands and replenishing resources. Here are some ways to encourage your members to get the stress recovery experiences they need to recharge so they can be at their best at home, at work, and on the fireground:

- **Time off:** Be sure members of your department are taking adequate time off. This means they need to carve out time when they are off duty to clear their mind from work and take steps to recharge. This can be particularly challenging for volunteers, who also have scheduling demands with their regular jobs.
- **Relaxation:** Whether it is exercise, reading a book, going fishing, taking a walk, or visiting with friends and family, encourage your members to intentionally do things that help them unwind on a regular basis.
- **Non-work activities:** While outside interests can be the first things to go when life gets busy or stressful, keeping up with them, even in small doses, is important to stress recovery. Check in with members and provide opportunities for them to share their outside interests with each other. Communicate the importance of these non-work experiences and encourage them to take up a hobby, play a sport, take a class, or do something else non-work related that they find interesting, challenging, and engaging.
- **Healthy sleep:** Research suggests that having less than six hours of sleep per night is a major risk factor for burnout. Make sure your members are getting enough good-quality sleep. This is particularly challenging for first responders who may get calls in the middle of the night, which means it is all the more important they practice healthy sleep habits on their non-duty days. Encourage them to maintain a regular sleep schedule; make sure their bedroom is quiet, dark, and comfortable; and avoid staring at their TV, computer, tablet, or smartphone right before bed.
- **Additional support:** Social support from friends and family can help your members manage stress but may not always be enough. Encourage those who are feeling chronically stressed or overwhelmed, or struggling with issues that are affecting their sleep, health, job performance, or relationships, to tap into resources such as EAP services, or get a referral to a qualified behavioral health professional, who can help them better manage stress and change unhealthy behaviors.

In addition to providing stress management training and resources to help members develop healthy coping skills and manage stress, comprehensive department efforts should include identifying and addressing organizational issues that create stress and reducing any unnecessary physical and psychosocial stressors in the work environment.



Photo courtesy of Laurelee Veitch

## Mental Health

As first responders to fires, automobile accidents, medical emergencies, and other hazardous situations, firefighters are regularly exposed to dangerous and potentially traumatic events. This not only puts firefighters' physical health and safety on the line, but can also increase risk for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, suicide, and other mental health concerns. These occupational hazards, combined with the day-to-day stressors we all face (including financial, family, and health issues), stigma related to help-seeking behaviors, and underutilization of behavioral health services require a department-wide effort to keep firefighters at the top of their game, both on and off the fireground.

Mental health takes on a critical importance in high-stress, high-risk work settings, such as those in which first responders operate, where their own functioning has serious implications for the health, safety, and security of the public they serve. It is also well-known in the field of workplace health promotion that the costs and performance losses related to mental health issues often outweigh those related to physical health concerns.

Recent efforts by the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance, International Association of Fire Chiefs, National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, National Volunteer Fire Council, U.S. Fire Administration, and other major fire service organizations shine a spotlight on the importance of firefighter mental health and the need to remove barriers that prevent firefighters from accessing the services and resources that can keep them healthy and performing at their best.

Although stigma related to mental health issues has declined in general, work is one place where people are still concerned about potential repercussions, such as being passed over for promotions, treated unfairly, seen as weak and less competent, or becoming the target of bullying, social exclusion, or gossip. A survey by the APA found that although a significant majority of adults (73



percent) reported feeling comfortable working with someone who has a mental health disorder, more than half said they would not feel comfortable disclosing a mental health disorder of their own to their boss or coworkers. Since mental health problems aren't necessarily visible to others, people often go to great length to keep them concealed from their colleagues. This can add to their stress, making the challenges they face even more difficult and preventing them from getting the support they need.

Mental health stigma and related underutilization of behavioral health resources are significant areas of concern in the fire service, where perceived expectations to be tough, selfless, and resilient in the face of danger can increase these barriers to self-care and reluctance to seek help. Support starts with access to good-quality mental health services but doesn't stop there. Integrating behavioral health and emotional well-being into all of your department's health and wellness efforts is key, so it becomes a normal part of the discussion.

There are many broad-based actions a department can take to help firefighters and EMS providers address mental health concerns and support a culture that promotes psychological well-being.

- If your department provides members with health insurance, ensure that behavioral health benefits cover a broad range of services, pay a significant portion of costs, do not unreasonably impose service limits, and allow easy access to a robust network of providers.
- Make a robust EAP available to all department members and provide clear information about the services that are available and how to access them. In addition to counseling sessions, high-quality EAPs may offer informational resources, support for supervisors, and services related to financial, legal, parenting, and other life management issues. If possible, extend EAP access to spouses, dependents, and domestic partners.
- Prominently post crisis hotline numbers and information about mental health resources in common areas. Include this information in print and electronic communications, as well as in materials for spouses, family members, and domestic partners.
- Cover mental health topics during new recruit orientation and provide ongoing training for all members to increase



awareness, improve mental health literacy, promote supportive behaviors to peers, encourage members to ask for help and access resources, debunk myths about mental health, and reduce stigma.

- Provide department leaders and supervisors with training on mental health awareness, recognition of symptoms, how to engage and support members around behavioral health, and crisis management for mental health-related situations.
- Ensure that department leaders actively participate in programs and activities related to mental health, include mental health topics when communicating about member well-being, work to promote acceptance and reduce stigma, and foster an environment open to, and supportive of, mental and emotional well-being.
- Monitor member reactions following potentially traumatic incidents, keeping in mind that individual responses and needs will vary. Remind firefighters and EMS providers of available resources, encourage use of supports, and provide on-site access to EAP professionals, as needed.
- Develop a peer support team that can respond and follow up with crews after difficult calls, or when a member needs assistance. Training programs, such as those offered by the International Association of Fire Fighters, teach peer support concepts and techniques including active listening, confidentiality, identifying members who may be struggling, and acting as a bridge to link them to mental health services.
- Offer chaplain services to provide comfort and assistance to firefighters and their families who could benefit from spiritual or faith-based support.



The Brighton Fire Department in Rochester, NY, takes a multi-pronged approach to mental health that combines training in peer support with an EAP benefit for career and volunteer members. Peer support members then provide department-wide training on the emotional and personal response to trauma.

## Substance Abuse

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for people to use alcohol and other substances to cope with stress and trauma. Therefore, some of your department members may have developed unhealthy patterns of alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, drug, or prescription pain medication use. While people may temporarily feel better, these behaviors can add to stress, impair functioning, and lead to more serious problems in the long run.

Alcohol use can weaken the body's immune response, so members who drink heavily may be more susceptible to illness and have worse health outcomes if they do get sick. Heavy alcohol and other substance use are also linked to increased accidents and injuries, can impair judgement and decision-making abilities, and make existing mental health concerns worse. This can pose serious problems for member health, safety, and job performance and make it even more difficult for members to cope with the challenges they face both at home and on the job.

Steps you can take to prevent and address substance abuse problems in your department include:

- Providing information about alcohol and substance use in your wellness communications.
- Reminding members of department policies related to alcohol, tobacco, and other substance use and encouraging them to use available supports, including EAP services, smoking cessation resources, and health promotion programs.
- Training department leaders to identify signs of potential alcohol or other substance use problems.
- Encouraging members who are struggling with alcohol or other substance use to talk to their primary care physician about how to reduce and prevent problematic use of alcohol and other substances before it becomes more serious.
- Referring members who need help with alcohol and other substance use to a qualified behavioral health professional who can provide confidential, non-punitive services to help them identify triggers, patterns, and unhealthy coping strategies, and develop the skills they need make significant sustainable behavior changes.

## Counterproductive Behaviors

From low-level incivility to bullying, harassment, and discrimination, negative behaviors in the department can affect your members' experience on the job and, in more extreme cases, harm their well-being and functioning, as well as the department's reputation.



Counterproductive behaviors can be especially problematic when directed toward members who return to duty following a leave of absence or treatment for mental health or substance abuse problems. If they are excluded, ostracized, gossiped about, or treated differently, it can compound their stress and make it more difficult for them to bounce back. Social support from colleagues plays an important role in promoting resilience.

While mild forms of incivility, such as rude comments, disrespectful attitudes, and a lack of courtesy may seem trivial, research suggests that these behaviors are surprisingly common. In a 2013 survey by Porath and Pearson, 98 percent of those polled said they had experienced incivility on the job. Another survey found that more than a quarter of respondents reported having left a job because of an uncivil work culture (Weber Shandwick et al., 2013).

These routine transgressions can add up, increasing member stress, decreasing job satisfaction and performance, and contributing to absenteeism and turnover, as well as physical and mental health problems. Left unchecked, incivility can also escalate over time and lead to more serious problems such as bullying and harassment.

Bullying, while less common than incivility, can have serious consequences in an organization. In a major national survey, 19 percent of American adults reported that they have experienced bullying behaviors at work and another 19 percent said they have witnessed others being bullied (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2017).

Workplace bullying may be direct, such as repeated yelling and verbal humiliation, hostile glares, or silence and deliberate exclusion. Or it may be more indirect, such as behind-the-back sabotage, spreading damaging rumors, or imposing unreasonable demands designed to make the target fail. Supervisors are the most frequent aggressors, followed by peers. In instances of mobbing, members gang up to bully a colleague.



Severely bullied individuals may suffer a variety of health consequences, including depression and anxiety disorders. Bullying can also diminish productivity and morale, lead to higher absenteeism and turnover, and increase health care and disability costs and the risk of legal action.

Discrimination and harassment continue to pose problems in the workplace, with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) receiving more than 72,000 complaints of workplace discrimination in 2019, including more than 7,500 charges of sexual harassment. This likely represents the tip of the iceberg, as the EEOC estimates that less than 14 percent of individuals who experience harassment ever file a formal complaint. Polls suggest that between 60 and 80 percent of women in the U.S. have experienced some form of sexual harassment, with most occurring in the workplace.

Despite the increased attention to sexual harassment and discrimination in recent years, few organizations have taken new steps to prevent and address these longstanding problems. Most organizations have simply reminded their members of existing policies and continued to offer the obligatory annual training designed to reduce their liability.

Research has shown that simply training people to recognize and report harassment and discrimination isn't enough to change behavior or an organizational culture where these problems are more likely to occur. Instead, psychologists recommend a comprehensive approach that incorporates fair policies that are clearly communicated, ongoing training, leadership support of a civil and respectful culture, and the promotion of women and people from diverse backgrounds into senior leadership roles.

Here are some steps you can take to prevent and address counterproductive behaviors that negatively affect your members and department:

- **Adopt policies that are fair and clear.** Clearly communicate that bullying, discrimination, and harassment will not be tolerated and that members who engage in these behaviors will be subject to disciplinary action. A harsh zero-tolerance policy can backfire, however, if people believe that some parties are treated unfairly, or members feel reluctant to raise concerns because they fear retaliation or think the consequences will be more severe than the situation warrants.
- **Communicate policies regularly.** Share department policies and laws relating to sexual harassment, procedures for filing complaints, and expectations of behavior for all members of the department. Incorporate the messages into ongoing trainings, send reminders by email, host a department meeting, and use other communication channels that works best for your members.
- **Train witnesses to speak up.** Bystander intervention training may help increase a sense of accountability and provide a process for members to speak up when they witness bullying, discrimination, or harassment involving others. The training can also encourage members to share responsibility for maintaining a safe environment, even if it means getting involved in a situation they would rather avoid.
- **Build a positive department culture.** Creating a psychologically healthy environment for all members can help curb any issues before they create problems. This includes gender parity and diversity in senior ranks, and leaders who model and support civility, respect, fairness, and trust. Counter-productive behaviors occur within a broader context, so be sure your department's practices align with and support the individual attitudes and behaviors you are trying to promote.

In a culture where every member feels safe, supported, and included, people can be their best, and that's good for your people, your department, and your community.

## Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity is more than just a program or policy. Ingrained in a department's culture, valuing diversity and promoting inclusion have broad strategic implications for innovation, well-being, performance, and success.



Chelan County Fire District 5 is one department that is working to build a membership that is representative of the population it serves. Having bilingual members has already become indispensable in providing services to non-English speaking residents in the community.



By itself, having a diverse department simply means there are members with different backgrounds and characteristics. While many people think of diversity as being related to race and ethnicity, it also includes differences in age, gender, ability, and sexual orientation. Ideally, your department will be a reflection of your community, which can help improve community relations and enhance your ability to identify and understand the needs of those you serve and communicate with them effectively.

Realizing the full benefits of a diverse department, however, requires inclusion. By extending the same opportunities and resources to all members and ensuring that everyone has a voice, you can tap into new perspectives, a broader set of skills, and creative ideas for strengthening the functioning of the department. More voices and more differences mean more opportunities to find creative solutions and generate new ideas. Diversity also helps organizations be more conscious of potential bias and discrimination.

Feeling excluded, discriminated against, or not fully accepted can also contribute to member stress and related health problems. In a work environment, this increased stress can cause significant problems for anyone who may be concerned about unfair treatment because of their identity. Creating a culture of inclusion and respect isn't always easy, but it can lead to healthier members and a stronger department.

Here are some steps you can take to promote diversity and inclusion in your department:

- **Diversify your department.** Periodically assess the make-up of your department and actively recruit from segments of the community that are underrepresented. This can require going beyond your typical recruiting strategies and changing up communication tactics to reach groups you might not otherwise have contact with.
- **Promote connections.** When new members join the department, link them with others who have similar backgrounds or experiences. Set them up for success by facilitating mentoring relationships and opportunities for other members of the department to get to know them.
- **Share decision making.** When one person controls hiring, training, scheduling, and promotions, it can create the



potential for unfair treatment. Create a system of checks and balances in the department, so more than one person is involved in decisions and help ensure that no one is being unfairly overlooked or given preferential treatment.

- **Give honest feedback and performance evaluations.** Leaders and supervisors sometimes feel uncomfortable giving negative feedback to someone who is part of a marginalized group out of concern that they may be seen as biased or prejudiced. As a result, they may miss opportunities to help the member improve their performance, which can inadvertently stifle their development, hurt their career, or prevent them from participating in desirable assignments.
- **Think broadly.** Consider the diverse needs of members when creating department programs and policies. Provide all members with opportunities to have meaningful input into the development, implementation, and evaluation of department practices.

## Trust

Trust plays an important role in the fire service and affects members' well-being and performance. In a 2018 survey of the U.S. workforce conducted by the APA, one in five workers said they do not trust their employer.

Approximately 9 out of 10 working Americans who said they trust their employer reported being satisfied with their job (89 percent), compared to less than half of employees who don't trust their employer (46 percent). Those who trust their employer were also more likely to say they are motivated to do their best at work (89 percent vs. 53 percent), have a positive relationship with their supervisor (90 percent vs. 56 percent), and say they would recommend the organization as a good place to work (80 percent vs. 41 percent).



The Oshkosh Fire Department has created a recruitment task force with a variety of community stakeholders. The department is working with college interns to develop a recruitment plan, campaign, and web site, and is collaborating with the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization on a program that reaches middle school aged girls. Additionally, the department launched a Fire Explorer Post that is 25 percent female and started a campaign with a local credit union to promote saving for EMT/Paramedic programs starting in high school.



Employees who said they don't trust their employer were more than three times as likely to say they're typically tense and stressed out at work (71 percent vs. 20 percent) and to indicate that they plan to look for a new job within the next year (58 percent vs. 18 percent), compared to those who trust their employer.

In the high-risk situations where firefighters and EMS providers work, trust is even more critical, as members must feel confident following instructions from leaders and know they can rely on each other, even when putting their lives on the line. Consistency and reliability, fairness, transparency, and shared goals and values can all contribute to a culture of trust in the department. Past APA surveys also found that trust is higher in organizations that recognize members for their contributions, provide opportunities for involvement, and communicate effectively.

## Organizational Justice

As with trust, people who feel that they are treated fairly in their organization have better well-being and performance outcomes compared to those who do not feel treated fairly. Organizational justice is linked to higher levels of job satisfaction, motivation, and work engagement. Those who say they are treated unfairly are more likely to report feeling stressed out on the job, to say they are more cynical and negative at work, and to say they intend to leave the organization within the next year.

Your members' attitudes and behaviors are shaped by their perception of decisions and processes, as well as how they are treated in the department. Department leaders treating members with dignity and respect is a good starting point, but open, transparent communication, reasonable explanations for decisions, and providing opportunities for members to have input into decisions that affect them can further strengthen members' experience of being treated fairly.

In many organizations, even those in which members are treated with respect, decisions, outcomes, and processes may not be seen as fair. In an APA survey, only around half of working Americans said the decision-making procedures in their work unit are applied consistently and free of bias. Similarly, just half of employees said rewards, recognition, and other job-related outcomes reflect their work, effort, and contributions to the organization.



Senior leaders typically have a more positive view of their organization than front-line workers do and are more likely to believe that outcomes are fair and that decision-making procedures are applied consistently. Therefore, it is imperative that department leaders seek feedback from department members and identify any gaps that need to be addressed.

## Trauma and Resilience

Resilience, or the ability to adapt to highly stressful or adverse events, is critical to the functioning of firefighters, EMS personnel, and departments, especially given the high-risk, unpredictable nature of work in the fire service.

Although most people are generally resilient and able to bounce back even from extreme circumstances without significant impairment, first responders are regularly exposed to potentially traumatic events. This chronic exposure can increase risk for trauma-related issues and other behavioral health concerns, including post-traumatic stress disorder. These symptoms, following exposure to a life-threatening or catastrophic event, may include:

- Intrusive memories, flashbacks, or dreams
- Distress when in circumstances similar to the traumatic event
- Avoidance of situations resembling the stressor
- Inability to remember all or part of the traumatic experience
- Sleep disruptions
- Anger or irritability
- Difficulty concentrating
- Hypervigilance
- Exaggerated startle response



Chief Thomas Steele at Mt. Gilead Volunteer Fire Department says that senior members of the department are open about their own struggles and share what has and has not been effective in coping with those challenges. This not only provides guidance that can benefit newer members, but also creates an open environment where people feel comfortable talking about difficult issues.

People vary in terms of their threshold for developing symptoms, and although genetic, biological, and personality characteristics do play a role, how members think about adverse events, the coping strategies they use, and their willingness to seek help when needed all affect their capacity to cope with potentially traumatic experiences. This, in turn, has implications for the level of mental health symptoms they may experience following exposure to adverse situations, as well as their overall well-being, interpersonal relationships, and job performance.

In addition to providing access to high-quality mental health services to help members who may be struggling after being exposed to life-threatening or traumatic events, departments can provide resources and create an environment that promotes resilience and the ability to successfully cope with the extreme work-related stressors present in the fire service.

A review by Britt et al. (2016) identified a set of resources that can influence capacity for resilience. These include:

- Unit cohesion, support, and flexibility
- Family support, close interpersonal relationships, and low levels of conflict
- Community resources, connections, and a sense of belonging

To facilitate a comprehensive response that includes all the necessary supports following a traumatic event, departments can develop standard operating procedures/guidelines for the critical injury of a member or a line-of-duty death.

By creating a supportive department culture, promoting work-life balance, providing resources that foster positive family relationships and social supports, encouraging members to stay active and engaged in their communities, offering training and resources that help members develop effective coping skills, and maintaining an environment where members feel comfortable talking about mental health and seeking help when needed, you can help members of your department build their capacity for resilience and successfully manage the stressors they face on the job.



# Appendix A: Case Studies

## Gilt Edge Volunteer Fire Department

Founded in 1986, the Gilt Edge Volunteer Fire Department serves a rural area in western Tennessee. The department's volunteer staff of 21 members are empowered to take initiative, step up, and work together to protect life and property, as well as each other's well-being.

### Member Involvement

When it comes to member involvement, Gilt Edge focuses on empowerment and ownership. Leaders know that people who are well-informed and feel listened to are more likely to engage in problem solving and decision making, so the department eliminates communication barriers that prevent information from flowing up or down the chain of command.

Leaders actively solicit new ideas and input from their members and incorporate that feedback when applicable. While not every idea is adopted, officers take care not to discourage input or stifle creative thinking. Suggestions are never ridiculed and constructive feedback is provided, so members know their input is valued. When ideas are adopted, members are given credit for their contributions.

For Chief Brandon Fletcher, involving members in meaningful activities that also help the department just makes sense. Matching people's interests and skills with department needs is a winning combination. For example, pairing a mechanically inclined firefighter with another member who is computer savvy and good with spreadsheets can make for a great maintenance team. Using members' strengths not only benefits the department, it also ensures that people are doing things they enjoy and are having positive experiences in the department.

### Health and Safety

A strong safety culture is engrained in the department. For instance, the department is adamant about seatbelt use. The rig does not roll until everyone is seated and belted, so safety has become second nature. The department takes an active role in roadway incident safety by providing a National Traffic Incident Management training program and following its recommended best practices. The department also has a longstanding turnout gear cleaning, inspection, and repair program that follows NFPA recommendations.

In addition, the department provides behavioral health training programs to its members annually and works with local support



resources following critical incidents, as needed. Behavioral health training is provided in both online and face-to-face formats.

Reducing the stigma related to mental health is another important aspect of promoting psychological well-being. While Fletcher acknowledges that mental health can be difficult for many people to talk about, the department strives to keep it at the forefront and normalizes it through regular training and conversations. Members are also taught that it is okay to ask for help and that if assistance is needed, they will receive it with no negative repercussions.

### Member Growth and Development

Gilt Edge requires certifications, including Firefighter I, Firefighter II, and Emergency Medical Responder, within 24 months of joining the department. Officers are similarly required to earn additional certifications as they climb the ranks. Having a well-qualified leadership team at Gilt Edge makes it easier and more cost effective for the department to provide many certifications in-house, including Fire Officer I and II. This gives the department an opportunity to shape officer candidates to fit department needs and expectations.

To share the responsibility and extend an even broader range of opportunities to members, instructors from departments across the county have come together through the local fire chiefs association to volunteer their time and teach a variety of certifications, keeping out-of-pocket costs low.

After completion of required certifications, members are afforded numerous training opportunities throughout the year. The department encourages and sometimes requires certain online training courses and often takes advantage of free training offered through the National Domestic Preparedness Consortium. Gilt Edge budgets to send members to trade shows as well as local and



regional conferences. Having members bring back and share what they learned has contributed to a culture of continuous growth and improvement at Gilt Edge, and the department has even hosted a regional hands-on training event for other departments in their county.

Being an instructor gives Fletcher the opportunity to identify members with initiative and leadership potential, so they can be further mentored. Members are also encouraged to enhance their career options by furthering their education outside of the fire service, such as completing their GEDs or getting a bachelor's or master's degree.

Member development also takes place informally at Gilt Edge. Leaders assign additional meaningful tasks to members gradually as they display initiative and reliability. This helps to build trust and makes members feel like a valuable part of the team.

## Work-Life Balance

Ensuring that members are successful both in and out of the firehouse is a top priority at Gilt Edge. Members know that family comes first and that a balance must exist between work, family, and fire department. Leaders try not to overtask members and slow them down, as necessary, to avoid burnout.

Beyond supporting members in managing the demands they face outside the department, such as child care and family issues, Gilt Edge works to make the department itself family oriented. By hosting activities at the station and bringing people together, families get to know each other and feel comfortable both being at the station and knowing their loved ones are in good hands when on the job. This inclusive environment builds strong bonds and friendships and a community of support among fire service families.

## Member Recognition

Leaders at Gilt Edge routinely remind their team that they appreciate the work they do. They praise good work publicly and correct substandard work only in private.

The department hosts an awards banquet each year, where it recognizes top performers in various categories as well as the firefighter of the year. In addition, leaders recognize personal and professional milestones and achievements throughout the year, such as when members earn certifications or degrees. The department also highlights individual and department achievements on its Facebook page, earning kudos from the public while raising the department's visibility in the community.



## Effective Communication

Transparency is important at Gilt Edge. While the department uses a variety of mechanisms — including individual, small group, and department meetings with leaders, after-action reviews, and a group communication app — to convey department-wide information, two-way communication starts from the beginning. Leaders sit down with new members to develop a shared understanding of expectations and how they translate into effective behaviors. From day one, members become part of a cohesive group that spans individual differences and provides support on and off duty.

This approach models openness and transparency from the top and strengthens relationships between the chief, officers, and members. Although they do have a rank structure and follow it, leaders at Gilt Edge understand that the department can benefit from the diverse backgrounds and life experiences that members bring to the team. As a result, members are comfortable providing input and feedback and band together to support the department's mission. For leaders at Gilt Edge, it all comes back to showing members that they care.

“Treat them like people, not like commodities,” says Fletcher. “When they know that you care about them as a person, that you want them to have a healthy, strong marriage, to take the kids to the ball game, you just further build upon the loyalty that they’re going to have towards the organization.”



## Mt. Lebanon Fire Department

Located on the southern border of Pittsburgh, PA, the Mt. Lebanon Fire Department is a combination department with 17 career and 40 volunteer firefighters. The department's commitment to member involvement, promoting mental wellness, and keeping members well-connected to each other and the community helps them provide the highest-quality and most cost-effective prevention, education, and emergency services.

### Member Involvement

A solution-focused approach to fire response and policy issues lies at the heart of the Mt. Lebanon Fire Department's delivery of professional, efficient, and effective services. When they have concerns, members submit their ideas and proposed solutions via an online form. The department's chief officers discuss the suggestions and, if in agreement and the timing is right, implement the new policy or practice. Any necessary training and communication are also rolled out to support the change and keep members up to date.

For example, when members raised the issue of chimney fires being a common reason for calls, they suggested developing a standard operating guideline and assembling a tote with all the tools that would allow them to respond more efficiently. The idea was adopted, and the tools are now readily available on all the department's trucks.

Committees play an important role in the department, informing purchases of SCBA and other gear and working to design trucks, when needed. This degree of member involvement ensures that their needs help drive decisions and that the department gets the best equipment for the money when large capital purchases are made.

The Health and Safety Committee handles everything from accident investigations and issues raised in safety evaluations to cancer prevention initiatives following best practices from the Lavender Ribbon Report. Member well-being is integral to the culture of the department. "With participative management, everything that we do involves pretty much everybody in the organization, so you get a lot of buy-in," said Lieutenant Kurt Christofel.

### Health and Safety

Every firefighter receives an annual physical. In addition, members are required to engage in a minimum of 30 minutes of daily exercise, and the department hosts group workouts three days a week so people can exercise together. They also tap members who



are certified CrossFit trainers as well as engage local nutritionists to help with programs to keep members fit and healthy.

All members have access to an Employee Assistance Program to help them manage life's challenges and get support when needed. Promoting mental well-being also happens through the tight-knit relationships between members and officers, who see it as part of their job to look out for signs and symptoms that someone may be struggling and address it before it escalates. A supportive environment that reduces stigma related to mental health issues and allows for open dialog depends on experienced members and officers being comfortable having difficult conversations when they see another member who needs help or to be pointed to resources.

The Mt. Lebanon Fire Department continues to review emerging research and best practices as they strive to protect the psychological welfare of their members. The department is developing a peer team with experience and training in assessing and supporting members who are identified as being at risk. The department is using the expertise of a neighboring department with a well-established, successful peer team to help guide these efforts. "We're trying to create an environment where people are able to talk about it and get support," says Christofel.

### Member Growth and Development

The Mt. Lebanon Fire Department follows the Pennsylvania State Fire Academy Recruit Program and then conducts internal competencies on their own equipment. The department also provides training through their Health and Safety Committee. Weekly drill nights cover required training as well as health and safety topics.

Career staff are eligible for college tuition reimbursement and required training such as state fire academy programs and

Firefighter I certification. Volunteer training is supported by the state relief fund, which covers training at the state fire academy as well as member attendance at conferences and other professional education and training events. Members are cross-trained so they can step into other roles quickly, when needed.

## Work-Life Balance

At the Mt. Lebanon Fire Department, career staff work a four-days-on/four-days-off schedule, so they have time to recuperate. Because volunteers are also juggling jobs outside the department along with other life demands, standards have been set for satisfying call and drill attendance requirements while still accommodating those other needs. Volunteer members have a variety of ways to earn credits, including doing overnight shifts and completing online training. Time away from family is always a consideration when scheduling drills and in-person training. Having 40 volunteers allows the department to break members into three recall groups that rotate on a weekly schedule. That means, in most instances, members work a predictable schedule and are only on call one week out of three.

## Member Recognition

Each year, the Awards Committee sends an email to the entire department soliciting nominations for the annual firefighter and officer of the year awards. Recipients are selected by the committee and are recognized at the December business meeting, with the awards formally presented at the department's spring banquet. Recipients also attend a municipal commission meeting, where they are recognized again and a photo with the commissioner, chief, and assistant chief is featured in the municipality's official magazine.

Other awards recognize bravery, outstanding performance, and exceptional support of the department. Along with regular informal verbal acknowledgement and positive reinforcement, members also receive occasional perks, such as a t-shirt, coin, or gift card to show appreciation for their contributions.

## Effective Communication

Communication at the Mt. Lebanon Fire Department is done through email, face-to-face meetings, and directives, in addition to the department's standard operating guidelines and policies and procedures. Members can always submit their ideas through the online change management form, but the chief also makes it clear that anyone can come directly to him with a problem.

Members are kept in the loop regarding broader community issues through a weekly managers' report from the municipality, and agendas, minutes, and public documents are archived on the municipality's web site for easy access.

The department employs a variety of digital communication tools, including Microsoft Teams and social media accounts, to keep members informed and connected as well as to engage with the community. A dedicated marketing and outreach team conducts community education as well as coordinates social media with support from the municipality's public information officer. In addition to the department's public Facebook page, it also hosts a closed group for members to keep in touch about fitness activities and group workouts.

Combined, these robust communication efforts help to keep members well-informed, closely connected, and highly engaged with the community they serve.

## Stevens County Fire Protection District No. 1

Stevens County Fire Protection District No. 1 (SCFPD 1) is a combination department with eight career firefighters and 70 volunteers that operates eight fire stations in Washington state. To cover a broad geographic area and manage multiple stations, the department relies on a decentralized approach, where members are actively engaged in shaping decisions and have the information, support, and tools they need to stay fit and do the job safely.

### Member Involvement

SCFPD 1 strives to remain flexible in its efforts to involve members, tapping the right people for the right issues and spreading out responsibility so it doesn't become too burdensome for any individual. This approach is evident in the district's use of committees as small, ad hoc, or time-limited groups, as opposed to standing committees, which can become stagnant over time. This also allows more members to get involved with issues they are interested in.

The district ensures that volunteer members are involved when it comes to issues or decisions that affect them. This gives volunteers a voice in shaping policies as well as helps get buy-in from members so that results are more likely to be effective when rolled out. For example, department leadership charged two captains to reach out to their volunteer colleagues to draft participation and reimbursement requirements. The result was a well-thought-out policy that met department needs and had vast buy-in.

Members are similarly involved in the recruitment and selection process. Both career and volunteer members from a variety of backgrounds and circumstances are featured in recruiting materials to better resonate with community members. When it comes to vetting new recruits, a panel composed of both volunteer and career members conducts interviews, which helps ensure that candidates are a good fit for the department.

Chief Mike Bucy characterizes his role as equipping members with the “physical and mental tools to do their jobs and make good decisions” and then letting them do the work. “It’s not creating a culture where they’re just complying with rules or requirements, because that doesn’t get people very far,” he says. “This way, you get the buy-in, you get more done, you involve more people.”

### Health and Safety

When Bucy came on as chief at SCFPD 1, routine physicals were only done for career staff. After speaking with both volunteer and career members, he reworked the budget to include physical exams



for all members. This was coupled with communication efforts to reinforce the preventative nature of the exams to find and address health issues early, and that they are not used to eliminate anyone. Bucy credits these efforts with early identification of medical conditions in numerous instances, including his own prostate cancer, which may not have been caught otherwise.

There is also a collective effort to keep each other mentally and physically fit. The department has fitness facilities and tapped a volunteer who is a physical trainer to offer sessions at one of the stations for interested members. Although additional health promotion efforts are still in early stages, the department recently brought on a chaplain to provide support to members and is exploring ways to strengthen its wellness program, including offering talks on topics such as nutrition, healthy cooking, and building strong marital relationships.

In addition to Employee Assistance Program services, the department debriefs after big calls. This provides an opportunity to raise issues about anything that went wrong or could be handled better in the future as well as to talk about difficult or potentially traumatic experiences, so members do not feel they must shoulder those burdens alone.

### Member Growth and Development

SCFPD 1 offers online training for routine topics. The department has also moved to shift training for things that need to be done in person. “You do all your training on shift,” says Bucy, “When you go home, you’re done.” Exceptions are made for special topics, such as auto extrication, which are impractical to offer in multiple sessions.

The department also relies heavily on task books for training, which provide specific guides to all members and let them develop at their speed. The task books cover essential skills through NFPA 1001 requirements, as well as use of the department's main apparatus types. This results in a standard set of tools for member development and a clear path for them to track their progress.

## Work-Life Balance

Reducing the potential for work-life conflict is key to the way the department handles scheduling. To alleviate the burden of always being on call, SCFPD 1 has moved to a shift response system. Members typically know what days they are working and who they will be working with weeks in advance so they can plan ahead and on shift nights take the time to put the apparatus back together and replenish supplies after a call without having to rush home. “When a call comes in at night, I know we’re going to have responses,” says Bucy. “It’s a healthier crew and when they come on shift, they’re ready to get things done.”

The move to a shift response system helps reduce some of the unpredictability that comes with being part of the fire service and gives members more freedom to enjoy their time off and take care of home obligations, without wondering if they can go out of town with their family, have a drink at dinner, or go see a movie with friends.

## Member Recognition

Members vote for their peers to receive annual awards, including firefighter, EMS provider, rookie, and station of the year, which are presented at a banquet along with a chief’s award. The banquet is a time for celebration and camaraderie and includes door prizes and a year-in-review video.

Recognition isn’t limited to once a year. Members can nominate a colleague for recognition any time. Forms are reviewed by the chief and then go to the fire commissioner, so when a recipient is acknowledged, it has been vetted by multiple people and carries special meaning.

Little things matter, too, like providing lunch on training days or holiday weekends, and stocking groceries for all shifts. Email notes, mentions in the local paper, and congratulations for completing task books also give members an added boost.

Recognizing volunteers by making them feel part of the team is important at SCFPD 1. The department now provides uniforms, nametags, and badges. Earning the badge by completing the firefighter task book is a reward in itself, but according to Bucy, “It also gives them self-pride. When they go out on a call or to a public event, you can’t tell the career from the volunteer and that’s important in a combination department.”



## Effective Communication

Decentralized decision-making means that the department is highly adaptive and can respond quickly. But allowing people to have areas under their control and the autonomy to make decisions within that scope requires providing them with the necessary information. As chief, Bucy sees himself as working for the members, rather than the other way around, and encourages openness and transparency. “Come in and ask a question and you’ll get an answer,” he says. “But you have to keep folks informed, so they know what questions to ask.”

The department holds regular officer meetings that include feedback from the shifts, and a recruitment and retention coordinator serves as a rapid conduit for communicating member concerns to department leadership. With eight stations, the department depends heavily on email, a monthly newsletter, and web conferencing tools to stay in touch with members and provide operations briefings. In addition, the department’s operations captain posts leadership quotes via the scheduling program, so when members check in, they get a daily dose of inspiration.



# Appendix B: Additional Resources

## Organizations and Programs

### Share the Load Program

*National Volunteer Fire Council*

This program provides responders with tools, resources, and training to proactively address behavioral health as well as establish or expand a department behavioral health program.

### Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance

The FBHA provides training and resources to help fire, EMS, and dispatch organizations focus on behavioral health awareness and suicide prevention.

### Psychology Help Center

*American Psychological Association*

This consumer resource features information related to psychological issues affecting physical and emotional well-being.

### Firefighter Life Safety Initiative #4: Empowerment

*National Fallen Firefighters Foundation*

The focus of Life Safety Initiative #4 is to empower all firefighters to stop unsafe practices by having every member fully engaged during an emergency incident with a focus on doing the work in a proficient manner and looking out for each other to avoid injuries and potential line-of-duty death.

### Firefighter Life Safety Initiative #13: Psychological Support

*National Fallen Firefighters Foundation*

The focus of Life Safety Initiative #13 is to provide firefighters, EMS providers, and their families with resources to deal with the emotional and psychological stress that being a responder can bring to their lives.

### First Responder Center for Excellence

The FRCE provides quality education and a research network committed to reducing first responder occupational illnesses, injuries, and deaths.

### The Code Green Campaign

This first responder mental health advocacy and education organization provides resources and training to improve mental wellness for responders and reduce barriers to accessing mental health care.

### Serve Strong

*The National Volunteer Fire Council*

This program provides firefighters and EMTs with proven wellness programs and resources to help prevent cancer, reduce heart attack risk, cope with behavioral health issues, and engage in safe practices on and off the fireground.

### Federation of Fire Chaplains

The purpose of this organization is to bring together individuals and groups who are interested in providing effective chaplaincies for fire and rescue service organizations. The Federation offers information and resources on starting a chaplaincy within a department and training opportunities for chaplains.

### Center for Firefighter Behavioral Health

This site offers resources for behavioral health including suicide prevention education; Firefighters Helping Firefighters, a peer support education site; information on employee assistance programs; and an app to learn how to use alcohol in healthy and safe ways.

## Fire Resources for First Responders and their Families

*All Clear Foundation*

This nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization focuses on aggregating critical resources to improve the life expectancy and wellbeing of first responders and their families. Resource categories include mental/emotional, physical, family/social, and spiritual.

## Guides and Tools

### Directory of Behavioral Health Professionals

*National Volunteer Fire Council*

Updated with new providers monthly, this directory lists local behavioral health professionals that are ready and equipped to help firefighters, EMS providers, rescue workers, dispatchers, and their families.

### Volunteer Fire Service Culture: Essential Strategies for Success

*National Volunteer Fire Council*

This textbook is designed to train department personnel and leaders about key issues relating to fire service health and safety and how to embrace safe and healthy practices in all areas of fire department operations and culture.

### National Safety Culture Change Initiative

*International Association of Fire Chiefs in partnership with the U.S. Fire Administration*

This study identifies both positive and negative elements of fire service culture and recommends changes to enhance safety and health in the fire and emergency service.

### Yellow Ribbon Report – Under the Helmet: Performing an Internal Size-Up

*International Association of Fire Chiefs' Volunteer and Combination Officers Section*

This report includes information, resources, and action items to help departments take a proactive approach to the mental wellness of their members.

### Fire Service Behavioral Health Management Guide

*National Fallen Firefighters Foundation*

This guide seeks to help fire departments establish a behavioral health program by providing guidance and considerations learned from other fire departments across the country.

### Mitigation of Occupational Violence to Firefighters and EMS Responders

*U.S. Fire Administration and the International Association of Fire Fighters*  
This report documents the causes and risk factors of violence against EMS responders and identifies mitigation opportunities to reduce and prevent violence.

### Firefighter Resources

*National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health*

This page provides summaries and links to current NIOSH projects, programs, publications, and resources created to improve the health and safety of firefighters.

## **Traumatic Incident Stress**

*National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health*

This topic page on traumatic incident stress for emergency responders includes information about symptoms, on-site monitoring, and post-incident health.

## **Resources for Family Members and Fire Departments of Fallen Firefighters**

*National Fallen Firefighters Foundation*

These resources are designed to help guide family members and fire departments through the difficult aftermath of a line-of-duty death.

## **Building a Comprehensive Behavioral Health Program**

*International Association of Fire Fighters*

This downloadable checklist helps identify strengths and gaps in a behavioral health program as well as an action planning template for next steps.

## **10 Steps to Build Your Peer Support Program**

*International Association of Fire Fighters*

A robust peer support program is a critical component to a comprehensive fire department behavioral health program. This document outlines the 10 steps to developing a peer support program.

## **Training**

### **North American Fire Training Directors**

Use the NAFTD web site to find your state training organization.

### **Preventing and Coping with Suicide in the Fire and Emergency Services**

*National Volunteer Fire Council*

This course examines the signs and symptoms preceding suicide, highlights available resources for departments and individuals, and discusses the healing process when coping with a firefighter suicide.

### **Behavioral Health for the Fire Service**

*National Volunteer Fire Council*

This course examines the cultural progress, future potential, and concerns surrounding behavioral health in the fire and emergency services, as well as resources and programs to help those in need.

### **Stress and Life Management – Finding Your Balance as a Volunteer**

*National Volunteer Fire Council*

This course looks at all the roles a volunteer firefighter plays throughout their lives and helps them identify strategies for prioritizing each aspect of their life to achieve balance and time management.

### **When an LODD Occurs: Incident Commanders Speak**

*National Fallen Firefighters Foundation*

This course helps incident commanders prepare for the challenges of facing a line-of-duty death that occurs on a scene where they are in command.

### **Mental Health First Aid for Fire and EMS**

*National Council for Behavioral Health and Missouri Department of Mental Health*

This training course teaches firefighters and EMS providers about the importance of early intervention and how to provide assistance to someone who is experiencing a mental health challenge or crisis.

## **On the Job and Off**

This nonprofit organization develops training for first responders through education and shared experience. Training is available for firefighters and dispatchers through online courses or department wide in-person trainings.

## **IAFF Peer Support Training Program**

*International Association of Fire Fighters Division of Occupational Health, Safety, and Medicine*

This two-day interactive classroom training focuses on active listening skills, suicide awareness and prevention, crisis intervention, how to identify local resources, and building an effective peer support program.

## **Mentoring Within the Fire Service Course**

*International Association of Fire Chiefs and Tennessee Fire Chiefs Association*

This online training on mentoring within the fire service features two modules. Part one focuses on re-energizing department culture through positive influence and part two focuses on developing and retaining firefighters through relationships.

## **Family**

### **What to Expect: A Guide for Family Members of Volunteer Firefighters**

*National Volunteer Fire Council*

This guide helps family members of volunteer firefighters navigate the realities of the volunteer fire service life and provides guidance for keeping family relationships strong. Print copies can be ordered in the NVFC Store.

### **A Preparedness Guide for Firefighter and Their Families**

*United States Department of Agriculture*

This guide provides information, resources, and conversation starters to give firefighters tools that will be helpful in preparing themselves and their family for the realities of a career in wildland firefighting.

### **Firefighter Wife**

Firefighter Wife's mission is to honor, strengthen, support, and encourage fire service marriages and families. The organization offers resources to the partners of firefighters and their families. Firefighter Wife also partnered with the NVFC to develop the guide *What to Expect: A Guide for Family Members of Volunteer Firefighters*.

## **Mentoring**

### **How Mentoring Can Foster Officer Development**

*FireRescue1 Academy*

In this article, two fire officers share their insights into the benefits of mentorship in the fire service.

### **Mentoring: A Formula for Success in the Fire Service**

*California Firefighter Joint Apprenticeship Committee*

This program provides departments with tools that can be used to help guide firefighter recruits through the process and set them up to succeed in the fire service.

### **Command Post: Building a Culture of Mentoring**

*Firehouse*

In this article, Dr. Harry Carter explains how to create a mentoring program and foster a culture of information-sharing in a fire department.

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