

Firefighter Strong

News for a Better You and a Stronger Crew



FREE POSTER INSIDE!

How Cleaning and Storage Practices Protect You (and Those Around You).



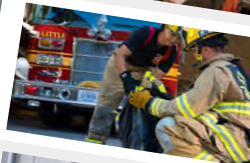
1 Why is gross decon on-scene important after a fire call?

Soot contains dangerous chemicals and off-gases for long periods of time, which is harmful to you and those around you. However, much of this contamination can be washed off on-scene with soap, water, and an industrial scrub brush.



2 Why should firefighters use a wet wipe to clean their skin after a fire response?

The neck, face, and hands are highly susceptible to soot exposure, making these the easiest places for fireground substances to meet the skin. Using a wet wipe on-scene after they get absorbed into the body.



3 Why is it important to put dirty gear in a sealed bag outside of a cab or personal vehicle?

Gear exposed to harmful fireground chemicals can continue to off-gas, putting firefighters at risk if kept in the cab of a vehicle. Placing the PPE in a sealed bag or container separated from the firefighter eliminates this exposure risk.



4 Why should firefighters shower within an hour of fire response and change into a new set of clothes?

Skin and clothes can absorb toxic chemicals and carcinogens from the fire scene, which can then continue to off-gas, putting the firefighter at risk. It is important to wash these particles off the body as soon as possible and change into a fresh set of clothes.

Learn more in the Lavender Ribbon Report at www.nvfc.org/lrr.



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ABOUT THE

National Volunteer Fire Council

The NVFC is the leading nonprofit membership association representing the interests of the volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services. The NVFC serves as the voice of the volunteer in the national arena and provides resources, programs, education, and advocacy for first responders across the nation. Membership in the NVFC is just **\$24** and comes with an array of benefits, including access to the First Responder Helpline, free training in the Virtual Classroom, dynamic conversation in the Volunteer Voices online community, an AD&D policy, and much more. Find information and join at www.nvfc.org/join. Learn more about the NVFC and access resources at www.nvfc.org.

DISCLAIMER

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

Standing Strong Together: A Message to Our Nation's Fire Service

By Sarah Lee, NVFC CEO

As we welcome you to this year's edition of *Firefighter Strong*, we want to begin with a heartfelt thank you. Across the country, first responders like you stand ready at a moment's notice – answering calls, protecting communities, and making a difference every single day. Your dedication, courage, and sacrifice do not go unnoticed.

Behind every first responder is a family who serves, too. Growing up in a fire service home, I know that having a first responder in the family affects more than the responder. The family may have to adjust schedules to accommodate trainings and calls, pick up more slack around the house when their loved one is out serving the community, or maybe they worry for the health and safety of their family member when that big call goes out. Families – you are seen and appreciated, and this newsletter is for you too.

The *Firefighter Strong* newsletter is designed with one goal in mind: to

help first responders stay healthy, safe, and fit for duty. Your well-being is essential – not only to your ability to respond but also to your ability to live a happy and fulfilling life in and out of the station. In these pages, you'll find trusted information and actionable resources focused on physical fitness, recruitment and retention, mental wellness, cancer prevention, family support, and effective leadership.

Whether you're a first responder, officer, non-operational volunteer, department leader, or a family member of a first responder, we hope you'll find inspiration and practical strategies you can use right away. Whether it's having enough volunteers to reduce burnout and ensure safe response, or physical or mental health, investing in health and well-being today helps ensure you – or your loved one – can continue to serve safely tomorrow.

The National Volunteer Fire Council is proud to stand with you. Together, we are *Firefighter Strong*. ■ ■

Your NVFC CEO



Sarah Lee
Sarah@nvfc.org

Do Volunteers Have a Responsibility in Community Risk Reduction?

By Ken Brown

Volunteer fire departments have been involved in fire prevention and safety activities for years, whether through education in local schools or smoke alarm installation programs or Fire Prevention Week initiatives. You may have heard the term Community Risk Reduction, or CRR, and thought it was just the new name for fire prevention. However, this is far from the case.

The truth is, while the fire problem is still prevalent throughout the U.S., with the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reporting just under 1.4 million fire calls in 2023, it only makes up about 3 percent of our workload nationally. The majority of calls (about 67% nationally) are emergency medical incidents. The other problem with categorizing CRR as “fire prevention” is that we tend to automatically place the responsibility for all CRR activities on those members that normally handle public fire safety education programs. This excludes those members that only “do fire suppression operations,” chief officers, EMS folks, training officers, and other members of the department. Every member of the fire service has a role in CRR.

So, what is CRR? By definition, CRR is the systematic means of identifying and prioritizing local fire and life safety risks and then proactively managing or mitigating those risks within the community. Through these efforts our goal is to better prepare the community to prevent, respond to, and recover from emergency incidents.

CRR is dependent on data. The first step to a successful CRR program is to conduct a community and department assessment. You must have the ability to access, collect, and analyze accurate and up-to-date data so that you can identify the risks and hazards that need to be addressed and can effectively tell the story to your constituents and community leaders. In the fire service we are very familiar with

gathering response data. However, in most CRR assessments we need to gather additional data such as demographics, economics, building types and construction, community services, hazards, event history, or critical structures. This is known as developing and understanding the **problem statement**.

Once you know the risks and have prioritized them, you need to develop mitigation strategies and tactics that utilize all aspects of the fire service, including public fire and life safety education and engagement, emergency planning, response crew training, and development/execution of emergency preparedness programs. This part of the CRR process is known as the **5 E's**: **E**ducation, **E**ngineering, **E**nforcement, **E**conomic Incentives, and **E**mergency Response. The 5 E's can help guide resource deployment, training programs, social media, incident command strategies, and policies.

Each community faces different risks, thus each community requires different interventions. Once you have collected and analyzed the data for your community and identified strategies and tactics for mitigating the risks, the next step is to prepare an **implementation plan**. This is done through the development of goals and expectations, identifying and allocating resources, and a process for monitoring ongoing progress.

Once the plan has been put into effect,

you enter the **evaluation** stage. Here you determine how to objectively monitor and measure the effectiveness of the CRR efforts, including how well your community is doing in terms of understanding its various risks. This is also the stage where you should modify or change strategies if/when needed to increase their effectiveness.

There are many resources available to help you in your efforts to implement the CRR process in your community. The National Volunteer Fire Council maintains an online resource center at www.nvfc.org/crr to help you get started. Vision 20/20 (<https://riskreduction.strategicfire.org/>) is dedicated entirely to helping departments and agencies through the CRR process.

That brings us to the basic question of this article – do volunteers have a responsibility in community risk reduction? The answer is a resounding YES! CRR goes beyond fire prevention and is the responsibility of the entire fire department to make it a success. The fire chief is the CRR chief, and every member plays a role. While education is usually a component of most CRR efforts, it takes a combination of two or more of the 5E's to address each community risk/hazard. Community risk reduction needs to become a philosophy and a way of thinking among the fire service that makes communities safer, not just another one and done prevention program. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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




Advice for New Emergency Medical Services Personnel

The road to success and becoming a seasoned EMS veteran of your department as a newbie can seem overwhelming. To help you transition into your department and avoid roadblocks along the way, we've collected tips, advice, and words of wisdom from members of the National Volunteer Fire Council's (NVFC) EMS/Rescue Section. Here's what they had to say!


Eric Quinney

Section Chair; Chief Administrative Officer of Uinta County (WY) Fire and Ambulance

 "You're not alone in this job. Your partners, whether they're more experienced or just starting out like you, are an invaluable resource. Learn from them, ask questions, and don't be afraid to lean on them for support or advice. Teamwork is key in emergency medical services."

Jules Scadden, Paramedic

Section Vice Chair; Director of Dysart (IA) Ambulance Service

 "My advice to new EMS practitioners at any level:


1. Be open. There are often methods seasoned providers learned in the field over time that make a skill learned in the classroom more efficient and effective than how it was taught from a textbook. Equally important is to respectfully share any new methods, research, innovations, skills, and techniques you have learned. New practitioners and seasoned veterans on a squad should be a partnership of respect and learning, which is ultimately best for the patients they serve.
2. Do not expect every call to be fast paced, exciting, lights and sirens, critical care calls. Many of our

responses are for sick patients who need minimal care but a lot of emotional support. Remember, holding someone's hand and providing emotional comfort on the way to the hospital is just as critical to patient care as advanced procedures and drug administration.

3. The most important advice is to always remember that everything you do and how you act on the stage directly affects the patient. Simply being calm, kind, and friendly is the best skill every practitioner should aim to perfect. EMS is always about what's best for the patient!"

T.J. Nedrow

Section Secretary; Washington State Fire Fighters' Association President Emeritus

 "Congratulations, you have stepped up to make a difference as an EMS provider. What's your plan?

Do you have a mentor? If the answer is no, find one. The best mentors are those that are wise, exhibit confidence, enable trust, and communicate appropriately and well. One might say seek a smart person; I say smart doesn't always mean wise. Wise mentors will have your back, hold you accountable, and encourage you.


Never take anything for granted. As you walk your never-ending journey of EMS, you will be faced with an untold number of decisions. Learn sound problem-solving techniques and never stop learning, for there will always be a new or unique situation.

Conflict is inevitable. It can be said that most people instinctively avoid conflict. However, with strong communication skills and constructive discussion, disagreements can be central to progress and success.

Our 'dash' sums up the entirety of our life. Don't miss an opportunity to make a difference – add value to your legacy."

Ed Mund

Section Director-at-Large; Volunteer at Riverside Fire Authority (Centralia, WA)

 "Every EMS career involves events with adverse outcomes. It is important to develop your own personal coping method for such events, the earlier the better. My first adverse event was a fatal motor vehicle crash. I was a new emergency medical responder and assigned to head stabilization while extricating the driver, who later died from a herniated spinal cord. Think that had an impact on me?

That's when I adopted this 3-question method that has offered healing and guided future performance for more than 30 years.

1. Did I create the patient's emergency? This is easy to always answer 'no' to when you arrive at a crisis that has already happened.
2. Did I do everything I could to the best of my knowledge and skills? The only correct answer to this question must be a brutally honest one. An honest 'yes' answer helps you heal. A 'no' answer requires immediate attention to identify and correct the problem(s).
3. What did I learn that I can use on future calls and teach to others? Capture these 'didn't learn that in my initial training' moments and look for opportunities to share with others who didn't learn them either.

Watch your veteran responders work. Talk with your mentors. Do some research. Find what provides comfort and career longevity for you." ■ ■ ■

TRAIN ON TOPICS THAT MATTER TO YOU

The NVFC offers a robust series of training opportunities – on-demand courses, live webinars, and in-person events.

HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE LEARNING TOPICS AVAILABLE:



LEADERSHIP TRACK:

Strengthen your leadership skills, knowledge, tools, and mindset.



NEW RECRUIT TRACK:

Prepare new members for their fire and emergency service journey.



HAZMAT RESPONSE:

Learn best practices for responding to hazmat and pipeline incidents.



ROADWAY RESPONSE:

Traffic incident management and electric vehicle response training.

Plus recruitment and retention, health and safety, wildfire, grants and funding, and much more!

Get started at www.nvfc.org/trainings.





YOU ARE NOT ALONE:

How the NVFC First Responder Helpline Supports You

By Nick Koscielniak

Firefighting and emergency response aren't just jobs – they're callings.

But with the immense pressure of protecting communities comes stress, trauma, and emotional challenges that can weigh heavily on first responders and their families. Volunteer firefighters, EMS providers, and rescue personnel dedicate their time to helping others, often balancing full-time careers and personal responsibilities alongside their service.

Yet, when it comes to seeking help for themselves, many hesitate. The stigma surrounding mental health in the fire service remains strong, and too often, responders suffer in silence. But here's the truth: *seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness.*

That's why the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) created the First Responder Helpline, a confidential, 24/7 support system designed specifically for volunteer emergency responders and their families.

What Happens When You Call the Helpline?

Making the first call can feel intimidating, but the process is straightforward and designed to provide immediate support.

A Compassionate Voice on the Other End – When you call, you'll be connected with a master's level clinician, known as

a Care Coordinator. They understand the unique challenges first responders face and are trained to provide the support you need in the moment.

Personalized Guidance and Support

The Care Coordinator will take the time to understand your situation, whether you're dealing with stress, family conflict, substance use, anxiety, or any other concern affecting your well-being.

Connecting You with the Right Help

– If additional care is needed, the Care Coordinator will facilitate your initial appointment with a licensed coach or counselor, ensuring you have access to a provider who fits your needs.

Ongoing Support When You Need It

Your Care Coordinator will follow up to ensure you're satisfied with the resources provided. If you need support between appointments, your Care Coordinator or one of their team members is a phone call away.

Breaking the Stigma

The fear of being judged or seen as "weak" prevents many first responders from seeking help. However, Chief Ed Mann, a longtime leader in the fire service, knows firsthand how life-changing it can be to reach out for support.

"Throughout my career, I've witnessed firsthand the immense pressures faced by first responders and their families," Mann said. "That's why the NVFC's First Responder Helpline is such a critical resource. I've lost count of how many times I've told fellow responders, 'Don't go it alone. It's okay to talk to someone.' I understand that reaching out can feel daunting, but it's vital to remember you're not isolated. There are people who genuinely care and are ready to support you."

Mann's message is clear: You are not alone. There is no shame in asking for help – only strength in taking care of yourself so you can continue to serve others.

Confidential, Free, and Tailored to First Responders

Unlike traditional employee assistance programs, which may not be available to volunteers, the NVFC First Responder Helpline is specifically designed to address the needs of volunteer firefighters and EMS providers. The service is 100 percent confidential and available to NVFC members and their household family members at no additional cost.

First responders face a unique set of challenges – long shifts, exposure to traumatic events, and the pressure of making life-or-death decisions. Over time,

these stressors can take a toll, leading to anxiety, depression, and even substance use. Relationship struggles, financial worries, or the grief that follows the loss of a colleague or loved one can add to the burden.

The NVFC First Responder Helpline is here to provide guidance and support for all these concerns and more. Whether you need help managing stress, coping with anxiety, navigating family conflicts, or overcoming an addiction, the Care Coordinators are trained to listen and connect you with the right resources. They can also assist with financial or legal concerns, problem gambling, and even child or elder care, ensuring that responders and their families have the support they need in every aspect of life. No matter what you're facing, there is help and hope.

Why Taking That First Step Matters

Mental and emotional struggles don't just affect you – they impact your job performance, relationships, and overall quality of life. Seeking help doesn't mean you're unfit for service. In fact, it makes you

a stronger, healthier, and more effective responder.

"Personally, I can attest to the power of seeking help," Mann shares. "I've navigated the mental health system myself, and it made a profound difference. If you're struggling, please reach out to the NVFC's First Responder Helpline. You deserve support, and you are absolutely not alone."

Take the First Step Today

If you or a fellow responder is struggling, don't wait until it feels unbearable. Call the

NVFC First Responder Helpline and take that first step toward support.

Join the NVFC to access the Helpline at www.nvfc.org/join-nvfc.

Learn more about the NVFC First Responder Helpline at www.nvfc.org/helpline.

Your service to your community is invaluable, but your well-being matters just as much. Remember, *strong responders seek support when they need it.* ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Koscielniak is the director of strategic communications at BHS, the company that provides service for the NVFC First Responder Helpline. With seven years in healthcare marketing and 11 years in sales and account management, he brings a deep understanding of connecting with diverse audiences. He's known for being a skilled communicator, with expertise in writing, social media, webinars, podcasting, and thought leadership. Outside of work, he enjoys spending time outdoors with his wife and daughter.



Safety first, every minute of every day

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We put safety first every minute of every day - for our people, contractors, and communities. Our commitment to safety first aligns with the NVFC's mission and we are proud to support and collaborate with firefighters and emergency responders across the nation to build a safe, reliable and affordable energy future.



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Turning Negatives into Positives: Strengthening Community Relationships

BY JOE MARUCA

I pulled into a volunteer fire station. The doors were up, an engine was out on the ramp, and there was a firefighter outside rinsing off the truck. In my travels, I stop at a lot of volunteer stations to talk and learn about them. I was a volunteer firefighter/EMT for 25 years, and then chief of a majority volunteer fire department for 20 more years. I've gotten a lot of good ideas from visiting other fire stations.

As I was speaking with the firefighter, he suddenly stopped what he was doing and went rushing towards the street waving both middle fingers at a passing car and shouting, "Fork You! Fork You! Fork You!" until the car was gone. (Okay, he didn't say "Fork," but you can guess what he actually said.) Then he proudly marched back over to me and announced, "That was the chairman of the Board of Selectmen. He never gives us what we want. He needs to learn that we're all just volunteers, and he can't tell us how run our fire department."

In another encounter, I was talking with a volunteer firefighter from one of the mid-Atlantic states, and he told me about a time when a town councilor questioned his chief about the need for a replacement or additional engine. To make their point, the firefighters got all their trucks and paraded, with their sirens blaring, around the block where this councilor lived. "We showed him who was boss and that you don't question us," he told me.

Many fire chiefs and firefighters tell me their towns won't give them enough

money to run their departments properly. They tell me they can't afford new gear, to fix the truck, or add some training. And while there definitely are financial barriers that keep smalltown fire departments woefully underfunded, maybe part of the problem is how volunteer fire departments behave towards elected officials and the people they serve.

Yes, the two stories I shared here are extreme, but I encounter a lot of fire departments that have poor relationships with their communities, especially their elected officials. It's as if the town and the firefighters see each other as a necessary evil. You can't have a fire department without a town, and you can't run a town without a fire department, so they put up with each other. But that doesn't mean they've learned to get along with each other. We've all seen the news stories about volunteer fire departments quitting in a fight with their elected officials.

Waging or continuing a fight between the fire department and the town they serve is counterproductive and ultimately will not have the desired results. Even if somehow progress is made towards the department's goals in the immediate future, the department will suffer in the long term from these poor relationships and negative public perceptions.

The fire chief plays a crucial role in fostering positive connections between the department and community. Today's volunteer fire chief must be the chief relationship officer of the fire department. This means not only being the public

face of the volunteer fire department but also maintaining strong and lasting relationships with community leaders. The chief must ensure that firefighters are always interacting with citizens in a positive manner. It also means that the fire chief must align the department's mission and operations with the needs and desires of the community and provide for consistent delivery of services.

The fire chief sets the tone and is the role model for how their members will act. When dealing with public officials and citizens, if the chief is disrespectful or hostile, then the firefighters will follow suit. People don't want to pay taxes or give donations to support firefighters who they perceive as disrespectful or rude to them. It is critical that the chief is the master of their own emotions and always demonstrates restraint and professionalism.

It is also important to drill in this pivotal fact: When firefighters interact with the public, on or off-duty, they are representing the volunteer fire department. In small towns, everyone knows who is on the fire department. Every interaction reflects upon the department.

A chief needs to communicate, understand, and collaborate with community leaders. During my tenure as chief, I had breakfast once a month with the chair of our municipal governing board. Through these meetings we established mutual respect and understanding. We got to know each other

well and talked a lot about family. We maintained a good line of communication. We still disagreed at times, but we were able to discuss our disagreements privately rather than argue in a public meeting. I was able to figure out potential barriers and concerns that the community could have to my ideas before I proposed them. This allowed me to better align my plans so they would be more likely to be approved. I didn't always get what I wanted and there were a lot of ideas that I never proposed because I was able to use this relationship to test them at the breakfast counter. However, there were a lot of things that did get approved or that I was able to adjust to make them more palatable to the community before raising the issues publicly.

Maintaining good relationships with residents and officials is also good for recruitment and retention. Who wants to be part of a fire department that's at war with its community and its elected leaders? It is hard to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters and EMS providers

in a hostile environment. Maybe some of the old "war-horses" in your organization like a good fight and some people seem to thrive on chaos, but most people want to do a good job, be respected, and not operate under a siege mentality. This means making our work as volunteer firefighters about the mission and not about us.

I can't emphasize enough how much building and maintaining positive community relationships will enhance your department. It will help with funding, recruitment, retention, reputation, and respect for your department and its members. Whatever your personal grievances are, always remember to focus on the mission and treat your customers as you would want to be treated. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe Maruca was chief of the West Barnstable (MA) Fire Department from 2005 until his retirement in 2024. He previously served as a volunteer firefighter/EMT, lieutenant, and captain for the West Barnstable Fire Department for 10 years and as a volunteer firefighter for 18 years with the Sandwich Fire Department and Longmeadow Fire Department. Maruca is an attorney and received his BA in business administration from Boston University's Questrom School of Management and a BS in fire department administration from SUNY Empire State College. He is a member of the National Volunteer Fire Council Board of Directors and is chair of the NFPA 1917 Technical Committee on Ambulances.



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WHEN YOU GO IN, WE GO IN WITH YOU.

Is Immersive Learning the Future of the Fire Service?

BY KEN WILLETTE

The past decade has seen periodic changes in fire service training curriculum, driven by new knowledge and skills based on research and field experience. The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) has been part of that change by bringing the voice of the volunteer fire service forward on many National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Technical Committees, curriculum development projects, and serving on numerous research advisory panels.

Key partners of the North American volunteer and on-call fire service are the state and provincial directors of fire training and education. These directors are members of the North American Fire Training Directors (NAFTD) and are recognized as the authorities having jurisdiction (AHJs) to oversee fire training in their geopolitical area. They are responsible for delivering training to all members of the fire service, and as a training delivery system, these AHJs collectively had over 1.2 million fire service students participate in their training in 2020.

If you have been in the fire service for any length of time, you have experienced technology providing new ways to conduct learning. It used to be salt tables and overhead projectors, then carousel slide decks and audio tapes, followed by video tapes, and in the past decades, computers and LCD projectors. Through each technology evolution, NAFTD members have adapted to ensure excellent training and learning took place, regardless of how it was delivered.

Today we have seen a quantum leap in delivering training with the introduction of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) systems as tools for fire service training. Things have evolved from the

apparatus driver simulator, a fixed prop where screens surround the student driver, to wearable goggles and vests that drop the firefighter into a virtual world that closely replicates the reality of structural fire attack. In this virtual world, students can learn basic skills to prepare them for NFPA 1403 compliant live fire training as well as actual structural fire attack. Because this training environment is virtual, and the student is exposed to minimal risk, there is also the potential to chip away at the 8,000 plus injuries that occur during training each year.

The military, aviation, and medical disciplines use AR and VR for training with great success. Now the question is, "Is it right for the fire service?"

To answer this, NAFTD, in collaboration with the Fire Protection Research Foundation, has secured funding through the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) to study the application of immersive learning on firefighter skills, health, and safety during training. Our first project was the Firefighter Immersive Learning Environment, or FILE, study. The NVFC was represented on the project's Technical Panel by Charlie Kludt, director from South Dakota.

A key deliverable of this project was to provide a roadmap on the use of immersive learning for the fire service and create a web knowledge base for the fire service to use as it considers utilizing immersive learning for its training activities.

If you want to learn more about immersive learning and the FILE study, check out the video *Using Virtual Reality to Train Firefighters* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2G-DJS_lyM.

The final report detailed how the fire service views immersive learning technology (ILT), noting the following:

- **Live Fire Training:** The use of immersive learning should serve as a complement to in-person live fire training and not replace it.
- **Applications:** Immersive learning has great promise for application to all levels of firefighter and fire officer training. While it is currently used for pump operations, live fire attack skills enhancement, and increasing situational awareness, it should be leveraged for hazmat, tech rescue, EMS training, and firefighter recruitment and retention.
- **Common Documentation Platforms:** Provide common standardized dashboards to facilitate documentation that is needed from different organizations (e.g., national, state, local, etc.).
- **Adaptable to Hybrid/Blended Training:** Immersive learning environments are recommended as a very important part of hybrid/blended learning and should, as technology continues to develop, evolve into a more important role.
- **Layered Content:** Support development of wholistic curriculums that utilize training content in a layered manner resulting in achieving desired training outcomes.
- **Job Performance Requirements (JPRs):** Integrate use of JPRs as performance metrics and produce documentation that can be used for skills, validation, and certification.
- **Standardization:** Generate language in applicable NFPA standards to address immersive learning environments (and update NFPA 1451 Annex C). Consider a separate standard for immersive learning technology.

In 2024, NAFTD and the Fire Protection Research Foundation received a second AFG award to fund the next phase of research into immersive learning. This project is called TRAIN: Training Responders' Awareness using Immersive Next-Gen Technology. Once again, Charlie Kludt is representing the NVFC on the project. The goal of TRAIN is to evaluate the application of ILT training tools to enhance firefighter practical and cognitive skills, creating a positive impact on firefighter health and safety during fireground operations.

To accomplish this, we are looking at the specific use-cases of fire apparatus driver/operator pumper ILT training to develop and validate an evaluation tool to enable the fire service to assess ILT training tools. Specific project objectives include the following:

- Conduct a survey of training academies and fire departments to understand the use of ILT by the fire service and identify factors that influence the acceptance of ILT by instructors and learners.
- Assimilate and review if extant learner performance checklists sufficiently

capture the transfer of knowledge and skills from ILT tools to real-world practice.

- Develop and validate an evaluation tool for use by fire service organizations looking to invest in ILT.
- Organize a summit to maintain cross-dialogue between the fire service and technology innovators to share the needs for future implementation of ILT.

You can find the roadmap document and all FILE project documents at www.nfpa.org/ffimmersivellearning.

So, is immersive learning the future of the fire service? Maybe, but rest assured, the collaboration between NAFTD and the NVFC will ensure your needs are addressed and your voice is heard. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken Willette is a 35-year fire service veteran and serves as executive director of the North American Fire Training Directors, providing support to the member organizations that train more than 1.1 million emergency responders in the U.S. and Canada. Willette has worked as a Department of Defense aircraft rescue firefighter, volunteer firefighter, municipal firefighter, shift commander, and fire chief. He spent eight years leading teams that supported first responder standards development and fire service solutions at the National Fire Protection Association. He is a former president of the Fire Chiefs Association of Massachusetts, a graduate of the National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officers Program, and received a bachelor's degree in fire protection from SUNY Stony Brook.

Come Join Us!

Most people retire to find a slower pace of life and enjoy the hobbies and activities they enjoy the most. But there's more to a meaningful and fulfilling retirement than just leisure, and no one knows that better than those who volunteer to serve others.

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Why PRIORITIZING Health and Safety Helps You Recruit and Keep Great People

BY WALTER A. CAMPBELL



Every day, departments across the country struggle to answer one question: How do we get people to join and stay?

Whether your department is entirely volunteer, paid, or somewhere in between, you're asking individuals to step into one of the most demanding and selfless roles in public service. The question isn't just how we fill our rosters. It's how we build an environment where people feel they belong and want to give their best.

The answer starts with how we take care of our own.

Over my career, both as a recruiter in the United States Air Force and a volunteer recruitment officer at Burtonsville (MD) Volunteer Fire Department, I've seen firsthand how a department's culture around health and safety can make or break its ability to recruit and retain. A firehouse that cares for its people isn't just checking a box. It's sending a powerful message: "We've got your back."

The Power of Care

When I first started recruiting for the Air Force, I quickly realized people weren't joining for the reasons we thought. Sure, the benefits and travel opportunities mattered. But what sealed the deal was trust. Parents wanted to know if their children would be looked after. Young recruits wanted to feel seen and

supported, not just processed and pushed into boots.

The conversations I had weren't really about jobs. They were about people, and when I transitioned into the volunteer fire service, that lesson stuck with me. At Burtonsville, I wasn't selling a job. I was offering purpose, belonging, and experience. But with that came responsibility. If I brought someone in, I had to be sure they were entering a place where their mental and physical well-being was valued.

One of the most important tools we can offer our people is a department culture grounded in health and safety.

What Recruits Are Looking For Today

The next generation of firefighters and EMTs are not just asking, "What will I be doing?" They're asking, "What will this do to me?"

Gen Z and Millennials, who now make up a growing portion of new applicants, are the most wellness-conscious generations. They want to serve and have a purpose but also care deeply about balance, mental health, and long-term impact.

At Burtonsville, I've had recruits ask: "What kind of support do you offer after a traumatic call?" "How do you clean your

gear?" "Are there people I can talk to if I feel overwhelmed?"

These questions tell us something critical. Recruits aren't just joining based on the number of calls or size of apparatus. They're joining physical, emotional, and cultural departments where they feel safe.

A clean, healthy, supportive firehouse is not a soft one. It's smart and strong in all the right ways.

Retention Starts Long Before the First Fire

Retention doesn't begin after a year of service or at the first awards banquet. It starts the moment someone walks through the door.

I remember a firefighter at Burtonsville who had been around for years. He was a solid guy, reliable, and never complained. But slowly, he started pulling back. He missed drills, stopped signing up for shifts, and eventually disappeared from the station's day-to-day rhythm.

One night, we sat down. Just two people talking, no pressure. He opened up about the weight he'd been carrying. Multiple tough calls. Personal stress. No time to decompress. He never felt like he had the space to say anything until that moment.

That conversation changed how I saw

everything. It wasn't about fixing him. It was about making space for him to feel supported. That firefighter stayed, not because we had all the answers, but because he didn't feel invisible anymore.

People stay when they feel seen. They stay when they know their department genuinely cares.

You Can't Market Your Way Out of a Bad Culture

I've helped departments nationwide develop high-impact recruitment campaigns, including videos, web sites, social media content, and even theater ads. But no matter how good the marketing is, it can't cover up a toxic culture.

You can't Photoshop trust. And you can't put a filter over dysfunction.

If your department doesn't prioritize its people, the story will get out. New members will pick up on it immediately, and current members will quietly walk away. No amount of slogans or Facebook boosts can bring them back.

Culture is the foundation of recruitment and retention, including wellness, respect, and safety.

Creating a Culture Where People Want to Stay

So how do you build a place where people want to serve – and keep serving? It starts with everyday actions. Not major programs or massive budgets. Just intentional leadership and consistent support.

Here's what I recommend:

- **Assign a Wellness Lead or Peer Support Contact:** Designate someone who checks in regularly after tough calls and as a routine part of your operation. Let your members know there's always someone to talk to.
- **Provide Visible Mental Health Resources:** Put materials on bulletin boards, in day rooms, and digital group chats. Talk about them. Normalize conversations around mental health. Use downtime during training nights

to introduce tools like the National Volunteer Fire Council's Share the Load program.

- **Train Officers to Lead with Empathy:** Technical knowledge is important, but so is emotional intelligence. Officers should know how to spot burnout, listen actively, and lead in a way that builds trust.
- **Support Members Returning from Leave:** If someone takes time off for mental or physical health reasons, create a reintegration plan. Have a designated officer check in with them. Let them re-engage at their own pace, without stigma.
- **Reaffirm Skills After Long Absences:** Before a member returns to full duty, let them ease back in. Schedule refreshers and low-pressure training drills. This will rebuild their confidence and assure the team that they're ready.
- **Involve Families:** Invite spouses, partners, and kids to celebrations, open houses, and wellness training. When families feel included, they become advocates for your department's success.
- **Recognize Progress:** A simple "thank you" or public acknowledgment of effort can go a long way. People want to know that their hard work matters, especially when it involves personal sacrifices.

It's Not About Being Perfect – It's About Being Present

No department has all the answers. We're all learning as we go. But what makes a difference is your commitment to try. When members see their leadership

showing up, asking questions, and making small improvements, it builds trust.

I remember when one of our officers took the initiative to check in with every member after a particularly bad MVA. It was nothing formal, just a conversation. That simple act had more impact than any training session we had done that month.

That's the kind of leadership that sticks with people. Ask yourself:

- If a member in your department were struggling right now, would they know where to go?
- Would their team know how to support them?
- Do your members feel that their well-being matters as much as their performance?

If the answer is unclear, that's where the work begins.

Being *Firefighter Strong* isn't just about physical strength or tactical skills. It's about building a department that values people as much as performance.

Health and safety are not checkboxes on a policy sheet. They're commitments. They are the foundation of recruitment. The heartbeat of retention. And the clearest way to show your people that you care.

If you want to attract new members and keep the ones you have, lead with care. Show your commitment through action. Create a place where people feel like they belong. That's not just a strong firehouse. That's a firehouse worth joining. ■ ■

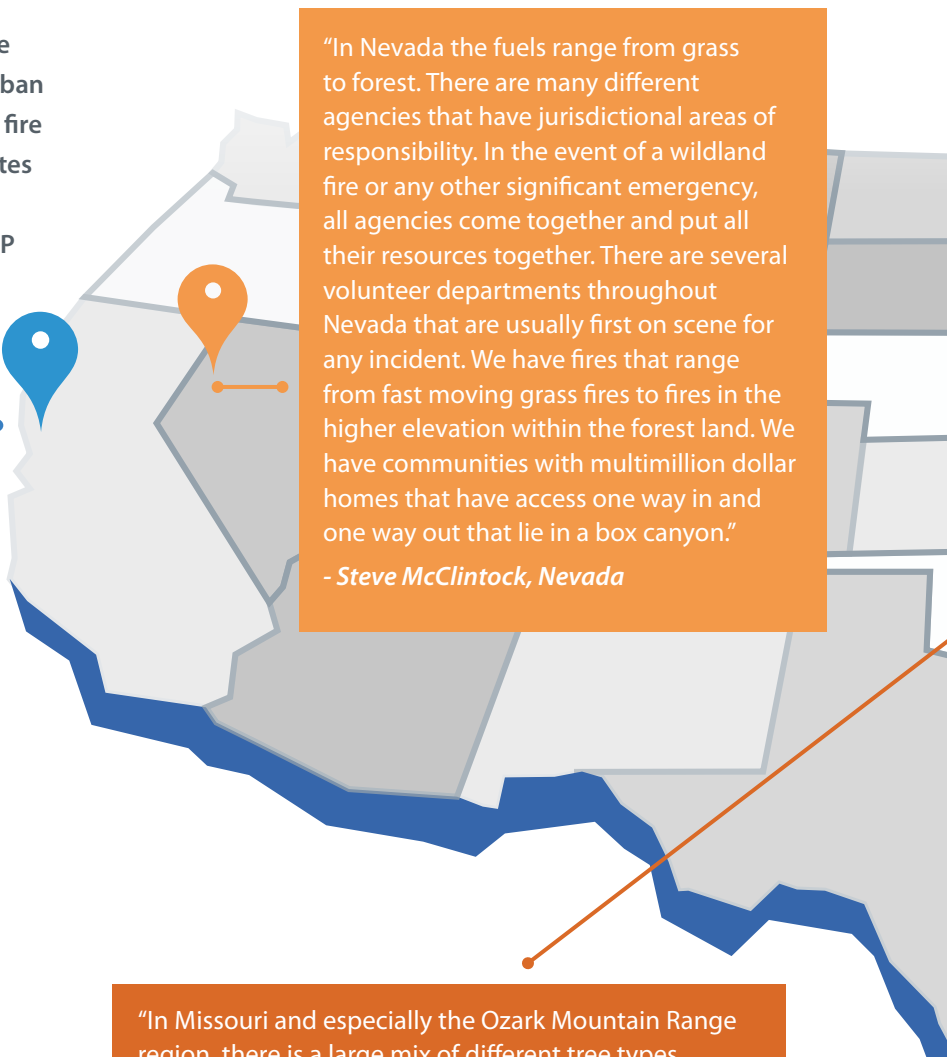


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Walter A. Campbell is a highly skilled recruitment and retention strategist at First Arriving, known for his innovative ideas, strategies, and solutions that help organizations attract top candidates. With over 20 years of experience as a U.S. Air Force recruiter, Campbell profoundly understands what it takes to build a successful team. Based in Frederick, MD, he has earned certification as a thought leader and is also recognized as a morale and humor enhancement professional, bringing an upbeat approach to his work.

Wildland Fire Preparedness: A National Perspective

Each year the destruction and devastation caused by wildland fire increases. Communities across the country are at risk. The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) and U.S. Forest Service developed the Wildland Fire Assessment Program (WFAP) to train fire service volunteers to assess homes in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) to help make their communities more fire adapted before a wildfire strikes. Here, WFAP Advocates provide perspective and mitigation efforts regarding wildland fires in their regions. Learn more about WFAP and access free training and resources at www.nvfc.org/wfap.



"Santa Clara County (CA), better known as Silicon Valley, has a large amount of high wildland fire danger wildland-urban interface. After two very large fire complexes in 2020 and rising insurance costs, many WUI residents are quite aware of the risks. We have one of the most active FireSafe Councils anywhere, which is engaged in planning, education, mitigation, and other projects, including the recent launch of an ambassador program for neighbor-to-neighbor Home Ignition Zone and Home Hardening assessments. A rising number of communities have achieved Firewise recognition and are helping to expand that program. Last year, the NVFC trained firefighters in home assessment, which has been welcomed by homeowners in the high-risk zones."

- Nick Arnett, California

"In Nevada the fuels range from grass to forest. There are many different agencies that have jurisdictional areas of responsibility. In the event of a wildland fire or any other significant emergency, all agencies come together and put all their resources together. There are several volunteer departments throughout Nevada that are usually first on scene for any incident. We have fires that range from fast moving grass fires to fires in the higher elevation within the forest land. We have communities with multimillion dollar homes that have access one way in and one way out that lie in a box canyon."

- Steve McClintock, Nevada

"In Missouri and especially the Ozark Mountain Range region, there is a large mix of different tree types. With weather changing, we have seen our normal wildland fire season go from a few months to almost all year now. We've seen an increase in growth and overpopulation of cedar trees in the past 10 years without any forest management controls, so it is extremely important for homeowners to take it upon themselves to do mitigation of their properties and especially around their homes. The Wildland Fire Assessment Program is extremely important to help decrease the potential for home and property loss."

- Jeff Romines, Missouri

"Here in southwest Michigan, most local volunteer fire departments are operating in the response mode, and very rarely are proactive when it comes to wildland fires. Our local departments respond to a lot of grass and vegetation fires. But recently, many fire departments put out Burn Bans as we had very dry conditions with warmer temperatures and high winds that were causing the vegetation to dry out and be very vulnerable to fires. These Burn Bans help to educate the public on the weather conditions in our area and try to help reduce the risk of wildland fires doing damage."

- Doug deBest, Michigan



"There are two giant misconceptions surrounding 'wildfires' that lead to failures in preparedness and mitigation efforts that end up costing homes and lives when a large wildfire does break out:

1. 'Wildfire' or 'wildland fire' means 'Out West' or 'in the wilderness.' It doesn't – it means grass fire, brush fire, forest fire, woods fire, whatever local term you use. If it's an outdoor fire and involves vegetation of any kind, it's a wildfire. Wildfire can spread to unprepared structures, which contributes to the fire intensity and spread via ember wash that can catch more structures on fire, resulting in urban conflagration.
2. 'It can't happen here.' Just because it hasn't yet or hasn't recently, does not mean it can't. It might not be likely, but it can still happen, and often when you're not ready for it. Any area with a decent buildup of vegetative fuels (grass, brush, leaf litter, timber, and slash) can play host to a dangerous wildfire. Drought plays a big factor in how easily wildfires can be started, how intensely they burn, and how quickly they spread. The reality is that an area that doesn't see many wildfires is probably the worst-prepared for when 'the big one' breaks out."

- Mark Howell, Missouri

"On March 26, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation Bureau of Forest Fire Control District 1 conducted a simulated wildfire response training and drill at the Department of Fish and Games Hyannis Ponds Wildlife Management area in Hyannis, MA. Municipal fire departments were divided into three task forces that rotated through three training stations. Station 1 included pump and roll training, progressive hose lays, and drip torch operations. Station 2 consisted of direct and indirect fire suppression techniques utilizing a variety of hand tools in the woods. Station 3 had firefighters identifying hazards, structure assessments, and protection with a simulated fire approaching, and identifying escape routes and safety zones.

Over 100 firefighters participated in the exercise, and the training was very well received by all. The knowledge gained will be instrumental in the event of a local wildfire. The other big benefit was getting firefighters together from multiple departments, because in case of a large incident when firefighters from different departments have to work together it shouldn't be 'Who are you' but rather 'How are you.'"

- Joshua Nigro, Massachusetts

Leveraging Social Media for Fire Department Community Engagement, Recruitment, and Retention: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

BY SAVANNAH MADDISON

When I first joined Maury County (TN) Fire Department in 2021, I never imagined that I would eventually be serving as the public information officer (PIO) for the department. With no fire service experience, I entered as a support member simply offering help with the rehabilitation of firefighters on scene. My background as a pageant competitor and social media influencer had nothing to do with firefighting. However, my journey has taught me that you should never limit yourself by labels or doubt your potential.

As time went on, I became more confident in my role, gradually gaining experience on the scene and even practicing with the tools that firefighters use. Soon, I decided to pursue the fire academy, and it was then that I truly learned the importance of not doubting your abilities. I began to realize that the skills I had gained in other areas of life could be applied to the fire service in ways I hadn't imagined.

The turning point in my journey came when I was called into a meeting with the chief and deputy chief of our department. At that time, our fire department didn't have a robust social media presence. We had an outdated web site and limited social media outreach. The chief asked me if I would volunteer to help revamp our web site and modernize our Facebook page. With a background in social media marketing, graphic design, and television, I saw an opportunity to make an impact.

I quickly put together a proposal to enhance our department's online presence, and just a few days later, I was unexpectedly appointed as the department's PIO. A room full of chiefs, who had never met me before, unanimously voted for me to take on this responsibility. I was shocked. But the chiefs saw something in me — my media experience, my ability to grow a brand, and my potential to bring fresh ideas to the table. It was a risk for them, but they trusted me with a role that I had no direct experience in due to my background in public relations.

I dived in immediately, learning everything I could about public information, what could be shared, and how to best highlight our department's work. However, I soon encountered a frustrating reality: sharing the great work our firefighters were doing on social media sometimes wasn't celebrated by the fire service itself. Firefighters are sometimes criticized for receiving recognition, with the term "t-shirt firefighters" being used to describe those who receive recognition for their efforts. This term, I realized, stemmed from a deeper culture — the fire service's long-standing culture of avoiding the spotlight and keeping heads down. Humility is a beautiful and important part of what we do in the fire service, but if we never share the great work we are doing, we will never grow.

Here's the truth I discovered: raising awareness for great work, creating visibility, and fundraising for your department are not the same as being a "t-shirt firefighter." Fire departments often neglect to share their members' accomplishments, and as a result, they remain invisible to the public. This lack of visibility leads to challenges in both recruitment and retention, as people are unaware of the incredible work being done. Public and internal recognition matters — it boosts morale, fosters a sense of pride, and attracts potential recruits. Without visibility, volunteer fire departments can't build the support they need. I was fortunate to be a part of a department that understood this and took steps to increase our visibility, growing our department substantially in all areas!

Recruitment and retention are ongoing challenges for the fire service, but I truly believe that a strong social media presence, paired with a positive departmental culture, can be a solution. How did I make it work, and how can you do the same? Here are some key steps to leverage social media and build a strong community engagement strategy for your department:

1 Find a Person with Social Media Talent

The first step is to identify

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GROW YOUR FIRE FAMILY



Looking for volunteers for your fire or EMS department?

NVFC's recruitment portal has customizable recruitment materials, ready-to-use PSAs, event planning guides, and more.

Start recruiting at Portal.NVFC.org



someone within your department or community who has a passion for social media and is willing to volunteer to help build your department's online presence. This person might have experience in graphic design, web site development, or even content creation. Firefighting skills can be learned, but social media skills can be leveraged immediately to make a significant impact.

If you have someone within your department who shows promise, take a chance on them. Help them to attend PIO training. Provide them with the resources they need to succeed, and allow them to grow your department's presence in the digital world.

2 Go Live

Use Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram to host live videos where you can update your community on department happenings, engage with followers in real time, and share successes. Interview members about their love of volunteerism. It's also a great opportunity to recognize the hard work of department members. A fun and powerful tool for building connection and celebration!

3 Showcase Your Department's Work

One of the first things I did was send out press releases that gained national attention. Within six months, our department had significantly increased its visibility. We revamped our web site, adding a donation feature that allowed community members to contribute financially at any time of the year. We also introduced subscription giving options to ensure ongoing support for the department.

It's essential to create a narrative that showcases the human side of your department – your firefighters are not just doing a job; they're committed to serving and protecting their community.

4 Be Creative with Community Outreach

Social media offers a variety of opportunities to engage with your community beyond just posting about

emergencies. We reached out to local artists, offering our station as a set for music videos. Two artists, Josh Ross and Hayden Coffman, jumped on the opportunity, and their music videos gained millions of views – one video now has 4.5 million views and the other has 2.7 million views. This type of creative outreach not only brought positive attention to our department but also helped us connect with different segments of the community.

Taking the time to engage in public information events, like bringing an apparatus to a local fair, festival, or gathering for the public to see, is powerful! School visits can also help garner incredible support from local families.

5 Build a Positive Department Culture

A strong, positive department culture is essential for recruitment and retention. A department that celebrates its members' successes, supports one another, and values the contributions of all members, regardless of their rank or tenure, will retain talent. Social media is a powerful tool to highlight this positive culture. Show your community that your department is more than just a team; it's a family that works together to make a difference. Use social media as a tool to post weekly shoutouts highlighting your volunteers!

6 Foster Local Partnerships

Local influencers, businesses, and organizations can be powerful allies in building your department's online presence. By collaborating with them, you can amplify your message and gain

support from a wider audience. Local influencers, especially, can help you reach potential recruits and donors who may not have been aware of your department before. You can invite local influencers for station tours, encouraging them to share the tour on social media.

The Results: Department Growth and Increased Success

Through hard work and innovative outreach, our volunteer department was able to secure more local funding and hire multiple full-time firefighter positions to cover all shifts. Our department received millions of views through positive national media attention on successful scenes, such as baby deliveries and rope rescues. We have countless community members expressing interest in joining, leading to our largest ever recruit classes. Local leaders have invested more in our department than ever before. This success wouldn't have been possible without leveraging social media to build visibility, foster community support, and highlight the incredible work of our firefighters. I am so proud of how far we've come.

In conclusion, if you want to improve community engagement, recruitment, and retention, social media is a powerful tool at your disposal. Be creative, be bold, and embrace the opportunity to make your department's work visible to the public. And remember – never doubt your department's potential. With the right mindset and a willingness to try new things, you can make a lasting impact in your community. ■ ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Savannah Maddison is a firefighter and social media influencer based in Nashville, TN. She serves as the public information officer for the Maury County Volunteer Fire Department and is an advanced emergency medical technician with the Nashville Fire Department. In addition to her emergency services career, Maddison is a published author, a prominent media personality, and a leading figure in the digital space, where she has garnered hundreds of thousands of followers on Instagram and TikTok through her advocacy, inspiring content, and community engagement.

Firefighters and EMS providers are constantly helping others.

Don't forget it's okay to get help for yourself.

As an emergency responder, you regularly encounter traumatic and stressful situations. It's normal for this to take a toll on your mental wellbeing.

When you need extra support, turn to these resources from the National Volunteer Fire Council.



Share the Load™ Program

Access critical behavioral health resources for you, your crew, and your family.

nvfc.org/help



Directory of Behavioral Health Professionals

Find local providers who are equipped to help emergency responders and their families with behavioral health needs.

nvfc.org/provider-directory



Psychologically Healthy Fire Departments Toolkit

Learn how leaders can support the wellbeing of their members to create a successful, high-performing department.

nvfc.org/phfd



NVFC First Responder Helpline

NVFC members and their household families can call 24/7 for assistance with a crisis or a variety of work-life stresses. The Helpline is offered through Provident by Business Health Services and is supported by First Alert.

nvfc.org/helpline

The Firehouse and the Homefront:

How Families Can Support Their Firefighter

BY WENDY C. NORRIS

From a young age, I knew that I wanted to be a firefighter when I grew up. I was a curious child and would often chase after the fire trucks and ambulances that responded to a small apartment complex located at the end of my neighborhood. I would pepper them with a thousand questions and insist on holding a radio or a stethoscope. Thankfully, those first responders were always kind and patient with me. As I transitioned into adolescence, my passion for the fire service only deepened when I joined the local Fire Explorers program and worked part-time at the fire department for the chief's secretary. I was hooked.

When I graduated from high school, I completed the fire academy, received my EMS certifications, secured a job in the fire service, and joined the local volunteer fire department. I was enamored with the fire service, living out my dream, so one would assume that when I met my husband, a firefighter/paramedic, we would be a match made in heaven. We built our little family of two around our passion for the fire service. We worked and volunteered in the industry. Almost all of our friends were first responders. We talked shop, attended conferences, deployed with response teams to disasters, and competed on rescue teams. Our lives felt like a little piece of heaven on earth, until it wasn't.

As the years ticked by, our family grew from two to three when we adopted our daughter. Friend dynamics changed, schedules were shifted around, and we no

longer had the capacity to accommodate all the things we loved to do when we were just a married couple. What we did hold onto was our work within the fire service. My husband held a position in a career department and served as a chief officer for our local volunteer fire department. I was sidelined by an injury, so I was no longer able to work as a firefighter, but I still remained active with the same volunteer department that my husband was a part of. We juggled raising a child, maintaining friendships, working, and trying to meet the demands of a volunteer department that was constantly in a state of flux. As the demands of the department increased, I began to feel the stress and strain affecting our family dynamics.

The complexities of being a volunteer firefighter run deep. Not only does a volunteer firefighter need to keep up with the responsibilities that they have with the agency they serve, but they must also meet the needs of their families, a job, maybe school, friendships, and other activities and groups that they are a part of. Today's culture demands that we keep all these proverbial plates spinning perfectly and in sync. Considering all the tasks and risks involved with being a volunteer firefighter, it's not a wonder that stress levels can be incredibly high for them and their loved ones.

Families play a vital role in supporting the health and well-being of firefighters. When families provide emotional support,

it helps the firefighter strengthen their resilience. Resilience refers to the ability to manage stress and recover from challenging experiences. The resilience that is strengthened through family relationships and social circles can act as a buffer and help inoculate the firefighter from the fallout of acute stress and trauma to which they are frequently exposed. According to research, social and familial support is a key factor in developing resilience, enabling individuals to cope better with daily stressors as well as stressful work environments. These supportive relationships offer emotional support and practical resources that can help shield the individual from the adverse effects of the job on their well-being.

So, how can a family support the health and well-being of their firefighter? The most important thing to consider is that each family member practices their own self-care and maintains optimal health and wellness to the best of their ability. Holistically healthy individuals are better equipped to support others in their care.

The Importance of Communication

Consistent communication, even when the conversation is hard, is also one of the most important ways a firefighter family can maintain strong relationships. Communication is like the concrete in the foundation of a house. The higher the quality of materials used for the foundation, the better the structural support of the house will be.



Good communication helps maintain connections and understanding amidst the chaos and unpredictability of the job – especially for volunteer firefighters who are often pulled away at a moment's notice, any time of the day or night. Strong communication also prevents resentment and isolation from taking root, which are common issues for first responder families. Talking regularly with one another, even setting aside specific times to sit down and have a conversation, allows family members to check in with each other, express their needs, and offer support in ways that truly help.

One of the most delicate balances in communicating with a loved one who is a firefighter is knowing when to give them space and when to encourage conversation. After a difficult response, the individual may need some time to mentally process their experience before they are

ready to talk about it. In those moments, offering comfort without pushing for a response – like a hand on the shoulder, a hug, or a snack or meal waiting for them – can speak louder than words. However, if their withdrawal lasts more than a day or two, or they begin to isolate, it may be time to ask, “How are you really doing?” or “Would it be helpful to talk with someone about your experience?” The key is patience and presence – being available without pressure and letting your loved one know they don’t have to carry the weight alone.

Maintaining Routines

Families can support their firefighters by helping them build and maintain healthy routines and boundaries. Creating mutually agreed-upon boundaries, developing some semblance of structure, and establishing both healthy routines for the family and the individual can

ease stress and promote balance. It’s important to try and offer, even schedule, opportunities for the firefighter and their family to recharge. For example, plan a family game night, participate in a physical activity like biking, or encourage time spent on a favorite hobby. Even small acts, such as sitting outside with a cup of coffee or taking a scenic drive, can provide ways to recharge. Most importantly, when families make space for rest, fun, and connection, it serves as a reminder that they don’t have to be “on duty” at home. It’s a reminder that caring for themselves and staying connected to their loved ones enables them to serve their community more effectively.

Protect Your Time Together

All relationships experience highs and lows, moments of closeness, and seasons

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Is Your Department Focused on Health? THEN SHOW YOUR COMMITMENT!

A Psychologically Healthy Fire Department (PHFD) promotes and fosters well-being among its members. A healthy and engaged workforce creates a successful, high-performing department.

Show your commitment to your members by taking these three steps:

- Submit your commitment form
- Complete the *Creating a Psychologically Healthy Fire Department* on-demand course
- Review the PHFD: Implementation Toolkit

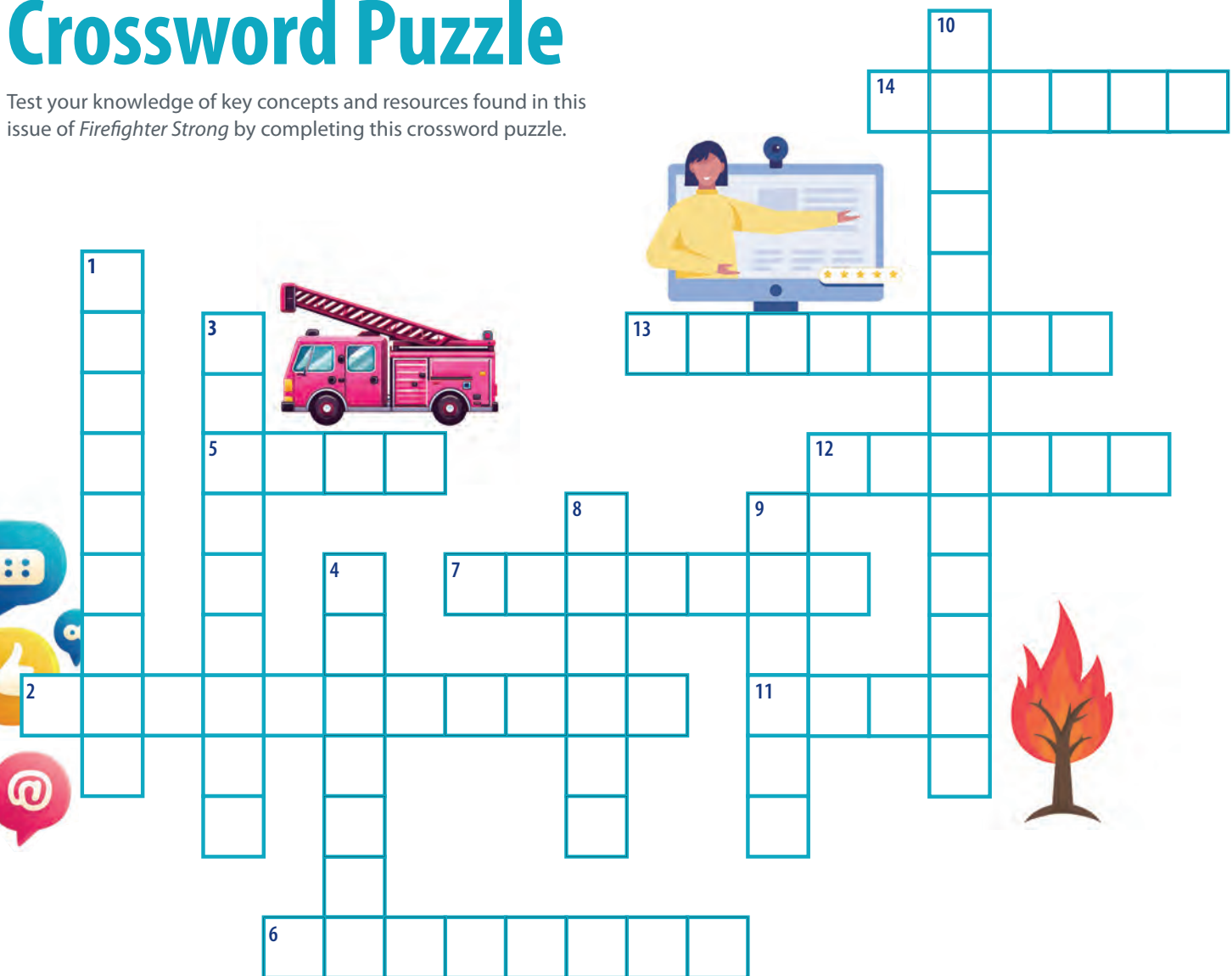
Your department’s name and logo will be added to the NVFC web site of departments committed to health, and you will receive a PHFD sticker and virtual logo to showcase your commitment to your members and community.



Get started at www.nvfc.org/phfd/#commitment

Crossword Puzzle

Test your knowledge of key concepts and resources found in this issue of *Firefighter Strong* by completing this crossword puzzle.



ACROSS

2. Departments can utilize these online platforms to engage the community and enhance recruitment and retention
5. Acronym for the NVFC program that helps departments recruit new volunteers
6. The NVFC First Responder _____ offers 24/7 assistance to NVFC members and their families for a variety of work-life stresses
7. The success of the department hinges on these people
11. Acronym for the NVFC program with the U.S. Forest Service that helps communities prepare before a wildfire strikes
12. The Lavender Ribbon Report provides best practices to help firefighters prevent this
13. What is offered through the NVFC Virtual Classroom and webinars
14. This person helps a new recruit learn the ropes and adjust to the department

DOWN

1. One of the 5 E's of Community Risk Reduction
3. Augmented and virtual reality are examples of this type of learning
4. The internal atmosphere of a fire department that can either help or hinder health, safety, recruitment, and retention efforts
8. It's important to keep these relationships strong after joining the fire service
9. Turning struggle into positive and meaningful changes is called posttraumatic _____
10. Strengthening these in the community will help with support, funding, recruitment, and retention

See answers on page 25

continued from page 21

of distance. Like many marriages, my husband and I faced our fair share of challenges as we juggled the demands of work, parenting, and everyday responsibilities – all while trying to stay present with each other and our daughter. It's a delicate dance that takes intention, patience, and a whole lot of grace. We felt more connected as a family after we sat down and had an honest conversation about setting clear boundaries to protect our time together. We committed to weekly check-ins to share personal and family needs, carved out space for quality time with our daughter, and gave each other the freedom to pursue individual interests.

That shift toward intentionality made all the difference – it allowed us to feel more grounded, supported, and united as a family. Did we do it perfectly all of the time? Definitely not! Of course, we're all human – mistakes happen and

setbacks are part of the journey. That's where patience, open communication, and regularly reevaluating our core family values became our anchor.

Life with a firefighter in the family isn't always easy. There are missed dinners, calls that come at any time, disrupted

schedules, and emotional weight that sometimes lingers. But it's also a life filled with purpose, pride, and deep connection. The challenges are real, but so are the rewards. With intentional support, a lot of grace, and a strong family foundation, being a part of a firefighter family can be one of life's greatest blessings. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

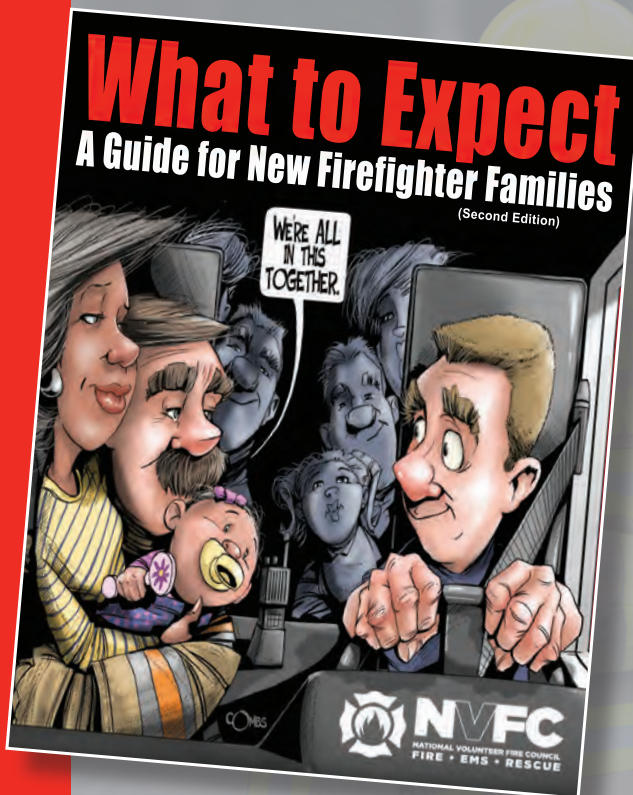
Wendy C. Norris is the founder and chief executive officer of the Texas LODD Task Force, which is part of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation's LAST program. She is a certified grief educator and a master chaplain with the Federation of Fire Chaplains. She has assisted with the development of a peer support curriculum for Texas A&M University-TEEX and also serves as an adjunct instructor for them. She is a member of the Texas First Responder Mental Health Consortium, presiding officer of the Governor's Advisory Panel for the Star of Texas Awards for injured and fallen first responders, and serves as a chaplain, PIO, and first responder for the Forest Bend Fire Department.

RESOURCES for Fire Service FAMILIES!

Being part of the emergency services impacts your entire family. The NVFC offers resources to help increase family support and involvement and strengthen family relationships.

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POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH:

The Science That's Saving Lives on the Front Lines

By Josh Goldberg



PTSD. The weight of this label is heavy. And few communities carry that burden more than our first responders.

Firefighters face some of the most physically and emotionally demanding conditions of any profession. From battling dangerous blazes to responding to life-threatening emergencies, firefighters are continually exposed to high-stress situations that can lead to long-term psychological challenges, including post-traumatic stress (PTS), anxiety, and depression.

But labels, diagnoses, and traumatic experiences don't have to be the end of the story. It can be the beginning of something extraordinary.

This is posttraumatic growth (PTG) – where struggle can be transformative, forging unimaginable strength, profound wisdom, and renewed purpose. It's not just an inspiring concept; it's an evidence-based science with life-changing implications.

PTG reveals what's possible when we face our darkest moments, emerging from hardship as a stronger, more authentic version of ourselves. When we're tested, we are forged into something greater than we ever imagined possible.

While the scientific study of PTG began only decades ago, the concept itself is centuries old. PTG appears throughout

human history – in literature, philosophy, and religious texts. It's the hero's journey in Star Wars and countless epic tales. It's the oldest idea you've **never** heard of.

In 1995, it became a scientific framework through the groundbreaking work of Dr. Richard Tedeschi and Dr. Lawrence Calhoun. They coined "Posttraumatic Growth" after a decade of studying those who had not just survived trauma, but thrived beyond it.

Understanding the Science of Posttraumatic Growth

PTG is the psychological transformation that can emerge from trauma's ashes. When forced to make sense of destruction, our struggles become catalysts for profound growth and meaningful change.

People who experience PTG report growth in five main areas:

- **New Possibilities:** The sense that new opportunities have emerged from the struggle, opening up possibilities that were not there before.
- **Deeper Relationships:** Experiencing closer relationships with specific people and an increased sense of connection with others who suffer.
- **Personal Strength:** An increased sense of one's own strength – "If I lived through that, I can face anything."
- **Appreciation for Life:** A sense of gratitude for the small and large things in life.

- **Spiritual and Existential Change:** A deepening of their spiritual lives; an exploration of beliefs and notions previously unconsidered.

As one firefighter put it, "Posttraumatic growth is life-changing and quite literally saved my life. I was shown that I am strong, I am important, and I will make a difference in this world."

Putting the Science to Work

Three decades later, Dr. Tedeschi remains the world's leading authority on PTG and ranks among Stanford University's top two percent most-cited researchers. Today, he serves as executive director of the Boulder Crest Institute for Posttraumatic Growth, which is dedicated to developing, delivering, studying, and scaling PTG-based training programs.

More than 160,000 people have experienced posttraumatic growth through Boulder Crest's transformative programs: **Struggle Well** for first responders and military personnel, **Warrior PATHH** for veterans and first responders, and a **PTG Certification** that trains mental health clinicians to integrate PTG principles into their practice.

At their core, these programs teach people how to navigate life's inevitable hardships – how to struggle well and emerge stronger.

Struggle Well: A Preventative Approach for First Responders

Struggle Well is a peer-led training program designed specifically for those on the front lines of society – those whose calling results in them being exposed to trauma regularly.

Unlike traditional programs that focus solely on post-trauma recovery, Struggle Well is proactive and preventative, equipping first responders with the skills needed to metabolize stress and trauma in real-time, rather than allowing it to accumulate unchecked.

First responders run **toward** danger, witnessing human suffering in its rawest form. Over time, the cumulative stress and trauma can take a heavy toll, as evidenced by the alarming rates of suicide among this population. In fact, statistics show that more first responders die by suicide than in the line of duty.

Struggle Well seeks to ensure that these brave individuals are not left to manage this burden alone. The program utilizes the five phases of PTG, built on an environment of trust and connection:

- **Education:** Identifies the impacts of stress and trauma, and examines how struggle can lead to opportunities for growth and transformation.
- **Regulation:** Develops mind, body, financial, and spiritual wellness practices to regulate thoughts, feelings, and actions.
- **Disclosure:** Devises ways to self-disclose personal experiences with struggle that effectively strengthen interpersonal relationships.
- **Story:** Creates a positive, forward-looking personal story that integrates past, present, and future.
- **Service:** Develops a plan to serve themselves, their family, work, community, and country in a new way.

“We all struggle. Not just in this job, not just as first responders, but as human beings. We all carry something heavy, something painful,” said one Struggle Well program participant. “Struggle Well doesn’t erase it, but it gives you the tools to move forward, to grow from trauma instead of

letting it break you. It’s about navigating life’s ups and downs and understanding what posttraumatic growth really is. But for me? It saved me from me.”

Real-Life Impact on Firefighters

Firefighters across the country are benefiting from Struggle Well, finding new ways to process the emotional weight of their jobs before it manifests in destructive ways. For many, the program has been a lifeline, offering a sustainable path to growth in a field that often prioritizes toughness over vulnerability. Some have found new motivation as a firefighter, while others have rekindled relationships that were strained due to stress and emotional withdrawal.

One firefighter, who had struggled with PTS symptoms for years, shared that the program helped him “redefine his purpose” and find strength in his experiences rather than being weighed down by them. Another participant noted that Struggle Well gave him the tools to communicate better with his family, easing the emotional burden his career had placed on his home life.

“For years, I thought I was just supposed to push through the pain, to pretend it didn’t affect me,” he explained. “Struggle Well taught me that true strength isn’t about suppressing trauma – it’s about facing it, learning from it, and coming out stronger

on the other side. More than that, it gave me the tools to keep myself from ever going back to that dark place.”

Why This Matters: A Future Built on Growth

The message of posttraumatic growth and the Struggle Well program is clear: Trauma does not have to define us. It can shape us, refine us, and ultimately lead to something greater. By integrating PTG science into their daily lives, firefighters can metabolize stress before it becomes an unmanageable crisis.

By promoting posttraumatic growth, Boulder Crest Foundation is not only helping firefighters cope with their trauma but also empowering them to lead stronger, more fulfilling lives. Their programs serve as a model for how PTG-based training can be applied across all high-stress professions, ensuring that those who dedicate their lives to protecting others receive the support and training they need to thrive.

Learn more about Boulder Crest, Struggle Well, PTG, and the PTG Certification program for licensed mental health clinicians at BoulderCrest.org.

Learn more about posttraumatic growth here.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Goldberg is the CEO of the Boulder Crest Foundation, the global leader in the development, delivery, study, and scale of PTG-based programs. Boulder Crest exists to transform the way that our society thinks, feels, and acts when it comes to notions of mental health and struggle, so that we live in a world that is fueled and founded in notions of PTG, rather than PTSD, diminishment, diagnosis, or dysfunction.

Crossword Puzzle Answers

ACROSS

2. Social Media

5. MMAF

6. Helpline

7. Leaders

11. WFAP

12. Cancer

13. Training

14. Mentor

DOWN

1. Education

3. Immersive

4. Culture

8. Family

9. Growth

10. Relationships

LEADERSHIP TIPS

From the 2025 NVFC Training Summit Speakers



ROB BRANDT

Summit Course – Struggle Well: Thriving in the Aftermath of Trauma

“The best chief I had the opportunity to work for focused entirely on the well-being and value of those he led. He believed that if the members of our department were in a good and healthy place, then we would be successful in all areas. He also understood that humans have three deep needs: to be Seen, Heard, and Valued. He included everyone in developing solutions for the challenges and struggles our agency faced, ensuring everyone shared in the growth and successes of our agency.

Keep it simple – hurt people hurt people, but healthy people help people. Develop trust and connection with those you lead, which takes honesty, being genuine, and a willingness to be vulnerable. Focus on your own wellness first; as St. Augustine said, ‘Fill yourself first, then you can serve others.’”

WALTER CAMPBELL

Summit Course – Laughing Your Way to Successful Recruitment & Retention: Lessons from Stand-Up Comedy for Volunteer Fire and EMS Leaders

“David Goggins (retired Navy SEAL) said, ‘The only thing more contagious than

a good attitude is a bad one.’ Plain and simple: Leaders set the tone. If you walk into the room with confidence and a positive attitude, your team will follow your lead.”

DANIEL CHAPEK

Summit Course – Unlock the Power of AI: Boost Efficiencies in Recruitment, Retention, and Leadership

“A great leader doesn’t consider themselves a great leader – they’re too focused on lifting up those around them. True leadership is about helping each team member grow in the ways they want to grow, finding success on their own terms. When you lead with humility and a genuine desire to see others thrive, the whole team becomes stronger together.”

KIM CLAUSING

Summit Course – Diversified Approach to Volunteer Recruitment, Retention, and Development

“As a volunteer and retention coordinator and grants program manager, my top leadership tip is to foster a collaborative environment that aligns individual motivations with organizational goals. Understanding each team member’s unique strengths and aspirations allows you to assign tasks effectively, enhancing

Leadership is the cornerstone of the fire and emergency services. The success of the department hinges on successful leaders. With that in mind, we asked the instructors from the 2025 NVFC Training Summit to provide tips or pieces of advice to current, new, or aspiring fire service leaders. And remember, leadership comes from a variety of places, whether you have a formal position such as chief or officer or take on an informal leadership role among the rank and file.

DR. CANDACE ASHBY

Summit Course – Leadership From the Bottom Up!

“The world is changed by your example, not your opinion. Can people trust you, are you committed, do you care? How do you show up each day to show people you can be trusted, are committed, and absolutely care? Understand what is in your control – your own attitude, actions, and behavior – and what is not in your control – your supervisor and anyone above him/her and how they lead/manage.”

engagement and productivity. This approach not only empowers your team but also drives collective success.”

DOUG CLINE

Summit Course – Understanding Live Fire Training Requirements and NFPA 1403

“My advice is:

- Knowledge is power, but only when you share it.
- You can have a wealth of knowledge, but no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.
- The future belongs to those who prepare. Now is the time to start building your future by gaining knowledge, developing new skills, gaining diverse experience, and taking advantage of opportunities.”

DR. KEN FOWLER

Summit Course – Leadership in Rural Volunteer Fire Companies: Challenges and Strategies for Fire Chiefs

“Remember, when it comes to recruitment and retention, investment in what you already have is often less expensive than investment in what you hope to get! Employee retention will always be the best recruitment strategy.”

JOE MARUCA

Summit Course – NFPA Standards: Friend or Foe? How Small-Town Fire Departments Can Use NFPA Standards to their Advantage

“Understand the difference between management and leadership. Management is about doing tasks correctly – efficiency and process. Leadership is about doing things right – vision, strategy, and purpose. Without leadership, there is no purpose for management and the organization ultimately fails.”

DR. CANDICE MCDONALD

Summit Course – From Rookie to Resilient: Empowering Mentors and Mentees in the Volunteer Fire Service

“A good leader does two things: First, they learn to be quiet and listen to UNDERSTAND. Second, they ensure

their actions reflect what is best for all stakeholders (employees, volunteers, community partners, and community members), never just their own interests.”

TOM MERRILL

Summit Keynote – Leading from All Levels

“The skills and traits that get you elected or appointed as an officer are not the skills and traits that will make you successful as an officer. And those skills and traits don’t come with the election or appointment either. Leaders are readers, and successful leaders work hard every single day to inspire, motivate, and understand their people. There are no bad teams, only bad leaders.”

TOM MILLER

Summit Course – Training on a Budget: How to Maximize Resources and Impact

“Train to be the firefighter that you would want to come to your emergency. Lead with purpose and passion – take ownership of the job. Success is not yours, it belongs to the team.”

WENDY NORRIS

Summit Course – Going Deeper: Exploring Grief and Loss in the Fire Service

“I have learned that some of the most important attributes of an excellent leader is someone who leads with integrity (admits their mistakes and works to fix those mistakes), dignity (recognizes the human aspects of those they lead), and empathy (individuals relate to and trust their leaders more when they know that they are genuinely cared for). The mark of outstanding leadership isn’t about authority – it’s about inspiring and empowering others to reach their full potential.”

JARED RENSHAW

Summit Course – A Chief Officer’s Roadmap for Navigating Local Politics

“Fire department leadership should focus on building strong relationships with their local elected officials by emphasizing the critical role that the fire and emergency services play in the local community. It is essential to communicate data-driven facts

and real-life examples to demonstrate the impact of policies and funding decisions. Additionally, maintaining professionalism and a collaborative approach will foster trust and create opportunities for mutually beneficial solutions.”

PAM ROGERS

Summit Course – The Volunteer Assembly Line: Onboarding Your New Firefighters & EMTs

“One of my favorite quotes regarding leading volunteers is by Jim Goodnight: ‘If you treat your employees like they make a difference, they will’. Simple acts of gratitude for volunteer first responders doesn’t take much time or a big, fancy budget.”

TIGER SCHMITTENDORF

Summit Course – Wake-Up Call: If You’re Not Focused on Volunteer Retention & Recruitment What are You Focused on?

“You don’t need to be an officer to be a leader, but you do need to remember that it’s never about us. It’s about:

- Those we serve: our neighbors and our community
- Those we serve with: our fellow firefighters and first responders
- Those who allow us to serve: our predecessors, those who lead us, and most importantly, our families”

DAVE SNYDER

Summit Course – Beyond the Sirens: Training Our Teams for Safer Response

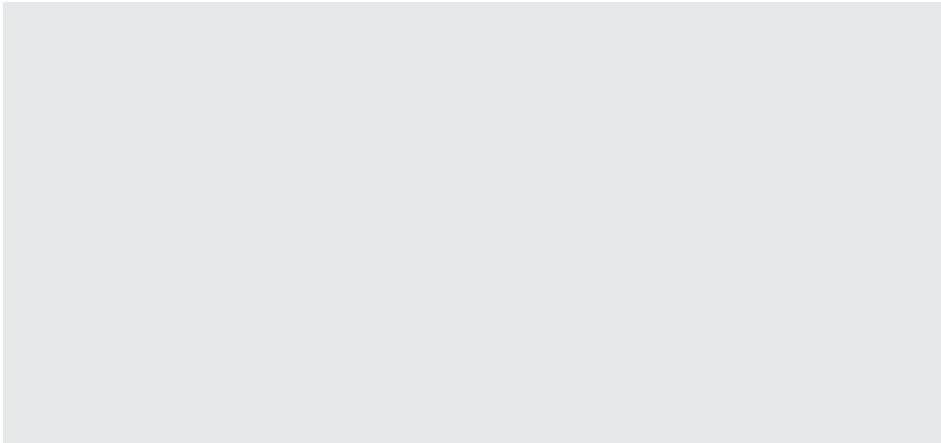
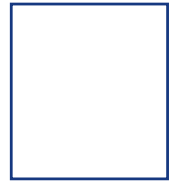
“Aspiring leaders, take the time to listen to new ideas from members who come to you with their thoughts. I encourage you to lead the way by having yourself and fellow members within your department attend trainings outside of the little bubble your agency is used to. The benefits are overwhelming and will promote camaraderie with others to help us see different perspectives. This process can bring fresh air into some stale operations and allow us to think outside of the box and potentially solve some of our own challenges.” ■ ■



National Volunteer Fire Council

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