

# THE VFA QUARTERLY

*A National Newsletter distributed by the Volunteer Firefighter Alliance*

Fall 2019

Volume 1, Issue 2

## Preventing Firefighter Burnout

**By Dr. Candice McDonald**

Many volunteer fire departments across the country have experienced a decrease in the number of active volunteers. Without adequate levels of first responders, communities are left vulnerable and active members are at risk of burnout.

In addition to limited number of firefighters, the Pareto Principle also causes exhaustion among active members. The Pareto Principle, also known as the 80-20 rule, states that 80% of the work is done by 20% of the volunteers. Departments need to be proactive in order to reverse and avoid falling victim to this principle. A study conducted on volunteer firefighter burnout and organizational connectedness, indicated emotional demands and home life as the two leading reasons firefighters become disconnected with volunteer service.

Volunteers begin to disengage when the requirements of the fire service start to interfere with home commitments. When home demands are not being met due to the demands of the fire service, emotional exhaustion can take place. The volunteer faced with unmet duties at home can develop cynical feelings towards the department. This in turn creates a disconnect between the member and the organization. The conflict between fire service and home life causes the member to lack both the energy and devotion to serve the community. This leads to missed trainings and failure to respond to calls.

It is no secret that the home life of the volunteer is often disrupted due to an emergency in the community. Dinners are interrupted, plans for a date night are put on hold, and even on Christmas morning antsy children have been known to wait until a parent returns from a call to open gifts. Firefighters and their families both make sacrifices to serve.

The home environment itself plays a critical role on positive member performance. Members are supportive social circles and family members are less likely to fall victim to burnout. When support is absent, volunteers tend to struggle to cope with the demands of volunteering and start to disengage. With conflict at home being a main predictor for burnout, it is important for fire departments to assist volunteers with creating a healthy balance between fire service and home demands. The following strategies are offered to help maintain balance.

### **RESPECT MEMBER TIME**

Time is valuable. Members sacrifice time from family and friends to protect the community. In return, they need a hassle-free environment during the time dedicated to volunteering. Departments can do this by creating and posting quarterly training schedules with start and end times. It is important to always abide by the set schedule. If training is to start at 6:30 p.m., don't wait until 6:45 to get started. Ending at the stated time is also critical. This helps members to schedule and honor home commitments without fear of running over and disappointing a loved one.

Avoid scheduling non-emergency activities, such as meetings and trainings, on multiple days during a single week. Don't ask members to give up more than one night a week away from home for non-emergency items. During meetings, be mindful of wasted time. Reduce unnecessary discussions during business meetings by sticking to a pre-developed agenda. If an additional topic is brought up, and it is not time sensitive, table it for the next meeting. For those departments that review the previous meeting minutes out loud, word for word, send them out to members via email in advance for review. This allows a quick vote for approval or a short discussion for corrections to be made. The same can be done with the treasurer's report.

Signups for special events and fundraisers should be broken down into three-hour shifts. By keeping the shifts short, members are able to spend time enjoying the event with their family before or after their shift. It also allows the member to honor any outside personal commitments before or after the event. Some members may want to work double shifts, but allow them the choice, and don't make those choosing a single shift feel second-rate. **(Continued on page two)**



# First Responder Crisis Support Helpline 1-844-550-HERO (4376)

**24 hours a day, 7 days a week**

*This national helpline provides access to confidential support, resources and referrals any time day or night by phone for first responders and their families.*

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## ***Preventing Firefighter Burnout...***

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Utilizing duty weekends is another method to respect member time. This allows your top 20% to have weekends with family without worry. Allow members to select the weekends in advance that work best for their personal schedule. Offer incentives, such as fuel or restaurant gift cards to members volunteering for weekend duty. These small incentives show appreciation for the sacrifice being made to serve.

### **FAMILY INVOLVEMENT**

With family support playing a critical role in the support of the volunteer, it is important for fire departments to engage the entire family. Research shows the support offered by family can counteract negative attitudes that start to develop towards the organization.

Involving the family should start at the recruitment level. Offer brochures for family members that welcome them into the fire service and outline what to expect. Create an environment that is supportive of family inclusion. Start new traditions to promote the importance of family. These new traditions can be as simple as planned family dinner and game nights at the station, quarterly cookouts, family-focused holiday parties, and family recognition nights.

Departments can also offer workshops to spouses covering items of concern. Bring in subject matter experts to discuss firefighter cancer, PTSD, fitness, and reputation management. Engaging families and members together also builds team cohesion and can reduce possible insecurities.

### **ASK & LISTEN**

The last strategy offered is to turn to your members and listen. Find out what is keeping them from honoring their volunteer commitment. Create an anonymous survey to find out what stressors exist from volunteering, what prevents them from responding to calls, and seek feedback on what the department can do to meet their needs. Reach out personally to inactive members and find out the reason for their absenteeism. A good leader never makes assumptions, they take the time to investigate the cause of an issue.

### **Reference**

- Huynh, J., Xanthopoulou, D., & Winefield, A. (2013). Social support moderates the impact of demands on burnout and organizational connectedness: A two-wave study of volunteer firefighters. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 18*(1) 9-15. doi: 10.1037/a0030804

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# Firefighter Cancer Risk Highlights

## Need For Exposure Tracking

With multiple studies demonstrating a higher risk of cancer for firefighters, first responder health and safety advocates are urging fire crews to document their exposures to toxic materials, carcinogens, and other harmful substances.

Advocates urge firefighters and other first responders to track their history of exposures so their level of risk can be managed over the course of their career, and so they have adequate documentation of exposures in case they suffer job-related health problems.

The scope of the danger was brought to public attention after 9/11, when studies found first responders who worked at the World Trade Center (WTC) site were facing respiratory problems and even cancer rates that were higher than expected.

The WTC Health Registry found increases in rates of prostate cancer, thyroid cancer, and multiple myeloma, a blood cancer, among nearly 34,000 WTC rescue and recovery workers in comparison to average rates among New York State residents after adjusting for age, race/ethnicity, and gender. Prostate and thyroid cancer rates were also higher than expected among nearly 21,000 rescue and recovery workers enrolled in the WTC Health Program when compared to typical rates.

But exposure to health hazards is not limited to urban or industrial disasters. One study conducted by the Firefighter Safety Through Advanced Research (FSTAR) program found that despite wearing full protective gear, firefighters can have systemic exposures to polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, or PAHS, which are carcinogens created from burning rubber or tar. Industrial sites expose firefighters to PAHS, but so do most residential homes fires, meaning crews are at risk even when performing routine firefighters duties. This reinforces the need to fully document any incident where exposure to toxins is likely, both to aid in a possible future diag-

nosis and to track the possible causes of any subsequent illnesses.

Firefighters have several tools available to help track exposures and share their experiences with others. FirstForward.com includes an exposure tracker as one of many free tools provided by the platform. This gives first responders an easy way to document their exposures on any internet-connected device.

“The rates of cancer and other severe exposure-related illness for our first responders are through the roof,” said Ari Vidali, Founder and CEO of Envisage Technologies, which produces FirstForward. “It is a tragedy that we all have an obligation to do something about.”

Another tool the industry has developed is the Firefighter Near Miss program sponsored by the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). This website invites firefighters to share stories of dangerous situations, with the hope that their colleagues can learn from their experiences.

In addition to promoting discussion of risk mitigation and best practices in the field, IAFC’s website offers information about health risks and the importance of monitoring one’s physical well-being. Firefighters’ accounts include not only narrow escapes from intense fires and other dangers, but also provide advice on recognizing signs of long-term physical issues — ranging from cancer to PTSD — which can pose just as much danger to an emergency responder as falling timbers or burning cars.

*For free copies of our  
“Firefighter Cancer Prevention  
and Education Guide”  
send an email to:  
[www.FirefighterCancerAlliance.org](http://www.FirefighterCancerAlliance.org)*

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**The Volunteer Firefighter Alliance**  
is a national non-profit organization dedicated to assisting  
**Volunteer Fire Departments**  
and **Volunteer Firefighters.**

**We would like to assist you through:**

- **Free Fire Prevention Materials:** Your department can request free fire prevention activity books at [www.freefireprevention.com](http://www.freefireprevention.com)
- **Free membership with 10k LODD Policy:** You can sign up at [www.freelodd.com](http://www.freelodd.com)
- **Free recruitment public service announcement:** Your department can sign up at [www.nvfrc.org](http://www.nvfrc.org)
- **Free firefighter cancer prevention resources:** [www.firefightercanceralliance.org](http://www.firefightercanceralliance.org)



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