

Firefighter Strong

News for a Better You and a Stronger Crew



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National Volunteer Fire Council

The NVFC unites and supports volunteer and combination fire and EMS organizations through education, advocacy, leadership development, and collaboration. Guided by professionalism and innovation, we provide the tools and resources needed to protect communities, advance responder health and safety, and prepare leaders for the future. Join the NVFC for just \$24 to receive benefits including the First Responder Helpline, free training in the Virtual Classroom, Volunteer Voices member community, an AD&D policy, and more. Find information and join at www.nvfc.org/join. 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.



What Does it Mean to Be Firefighter Strong?

by Sarah Lee, NVFC CEO

At the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), we talk a lot about what it means to be *Firefighter Strong*. It's more than a name — it's a philosophy. It's about being strong for yourself and your crew, taking accountability for your own health and safety, and ensuring you have the tools in your toolbelt to answer the call.

Strength is not defined by how much gear you can carry, how much you can lift, or how long you can hold a line. It's about recognizing the weight of a difficult call and talking about it. It's about building a culture where seeking support is a sign of courage, not weakness. It's about taking personal accountability — scheduling that annual physical, staying active, and making sure you're getting the rest your body and mind need. This kind of strength takes work, and sometimes it requires change. We're here to help.

This is our 10th issue of *Firefighter Strong*, and inside you'll find practical

tools to help you build on that strength. You'll learn why improving fitness makes you a better responder, recognize and avoid burnout, access funding for resources and equipment your department may need, and identify mental health support when the time comes. You'll also find guidance on planning ahead for retirement — including the identity shift that transition can bring — and so much more.

In the fire service, there is a role for everyone, and every role counts. Whether you're operational, handling administrative tasks, or you're a family member supporting someone who serves — you are part of this community. On behalf of the NVFC, I want to say thank you. Thank you for the calls answered in the middle of the night, in the middle of a family dinner, and on holidays. Thank you for showing up for your neighbors and your community in their most difficult moments. Thank you for bringing your passion, your light, and your dedication to the fire service — the best community there is. ■ ■

Your NVFC CEO



Sarah Lee
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Advocating for Firefighter Health and Safety Without Hurting Recruitment

by David Lewis

Across America, fire departments are struggling to recruit enough members to meet emergency response needs. These efforts are faced with the challenges of increased response volumes, training demands, and hours required to keep the department operating smoothly.

At the same time, department leaders are increasingly focused on improving firefighter health and safety. Changing from a culture where firefighter injuries and deaths were unavoidable parts of the profession to an attitude of taking preventive actions has taken some time, but progress is being made. From cancer prevention and behavioral health to roadway incident protection and improved training standards, the profession has made significant progress in protecting those who serve. Yet some departments worry that talking openly about the risk issues may discourage potential recruits from joining.

Advocating for firefighter health and safety can strengthen recruitment by showing that the fire service values its people and operates professionally. When communicated correctly, safety initiatives demonstrate professionalism, strong leadership, and a commitment to taking care of the people who answer the call.

Knowing the department is making every effort to protect their members helps alleviate concerns prospective volunteers and their families may have about the potential hazards or dangers of the job. It also justifies the time commitment needed for training.

The key is how the message is communicated.

When preparing a recruitment message, emphasize the steps taken in training and preparation to minimize the risk. Include messages such as, "Safety practices make us better firefighters." Highlight advances in safety such as PPE design, apparatus safety standards, use of SOPs/SOGs, and health awareness programs. Use these messages to increase the trust with

potential recruits that the fire department cares about their safety.

Firefighting has always involved risk, and potential recruits should understand that. What they want to know is that the organization will prepare them to manage those risks responsibly. Emphasize training, teamwork, and safety practices to help shift the narrative to one of preparedness. When prospective members see a department that trains hard, maintains modern equipment, and follows clear procedures, they gain confidence that the organization is serious about protecting its people.

A strong safety culture also reinforces one of the fire service's most powerful traditions: taking care of one another. Programs that support physical fitness, cancer awareness, mental health, and injury prevention show recruits that the department values its members beyond the emergency scene. These efforts send a clear message that firefighters are part of a team that looks out for each other both on and off the fireground.

National organizations play an important role in advancing this culture of safety. Standards developed by the National Fire Protection Association and advocacy from groups such as the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) help departments across the country adopt practices that reduce risk while improving operational effectiveness. These improvements

demonstrate that the fire service is continually learning and evolving.

Another important consideration is the perspective of families. Many individuals discuss joining the fire service with spouses, parents, or children before making the commitment. When departments clearly communicate their focus on health and safety, it reassures families that the organization takes its responsibility to protect members seriously. The NVFC guide, *What to Expect: A Guide for New Firefighter Families*, helps explain to families the risks of firefighting and what actions department leadership takes to protect their loved ones.

Ultimately, advocating for firefighter health and safety should not be a recruitment challenge; it should be an asset. Departments that openly promote safety, wellness, and professional training send a powerful message to prospective members: this is an organization that values its people. The key message to communicate is: "We value our people, we train professionally, and we are committed to everyone going home at the end of the call."

The fire service demands courage, dedication, and a willingness to serve others. But by demonstrating a strong commitment to health and safety, departments can ensure that firefighters know they will be supported, prepared, and protected as they answer that call. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Lewis is a member of the Odenton (MD) Volunteer Fire Company and has served in many roles, including chief officer and president. He is active in the Maryland State Firefighters Association, Maryland Fire Chiefs Association, Cumberland Valley Volunteer Firefighters Association, and National Volunteer Fire Council. He is a recognized expert in firefighter safety and wellness and has delivered training programs across the U.S. As an emergency services educator, Lewis applies his own life experiences to build future leadership across the emergency services communities.



IT'S ALL CONNECTED: How Improving Fitness Makes You a Better Responder

BY JASON READ

Incorporating more fitness into your routine is critical, not just for your overall health but for the performance of our lifesaving mission we execute every day. In the spirit of the National Volunteer Fire Council's (NVFC) competitive (and fun!) Step Strong Challenge that is taking place in June 2026, as well as the 2026 Safety Stand Down theme of "Firefighter FITNESS: Fit to Serve, Fit for Life," I was asked to write an article about how responders can add more fitness into their daily routine. As I began writing, the article shifted in scope because I believe that it is vital firefighters first understand *why* fitness is a mission-critical area.

For background, I was a member of three Olympic teams in the sport of rowing and received a gold medal in 2004. Watching this year's Winter Olympics were emotional, inspiring, and brought me back to my team's Olympic odyssey. The sublime feeling of standing alongside my rowing brothers on an Olympic podium was unforgettable. It was the reward of what years of disciplined training, sacrifice, and commitment to physical excellence can achieve.

In both elite athletics and the fire service, success is never accidental. It is built through disciplined habits, consistent preparation, and a commitment to something greater than yourself. Long before a race begins or the tones drop, the outcome of the call is already shaped by the choices we make – how we train, how we fuel our bodies, proper hydration, and how we support one another.

The Leading Killer Isn't the Fire – It's the Heart

Cardiac events account for nearly half

of all firefighter line-of-duty deaths in America every year. We have accepted this statistic as if it were an immutable fact of our profession. It is not. Cardiovascular disease is largely preventable, and fire service leadership has a significant role in countering this reversible trend.

As an Olympic athlete, I understand what the cardiovascular system demands under extreme stress. An emergency call is a physiological ambush – from rest to maximum exertion in seconds, often after broken sleep, in extreme heat, carrying 60 or more pounds of gear; most people's baseline hydration level is dehydration. That demand profile is brutal on the untrained heart.

Regular aerobic conditioning, strength training, and medical monitoring are not luxuries for first responders. They are operational necessities. A cardiac screening program and a structured fitness regimen at your station are among the most important investments your department can make. There are many resources available to help. I like the FitFighter strength and movement platform, founded by Sarah Apgar, a decorated Army officer and firefighter.

Cancer: The Silent Threat in the Smoke

Cancer has become the leading cause of firefighter deaths over the long arc of a career, and the data is unambiguous: firefighters face significantly elevated rates of several cancers compared to the general population. We are exposed to a toxic chemical soup at every structure fire – benzene, formaldehyde, hydrogen cyanide, asbestos, and a host of other carcinogens that absorb through unprotected skin and enter our lungs.

Properly wearing, cleaning, and storing PPE as well as installing a station exhaust removal system are specific actions responders need to take to protect themselves from carcinogens. Physical fitness also plays a role here: a robust immune system and a well-maintained body are better equipped to combat the cellular damage caused by carcinogen exposure. Wellness is not a separate conversation from cancer prevention – it is the same conversation.

Diabetes and Obesity: The Quiet Epidemic in Our Stations

Obesity rates in the fire service mirror – and in some studies exceed – those of the general population. Type 2 diabetes, hypertension, metabolic syndrome: these conditions are rampant in our ranks, and they compound every other health risk we face. An obese firefighter with uncontrolled diabetes carries a dramatically higher cardiac risk when responding to an alarm. They are also more susceptible to heat illness, joint injury, and the long-term physiological costs of shift work and sleep disruption.

I know from competing for three decades inside elite sport that good nutrition is training. Sleep is training. Recovery is training. You cannot separate what happens at the dinner table from what happens at the fire scene. It's literally trash in, trash out in terms of performance. Departments that invest in wellness programming – structured fitness time, nutritional education, and mental health resources – are investing in readiness.

A Call to Action: Build Your Culture Around Wellness

The NVFC's Heart-Healthy Firefighter Program, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation's Everyone Goes Home

initiative, and the NVFC's Fire/EMS Helpline are resources that exist precisely because this community has recognized that wellness is not peripheral to the fire service mission – it is a core element. As mentioned, the Step Strong Challenge inspires firefighters to move, and movement is the best way to push back against many reversible health outcomes.

I urge every department to take the following steps:

- Establish an annual physical examination for all active members.
- Designate on-duty fitness time as a part of the duty day.
- Implement post-fire decontamination protocols as standard operating procedure.
- Foster a station culture where asking for help – whether for a physical health concern, a mental health struggle, or a nutritional question – is seen as a sign of professionalism.

When I trained for the Olympics and Pan Am Games, my coaches reminded me

constantly that the competition is won or lost in the preparation – in the thousands of decisions we make before the race begins. Our fireground performance is no different. The decisions we make in the firehouse, at the table, in the gym, and at the doctor's office determine whether we are ready when the tones drop, and whether we are alive to retire.

Small adjustments in your daily routine can pay off with strong dividends: walk, jog, run, swim, row, paddle, lift. Start: drinking more water. Start: using the stairs more. Start: a light lifting routine with a mentor. Start: enrolling in group fitness programs. Speak to your doctor about improving your fitness level.

The fire service and rowing community have given me an adjacent calling – a mission of purpose, of tenacity, and of genuine care for others. Let us extend that care to ourselves and to each other through fitness. It's not easy to get in shape, but it is much harder to be out of shape. Let's get fit together. ■ ■

Find more health and fitness resources through the NVFC's Heart-Healthy Firefighter Program (www.healthy-firefighter.org) and the 2026 Safety Stand Down (www.safetystanddown.org).



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Read is a passionate advocate for firefighter health and wellness. He is an Olympic gold medalist and a former division 1 head coach in rowing. He has served in the fire and emergency services for more than 34 years, including his current position as EMS chief of the Hopewell (NJ) Fire Department.

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WHEN YOU GO IN, WE GO IN WITH YOU.

NIOSH:

Learning from Line-of-Duty Deaths

and Serious Injuries in 2025

by Wesley R. Attwood, Andrea Wilkinson, and Jay L. Tarley

The line-of-duty death (LODD) or serious injury of a firefighter is one of the most difficult things a fire department and its members may experience. Communities, families, and fire departments are often left with questions about why or how an incident happened. The sacrifices of the fallen and seriously injured can provide valuable lessons that can help save subsequent lives. Fire departments may find it helpful to reflect on these tragedies and how the lessons learned from their incident may help fire departments across the country.

In 1998, Congress funded and directed the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) to conduct firefighter fatality investigations. These investigations gather information on contributing factors to firefighter LODDs and provide prevention actions for the nation's fire service.

Consequently, NIOSH created the Fire Fighter Fatality Investigation and Prevention Program (FFFIPP) to conduct objective LODD and serious injury investigations. The FFFIPP's goal is to learn from firefighter LODDs and serious injuries to prevent similar incidents from happening again. This includes reporting characteristics and contributing factors of LODDs and serious injuries and providing educational materials that include prevention actions for the nation's fire service.

NIOSH is a non-regulatory research institute, and as such, participation is voluntary and results in prevention-focused, non-punitive, research-based

reports. Reports are often used to inform training, standards development, and updated standard operating protocols.

Investigations in 2025

FFFIPP completed 11 investigations from fire departments in 2025, representing six LODDs and five serious injury incidents. Ten of the incidents involved career firefighters and one involved volunteer firefighters. The 11 incidents consisted of seven structure fires, two motor vehicle incidents, one emergency medical services call, and one in-station medical incident.

Lessons Learned in 2025

Our analysis of the 11 NIOSH investigations in 2025 suggested five common themes for contributing factors and associated prevention actions. Each of these provides valuable lessons learned for the fire service.

1 Fire Behavior and Dynamics

Successful outcomes for structure fires are dependent upon firefighters matching suppression actions to the conditions present. These decisions are largely influenced by understanding and evaluating fire behavior/dynamics to employ the appropriate tactics. This approach includes understanding the influence of ventilation on fire behavior and coordinating suppression. This also includes understanding a building's design and structural anatomy, construction methods and materials, and vulnerabilities under fireground conditions. Knowledge and application of these principles have been linked to safer firefighting operations and firefighter survivability.

2 Available Personnel for a Firefighter Emergency

Addressing a firefighter emergency involves using a rapid intervention team or an on-deck crew. A rapid intervention team is a dedicated and staged crew assigned to respond to a firefighter emergency. An on-deck crew involves a group of firefighters in a forward-staged position outside of the immediately dangerous to life and health environment who can be given an assignment based on developing needs. This crew serves as a tactical reserve of resources within the workforce management cycle and can respond to a firefighter emergency.

3 Communication of Critical Information and Accountability

Safety hazards, such as unexpected fire spread or signs of structural collapse, may dictate an immediate change in strategy and tactics to preserve life and safety. Consequently, it is beneficial for firefighters on scene to immediately communicate safety hazards through the chain of command. When fire departments establish a division/group, firefighters advise a dedicated supervisor of work progress and provide accountability for crew members engaging in task-level activities. Supervisors can provide ongoing conditions, actions, and needs reports to the incident commander of all four sides and the interior of an incident which may influence tactics and strategy. Divisions/groups can also assist with accountability of everyone on scene.

4 Annual Medical Evaluations and Return-to-Work

Nearly half of all firefighter duty-related deaths are caused by sudden cardiac death. Annual medical evaluations should be conducted by physicians familiar

with the essential tasks of firefighting as outlined by the National Fire Protection Association. This extends to receiving a return-to-work physical following a medical absence. Routine medical evaluations by a physician can allow for early diagnoses of new medical conditions. Routine medical evaluations also decrease the risk of complications due to untreated medical issues.

5 Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is a fundamental aspect of an organizational culture. It reflects shared beliefs within a team that it is safe to speak up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes without fear of retribution or embarrassment. The fire service has a long history of tradition, and one of those traditions is that personnel are expected to prove themselves and build knowledge and experience. Providing personnel with autonomy to express themselves, especially to speak up about events involving safety, requires strong leadership that is not intimidated by tradition and bias. Psychological safety on the fireground is supported by

leadership vulnerability and humility. It also is supported by firefighters' perceived ability to communicate concerns to supervisors without fear of retribution, and by leadership valuing those observations. This can contribute to effective tactical decisions and understanding of the evolving conditions that rapidly change during emergency operations.

Conclusion

The FFFIPP is committed to conducting high-quality investigations and sharing findings with the fire service.

This approach is intended to support departments in strengthening policies, training, and operational practices to reduce risk and improve firefighter safety. You can learn more about the FFFIPP, request a serious injury and LODD investigation, read existing reports, and see what investigations FFFIPP is currently working on at www.cdc.gov/niosh/firefighters/fffipp/about.html. ■ ■

Disclaimer: The findings and conclusions in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



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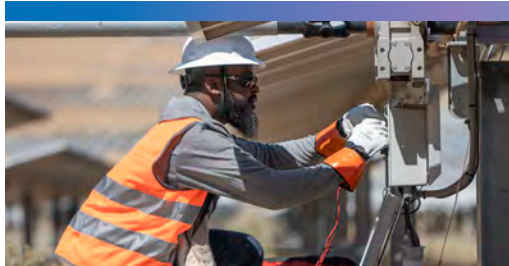
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Retirement and Retired Well: LIFE AFTER THE LAST ALARM



by T.J. Nedrow

Whether you recently retired from the fire service, are getting ready to retire, or have years to go before retirement, leaving the fire service is something every firefighter needs to be prepared for. Even if it seems far off now, there will come a time when you'll hang up your gear for the last time and move on to the next chapter in your life. Everyone experiences this transition differently. For some, they don't give it a second thought. But for others, like me, it was difficult to separate my lives: fire, work, and home.

I spent 50 years in the fire service, rising to volunteer command officer responsibilities in a combination fire department and serving in various positions with state and national fire service organizations. I was a family man with an overly understanding wife and two boys that are now grown. I also had a successful 40-year career that created increased position and responsibilities. Looking back, I must admit that balance was difficult and I'm a lucky survivor of too much of a good thing.

Now that I have had time to step back and reflect on what it means to retire well, I realize that building the foundation for a successful retirement should start long before you actually retire. For many of us, the fire service becomes so much a part of our lives and identity, we are not prepared for the toll it takes when we are no longer active in the service.

With that in mind, here are my top takeaways for how to set yourself up now for a successful retirement tomorrow.

1. Live with strength, compassion, and empathy.
2. Never stop learning.

3. Lead by example.
4. Maintain a positive attitude. Build positive relationships with your brothers and sisters.
5. Do not dwell on missed meals or school events, or disruptions to sleep and life in general.
6. Strive to have life balance with the fire service's obligations and expectations. Your family is priority, and they need you too.
7. Never let negative influence take over, run your life, or color what you do and say.
8. Living a healthy lifestyle begets a healthy retirement.
9. Always strive to add value to your reputation, your position, your shift, and your department.
10. Know your limits – know when to say no, and make sure you can follow through if you say yes.
11. Always admit and communicate if you are in distress.
12. Record both your positive and negative activities of your service. You'll be amazed what legacy moments you have been a part of.
13. Avoid "crutches" such as alcohol and keep open conversations with your spouse/partner in both the good and challenging times.
14. Plan for retirement in a financial way. If your department provides any monetary compensation for your service, consider investing it for your future.

I know what you're thinking – those tips are great if you still have a way to

go before retirement. But what about those who are currently crossing the threshold to retirement? In that case, you probably have a lot of questions. I offer the following responses.

Q: I've just retired from the fire service. Now what?

A: Find a different purpose.

Successfully replacing time spent with fire service obligations and responsibilities is paramount. It can be hard to replace something that previously consumed your everyday life. Identify something that motivates you daily.

Q: Is there still room for volunteering?

A: Yes, the options are plentiful, both in the fire service and beyond.

Even though you're not engaged in fireground activities now, you can still serve in supporting roles, such as chaplain, investigator, rehab, and many more. Or look outside your department to find other community or faith-based volunteer opportunities that grab your interest.

Q: How do I find balance without the fire service?

A: Seek balance in this new chapter of life that offers fellowship and worth.

I was taught to compartmentalize my firefighting and not say or bring things home. Since then, I've learned to communicate. Be transparent and spend precious time with those close to you. My wife and I have been married for 45 years – a testament to a couple that now maintain balance and happiness.

Q: How do I live a calm and peaceful chapter of life?

A: It may be tough to embrace the calm, but doing so can provide a happier, more balanced retirement.

I initially found difficulty in maintaining calm, peace, and balance. Going from overdrive to a slower pace with those around me was key. Whether it is family, other retirees, or newfound friends, I discovered a calm that saved me from certain imbalance.

Q: How do I fill the void without the fire service?

A: Allow yourself to let go of the past. Set a new course with people, routines, hobbies, and organizations.

Ordinary mornings felt hollow after I retired, so I committed to rubbing elbows with other retirees through regular coffee get-togethers and bi-monthly breakfasts for comfort and to share stories (true or not). By filling my time, ordinary mornings

feel easier, less demanding, and I no longer rush toward tasks.

Q: How do I deal with planned or unplanned retirement?

A: Rejoice and enjoy successes. Or, forgive and don't let emotions rule.

The past is the past, and the future is what you make it. Let go of unhealthy notions that offer little value going forward.

Q: What if I have demons in my closet?

A: Unfortunately, many of us do. But you do not have to suffer in silence.

As responders we have seen, experienced, and lived through tragedy across the spectrum. Be honest and reconcile what impacts your faith, your strengths, and behavioral health. Remember, you are human and it's okay to reach out if you need help. There are many resources and avenues of support available.

My final thoughts: I retired in 2019 from a very rewarding and demanding career that seriously competed with the fire service. There was little time to stop and smell the roses. Now it's my time to make more time. My wish is that you do the same. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Emotional Intelligence: Understanding the Human Edge in Today's Volunteer Fire Service

by Douglas Cline

In today's fast-paced, high-risk, and increasingly complex emergency response environment, technical proficiency alone is not enough. The volunteer fire service operates at the intersection of danger, service, and community, where decisions are made under pressure, relationships are built on trust, and performance can directly impact lives of family and friends.

What increasingly separates effective firefighters, officers, and leaders from the rest is *Emotional Intelligence*, or the ability to recognize, understand, manage, and influence emotions in oneself and others.

Emotional intelligence is not a new concept within the fire service. For generations, respected firefighters and officers, those who others trusted on the fireground and in the station, demonstrated these competencies. These individuals were calm under pressure, steady in crisis, respected in conversation, and capable of bringing people together. They understood that success in the fire service is not just about tactics, it is about the organization's most valued resource – its people.

Emotional intelligence is now recognized as a cornerstone of leadership, teamwork, and personal resilience. It is built on five core components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Within the volunteer fire service – where members balance careers, family, and service – these competencies are not just valuable, they are essential to success.

The Five Core Components of Emotional Intelligence

1 Self-Awareness: The Foundation On and Off the Fireground

Self-awareness is the ability to recognize and understand your emotions, triggers, and behavioral tendencies, especially under stress. A firefighter who lacks self-awareness may bring frustration from their personal life into the fire station, onto the

apparatus, or into a call. On the fireground, this can manifest as poor communication, overreaction, or tunnel vision. In contrast, a self-aware firefighter or officer recognizes their emotional state and adjusts accordingly.

For example, an officer who knows they become impatient during chaotic scenes can consciously slow down, communicate clearly, and ensure assignments are understood. This not only improves operational effectiveness but also enhances personnel safety.

Self-awareness also builds credibility. In volunteer organizations where rank does not always equal respect, members follow those who are authentic, grounded, and accountable.

2 Self-Regulation: Composure in Chaos

The fire service is defined by high-stress, unpredictable environments. Self-regulation is what determines whether a firefighter reacts impulsively or responds with discipline and control.

In volunteer departments, where training time may be limited and experience levels vary widely, emotional reactions can quickly impact team performance. A firefighter who loses composure whether through anger, panic, or frustration can disrupt the organizational environment, impact emergency operations, and create safety risks.

Self-regulation is not about suppressing emotion, it is about controlling it. It is the pause before speaking on the radio, the measured tone during a heated exchange, and the ability to remain calm when conditions deteriorate.

Self-regulation is equally important on the fireground and at the station. Volunteer departments often function like extended families, where interpersonal conflicts can linger. Leaders who model emotional control create a culture of professionalism, accountability, and respect.

3 Motivation: The Heart of Volunteerism

Motivation within emotional intelligence takes on a unique meaning in the volunteer fire service. Unlike other careers, volunteer firefighters are not driven by salary or financial incentives. Their commitment is fueled by deeper intrinsic motivations – purpose, pride, service, and community.

However, sustaining that motivation requires discipline. Volunteer firefighters must balance competing demands of family, work, and service. Without internal drive, burnout and disengagement become real risks. The loss of motivation is often one of the root issues with volunteer retention.

Emotionally intelligent individuals maintain focus by connecting their actions to purpose. They understand why their role matters, not just to themselves, but to their community and their fellow firefighters.

Motivated members:

- Show up consistently
- Take initiative in training and operations
- Support their team without being asked
- Maintain a positive attitude, even during challenges
- Will help with any task no matter how big or small

This mindset is contagious. One motivated individual can elevate the entire organization, while a lack of motivation can just as easily spread to the point of debilitating the organization.

4 Empathy: The Human Side of Emergency Response

Empathy is one of the most critical and often overlooked skills in the fire service. Every call involves people at some of the worst moments of their lives. Empathy allows firefighters to move beyond the task and connect with the human experience. It is the ability to comfort a family after a

fire, reassure a patient during a medical emergency, or support a fellow firefighter after a difficult call.

Within the department, empathy strengthens relationships. Volunteer organizations are built on trust and camaraderie. Members come from different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Misunderstandings are inevitable; however, empathy allows individuals to navigate those differences professionally and constructively.

Empathy in leadership is especially critical. Officers and leaders who understand the challenges their members face are better equipped to lead effectively.

Empathetic leaders:

- Listen without judgment
- Recognize when members are struggling
- Provide support and guidance
- Build a culture where people feel valued

In both emergency response and station life, empathy transforms interactions from transactional to meaningful.

5 Social Skills: Building a Strong Firehouse Culture

Social skills are the outward expression of emotional intelligence and are vital in a team-based environment like the fire service.

Firefighting is inherently collaborative. Success depends on coordination, communication, and trust. Strong social skills enable firefighters to:

- Communicate clearly under pressure
- Work effectively as part of a team
- Resolve conflicts constructively
- Build relationships within the department and the community

Volunteer departments rely heavily on relationships. Unlike career job settings, members choose to be there. Poor communication, unresolved conflict, or toxic behavior can quickly drive people away.

Officers and firefighters with strong social skills help create a positive culture, one

where members feel connected, respected, and committed to the mission.

Expanding the Emotional Intelligence Framework

In addition to the five core competencies, the following applied competencies also contribute to the success of a volunteer fire department.

Interpersonal Communication: On the fireground, during training or in the firehouse, communication must be clear, concise, and effective. Everyone's communication efforts must also consider stress, noise, and emotion. The difference between conflict and growth often comes down to how a message is delivered. Emotionally intelligent firefighters understand how to deliver information in a way that is both direct and respectful.

Relationship Management: Volunteer fire departments depend on strong relationships to function effectively. Trust is built over time through shared experiences, reliability, and mutual respect. Officers who can resolve conflicts, rebuild trust after disagreements, support team cohesion, and encourage collaboration can unify diverse personalities into a cohesive, high-performing team.

Social Intelligence: Understanding group dynamics is critical in the fire service. Every department has its own culture, traditions, and informal leadership structures. Socially intelligent individuals can "read the room," recognize the department's informal influencers, navigate generational and cultural differences, and adapt their approach based on the audience.

Leadership Development: Leadership in the volunteer fire service is not just about

rank, it is about influence. Members follow those they trust and respect. Emotionally intelligent leaders create an environment where firefighters feel safe to learn, grow, and contribute. In high-risk environments, this trust directly impacts safety and performance.

Developing Emotional Intelligence in the Fire Service

The good news is that emotional intelligence can be developed through:

- Self-reflection after calls and training
- After-action reviews that include both technical and interpersonal performance
- Mentorship and coaching within the department
- Training scenarios that incorporate stress and communication challenges

Simple practices – such as pausing before reacting, actively listening, and seeking feedback – can lead to significant improvement over time.

Conclusion

Emotional intelligence is not a soft skill in the fire service – it is a critical operational capability. It ensures that teams function effectively, leaders make sound decisions, and members remain committed to the mission.

The core and applied competencies of emotional intelligence define the human edge in today's volunteer fire service. Emotional intelligence is critical in retention of members as well as paramount in recruiting new members. In an environment where people are the most important resource, emotional intelligence is not optional, it is essential. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Douglas Cline is assistant chief with Horry County (SC) Fire Recue, executive editor for TheFireOfficer.com, executive director of the National Fire Academy (NFA) Alumni Association, and executive director for the Command Institute in Washington DC. He has been in the fire and emergency services for 46 years and is a highly published author of articles, blogs, and textbooks for both fire and EMS. He also has a diverse line of training videos, is a Level III Fire Instructor, and is an instructor for the NFA.



People Over Process, Even With AI

by Daniel Chapek

Across the fire service, one challenge shows up again and again: we are being asked to do more with fewer people and less time. Recruitment is harder. Retention is harder. Administrative demands keep growing. And the expectations from our communities haven't changed.

Artificial intelligence is starting to offer a new way forward. Not as a replacement for firefighters or EMS providers, but as a force multiplier. Used well, AI can help departments work smarter, reduce administrative burden, and free up time for what actually matters: training, response, and taking care of our people.

The question is no longer whether AI will impact the fire service. It already is. The real question is whether departments will choose to use it intentionally and responsibly.

Where AI Fits Today

AI is not a single tool. It is a category of tools that can assist with everyday tasks that often take up more time than they should.

For volunteer and combination departments, that can include:

- Drafting recruitment posts, social media content, and community outreach materials
- Supporting grant writing and fundraising efforts
- Summarizing reports, policies, or training materials
- Assisting with SOP development or updates
- Creating training outlines or lesson plans
- Improving internal communication, including emails and member updates

Beyond content and communication, AI can also support one of the most difficult challenges departments face: retention. Many departments already track attendance at trainings, calls, and duty shifts, but those data points often live in separate systems or are only reviewed at a surface level. AI can help connect those dots, identifying patterns that are easy to miss, such as gradual drops in participation, changes in engagement over time, or early indicators that a member may be disengaging.

This kind of insight does not replace leadership or personal connection, but it can give officers a clearer picture of what is happening inside the department, allowing them to step in earlier and more intentionally to support their people.

AI can also help standardize messaging, improve prevention outreach, and support training development. On the EMS side, there is growing potential for documentation support, report

summaries, and even early mental health check-ins or CISM support tools.

None of this replaces experience, judgment, or training. It simply reduces the time it takes to get from a blank page to a usable first draft. Think of AI less like an expert, and more like a fast assistant that still needs supervision.

Ethics: The Part We Can't Skip

As useful as AI can be, it also introduces new risks that the fire service cannot afford to overlook. At its core, this is about maintaining trust. Our communities trust us with their safety, their information, and often their worst days. That standard does not change just because a new tool is involved.

There are a few ethical principles every department should keep in mind for any tool, artificial or not:

- **Protect sensitive information.** Patient care data, incident details, and personnel information should never be entered into public AI tools. If there is any doubt, it should stay out.
- **Verify before you use.** AI can sound confident even when it is wrong. Any content used for training, policy, or public communication needs human review and validation.
- **Be mindful of bias.** AI-generated content can unintentionally reflect bias. That matters when creating recruitment messaging, community outreach, or internal materials.
- **Be transparent when it matters.** If AI is used to generate public-facing content, departments should be thoughtful about how that aligns with their values and public expectations.
- **Keep humans in the loop.** AI can support decisions, but it should never replace professional judgment, especially in operational, medical, or personnel matters.

Just as important, departments need to be careful not to lose the human connection that drives recruitment and retention. People join departments because of relationships, purpose, and a sense of

belonging, not because of perfectly polished messaging. Over-reliance on AI-generated content can come across as impersonal or inauthentic, especially at a time when many people are already experiencing "AI fatigue" from obviously generated and automated posts.

AI can help you move faster, but it should not replace your voice. The most effective recruitment and retention efforts will continue to be grounded in real stories, real people, and real experiences.

These are not just technical concerns. They are leadership decisions. How a department uses AI will reflect its priorities and values, just like any other operational choice.

Building Guardrails Without Slowing Progress

As departments begin exploring AI, even at a basic level, it is worth putting some structure around its use.

An effective AI policy does not need to be complicated, but it should address a few core areas:

- **Clear boundaries:** Define what types of use are appropriate and what is off-limits, especially around sensitive data.
- **Review expectations:** Require human oversight for anything AI produces before it is shared or implemented.
- **Tool awareness:** Identify which tools are approved or recommended, even if only informally at first.

- **Training:** Make sure members understand both how to use AI and where its limitations are.
- **Accountability:** Reinforce that responsibility always stays with the user, not the tool.

The goal is not to restrict innovation. It is to create a framework that allows the department to move forward without introducing unnecessary risk.

Start Small, Start Now

One of the biggest misconceptions about AI is that departments need a full strategy before they begin. In reality, the best way to understand its value is to start small.

Try using AI to draft a recruitment post. Use it to outline a training night. Have it help summarize a long document into key points. These are low-risk, high-value starting points. From there, departments can build comfort, identify what works, and expand thoughtfully.

AI is evolving quickly. The departments that begin learning now, even in small ways, will be better positioned to take advantage of future capabilities. Those that wait may find themselves trying to catch up.

The fire service has always adapted to new tools and new challenges. AI is simply the next one. Used correctly, it will not replace the human element that defines this profession. It will strengthen it. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Chapek is the fire chief for Weston (NE) Volunteer Fire & Rescue and district director for the Nebraska State Volunteer Firefighters Association. With more than 20 years in the fire service, he has held roles including firefighter, EMR, training officer, secretary, and rural board member, all in a volunteer capacity. He focuses on recruitment and retention, helping departments apply practical, scalable strategies that work in resource-limited environments. In his career within the engineering technology sector, he has trained adults internationally on improving efficiency and technology use. He brings that perspective into the fire service, sharing straightforward, actionable ideas to help departments build stronger, more sustainable volunteer teams.



The Art of Mattering and How it Can Combat Responder Burnout:

A Q&A WITH JENNIFER WALLACE

In her new book *Mattering: The Secret to a Life of Deep Connection and Purpose*, award-winning journalist and bestselling author Jennifer Wallace makes the case that feeling valued and adding value is a core human need. She has brought this message to the fire and emergency services, explaining how mattering can be an important retention tool to combat first responder burnout and help build resilience.

We caught up with Jennifer to ask her more about mattering as it relates to the fire service and how responders can harness this tool to become more engaged, present, and resilient.

What is the concept of “mattering,” and why is it relevant to emergency responders?

Mattering is the experience of feeling valued – and knowing you have value to add. It’s both sides of the equation. I feel seen, and I know I make a difference.

For emergency responders, mattering isn’t a luxury. It’s foundational. You walk into moments of crisis and hold families together on their worst days. But over time, especially in a profession where tragedy is routine, it’s easy to lose sight of the lives you’ve changed.

When responders feel valued by their departments and connected to the difference they make in their communities, they are more resilient. When that connection frays, the work can begin to feel heavy in a different way, isolating instead of meaningful.

What are “anti-mattering” and “negativity bias,” and what are the consequences?

Anti-mattering is the opposite of mattering. It’s the experience of feeling invisible, replaceable, or insignificant. It’s the belief that “It wouldn’t really matter if I wasn’t here.”

Negativity bias is our brain’s hardwiring to remember and dwell on negative events, such as failures or losses, more than on positive ones, such as successes or achievements. Firefighters and EMS providers face an intensified version of this bias. You may save dozens of lives, but the one call that didn’t end the way you hoped is the one that stays with you.

If responders begin to feel they don’t matter, or they lose connection to the lives they’ve touched, the consequences can include cynicism, emotional withdrawal, disengagement, and burnout. Over time, it can erode mental health. And that erosion doesn’t just affect the individual – it affects the entire team.

How can mattering affect engagement and fight burnout?

Burnout is often framed as exhaustion from too much work. But what I’ve found is that burnout frequently grows from feeling unseen and disconnected.

When responders:

- Feel valued by their leaders and peers,
- See tangible evidence that their presence changed someone’s life,
- And know they are relied upon in meaningful ways,

they are more engaged, more committed, and more likely to stay. Mattering restores the “why.” It reminds responders that even when outcomes are difficult, their presence still counts.

What does SAID stand for?

In my book, I describe four ingredients of mattering using the acronym SAID:

S – Significant

Feeling important. Knowing your needs and who you are deep at your core matter, not just your performance.

A – Appreciated

Being recognized for what you contribute – specifically and authentically. Not generic praise, but “I saw what you did.”

I – Invested In

Knowing someone is in your corner. That a leader or colleague cares about your growth, your well-being, and your future.

D – Depended On

Being relied upon in meaningful ways. Not overburdened, but trusted.

When these four ingredients are present, people thrive. When they’re missing, something essential erodes.

What can fire service leaders do?

Leaders play an outsized role in shaping mattering.

A few specific actions leaders can take are:

- **Close the loop.** When possible, share outcomes from calls so responders can see the lives they changed.

- **Be specific in appreciation.** “You handled that family with extraordinary calm” goes much further than “good job.”
- **Check in beyond performance.** Ask, “How are you holding up?” and mean it.
- **Create peer recognition rituals.** Build a culture where colleagues call out each other’s strengths.
- **Protect reliance from becoming overload.** Being depended on builds mattering; being constantly overburdened erodes it.

Small, consistent signals accumulate.

What can firefighters do to support their own resilience?

First, intentionally reconnect to your evidence of impact. Keep what I call an “impact file.” Save thank-you notes. Record stories. Write down moments when you know your presence mattered.

Second, lean into your crew. Let yourself be invested in. Resilience grows in connection, not isolation.

Third, remember that your worth is not tied solely to outcomes. You are significant because you show up with courage, skill, and humanity in moments most people run from.

And finally, find ways to be depended on outside the job too. Coaching a team, mentoring a rookie, being the reliable neighbor. That diversified sense of reliance protects you.

How can people learn more?

You can explore these ideas more deeply in my book *Mattering: The Secret to a Life of Deep Connection and Purpose*. I share research-backed strategies for building resilience in workplaces and communities. The science of mattering is growing, and it’s giving us a framework for strengthening mental health and engagement in high-stress professions like yours.

Anything else you’d like to share?

In a culture that moves quickly past yesterday’s headline, the impact you

have can feel invisible. But to the person whose life you stabilized, whose house you entered, whose child you cared for, you are not invisible. You are unforgettable. And remembering that, and helping one another remember that, may be one of the most powerful tools for resilience we have. ■ ■

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Check out the NVFC webinar *How Mattering Can Buffer Against Burnout in the Fire Service*

featuring

Jennifer Wallace & Fire Chief Greg Bulanow.

Access it for free in the Virtual Classroom at <https://virtualclassroom.nvfc.org>.



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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 supported by the National HeroPlus Program.

nvfc.org/helpline

Communicating an Emergency: BE PREPARED FOR THE UNKNOWN

by Laura Rinehart

As an emergency service department, you are well versed in the operational aspects of responding to a crisis. However, there is another side of crisis management that is also important – communications. Typically when an emergency happens, government officials, members of the media, and the public are all trying to get information. Departments need to have a communication plan in place to properly handle the release of information and avoid missteps that could negatively impact the department.

The primary objective in emergency communications is to deliver accurate information to the intended audience as quickly as possible. During major incidents, there is immense pressure from both the media and the public to provide timely updates on what is occurring. Public information officers (PIOs) or spokespersons must carefully manage information release, ensuring accuracy and timeliness, while also considering what is appropriate for public disclosure.

Preparation Before an Emergency

Many essential elements of emergency communications are established long before an actual emergency arises. Comprehensive preparation is crucial for a successful response to both the media and the community when a large-scale incident occurs. It is not a matter of if your agency will encounter a significant event, but when. Emergencies occur daily in all types of communities, regardless of size. Even if your department lacks a full-time PIO, it is vital to designate someone who is ready to communicate emergency information on behalf of the agency. Identifying, training, and preparing personnel for the PIO role in advance allows operational staff to concentrate on managing the incident.

Establishing a Support Network

Taking a few simple steps now can form the foundation of your crisis support network. A critical preparatory task for PIOs is to identify all parties – both internal and external – who need notification during significant emergencies. Creating a shared contact list for emergency incidents should include internal fire department staff, local officials, city council or board members, partner agencies such as law enforcement, schools, and utilities, as well as organizations like the American Red Cross, animal services, and other community stakeholders.

Efficient Information Sharing

Setting up group texts, emails, or chat channels before an incident greatly facilitates information sharing during a crisis. For example, in Loudoun County, VA, important incident details are distributed via group text to the systemwide fire chief, on-duty command officers, the fire marshal's office, the 911 call center, and the PIO team. These messages are updated as the situation evolves, often including photos for news releases, ensuring timely updates for both internal and external stakeholders.

Leveraging Online Presence

Expanding your reach through an active online presence is an effective method for sharing critical information with the public and building community trust. Official fire department websites and social media platforms provide simple, efficient channels for disseminating important messages during crises.

Social Media Engagement

Smaller departments may lack dedicated communicators, but with training and guidance, any member can help establish an online presence. Social media is highly accessible, often free, and can reach large audiences. Even if new content is not

posted daily, encouraging community members to follow department accounts ensures they receive emergency information directly from the source. When posting photos or information from an emergency scene, remember to be respectful of the situation, compliant with HIPAA laws, and not reveal any sensitive or private information that should not be made public.

On-Scene PIO Actions

When responding to the incident scene, several straightforward actions can simplify the PIO's responsibilities. Establishing a media staging area early keeps media members safe, out of operational zones, yet close enough for interviews. This approach enables regular briefings and consistent information sharing with all media outlets. While accommodating media requests is important, scene safety and investigative integrity must remain the foremost considerations when selecting a staging location.

Developing Talking Points

Talking points play a key role in emergency communications. Depending on the spokesperson's experience, these may range from simple bullet points to detailed written responses. Preparing critical data points in advance ensures information accuracy and relieves leadership from recalling specific details during interviews.

Managing Media and Public Pressure

Anticipate requests from the media and public for immediate incident information. With real-time sharing via cell phones, be prepared for challenging questions and determine appropriate responses, especially for sensitive information not meant for public release. It is helpful to have a prepared statement acknowledging that it is an active incident and investigation. Initially, focus on

sharing critical information as verified with command officers before regrouping to develop further updates or news releases.

Building Relationships with Reporters

Establishing rapport with local reporters is invaluable. Open lines of communication foster trust and increase the likelihood of accurate reporting. Proactively guide media on where to obtain official emergency information and encourage them to follow department social media channels or subscribe to emergency alerts.

Collaboration in Larger Systems

If part of a larger combination system, seek an introductory meeting with the department or county PIO to discuss practices and guidelines for emergency communications. Having a point of contact in advance streamlines coordination during emergencies.

Formal PIO Training

Formal training for PIOs is essential. Organizations like the National Information Officers Association

(NIOA) offer specialized training and networking opportunities for public safety communicators. The Council of Governments in the National Capitol Region conducts monthly meetings for regional updates and campaigns. The Federal Emergency Management Agency provides a comprehensive PIO training program with courses and certification for varying experience levels. Regular collaboration between fire and law enforcement PIOs is also beneficial for campaigns, outreach, and incident response.

In Conclusion...

By reviewing these principles and recognizing the significance of emergency communicators, you are better equipped to support your agency in both internal and external emergency communications. Someone will tell your agency's story if you don't, so be proactive! ■ ■

Resources

NIOA: <https://nioa.org/>

FEMA: <https://training.fema.gov/programs/public-information-officer/>



About the Author

Laura Rinehart is the public information officer for the Loudoun County Combined Fire and Rescue System (LC-CFRS) in Virginia. Rinehart started her career in the fire service in 2003 as a volunteer with the Sterling Volunteer Fire Company and was hired by Loudoun County Fire and Rescue in 2005 as a firefighter. In 2010, Rinehart transferred to headquarters to work under the public affairs officer and shortly thereafter accepted a civilian position as the public information officer.

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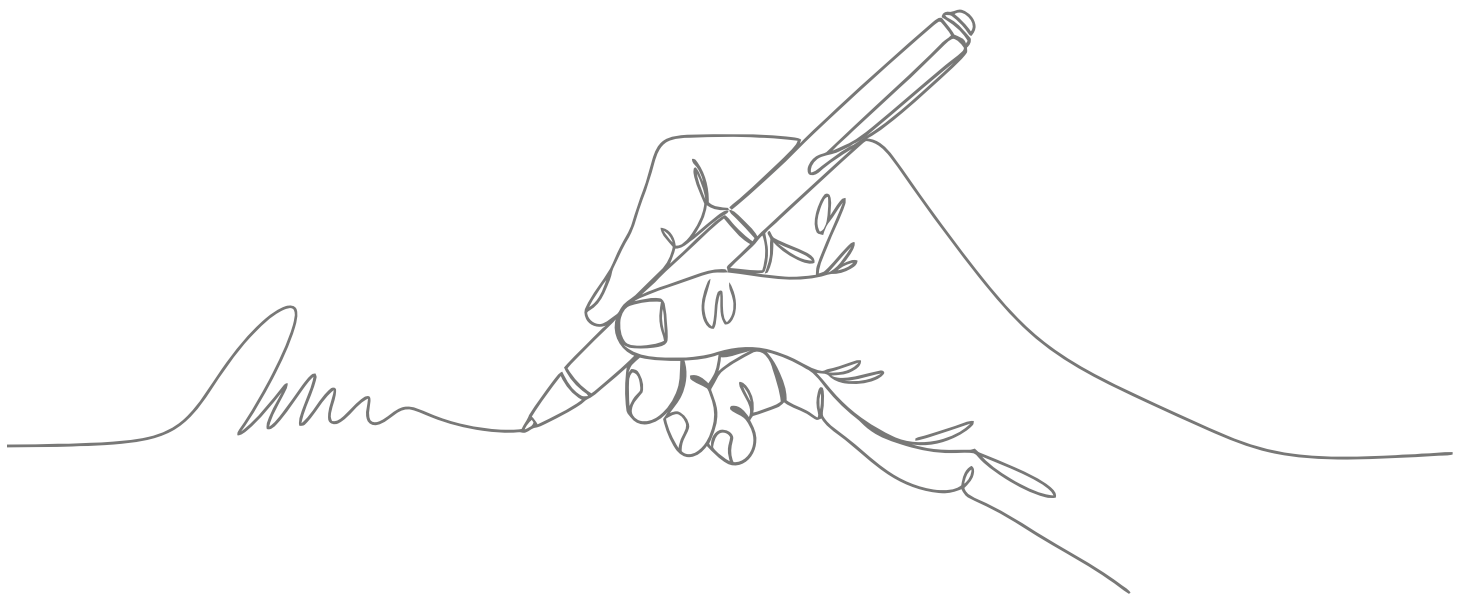


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Grant Writing Basics

BY SARA MULLINS

I know what you're thinking... We need equipment. We can't afford better PPE. That truck is only one more breakdown from going out of service, and then what are we going to do? Where can I get "free money" to fix this? Maybe I can find a grant?

This is absolutely an option – but before pursuing grant funding, let's discuss a few ground rules and application tips to increase your chances of success.

Start with a Good Foundation

First, be honest with yourself about your situation. The most successful grant applications recognize that it's a temporary helping hand to improve your department with a new capability, address an unforeseen need, or serve as a bridge to financial independence. It's incredibly rare for an organization to give away "free money" with no strings attached. A grant is still an exchange of sorts. They give you funding for a specific purpose, and in return, you give back things like a reliable department, improved response capability, or the satisfaction of helping a community through you.

Second, you need to take a hard look at your department's finances and inventory. If someone else looked at your books, would they agree that your department has been fiscally responsible? Have your purchases over the last three years met your department and community goals? Desired purchases are not always necessary purchases. Have you tried to find funding using methods other than grants?

A history of questionable financial decisions can significantly lower your score compared to other applicants. Conversely, a history of prudent spending will increase your competitiveness. This self-evaluation needs to happen before you ever start writing the narratives.

Finally, you can't win them all. Even strong applications get denied. It's not a reflection of you or your department, but a harsh reality of competitive funding. Always have a backup plan for funding in addition to a grant application. This is where perseverance matters; don't give up if you don't win.

Choosing What to Pursue

The internet and community are a sea

of grants once you know where to look, and it's tempting to say, "I'll take any fish I can get!" But the best applications are targeted. Fishing for grants is like using a fishing pole with a single lure, not a net. A solid grant application takes careful thought and research. Even a small application is a commitment of at least 20-40 hours of work between phone calls, inventory, and research. If you are pursuing a federal grant and it's your first time, expect a commitment of 100 hours or more. For a volunteer agency, that kind of time is a big ask. This is what makes choosing your targets carefully so much more important.

Where to Look

A reliable place to start looking is Grants.gov. This is a database of all federal government grants available. While FEMA's Assistance to Firefighters Grant and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response grant are some of the most well-known fire service grants, think outside of the box. Agencies including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, and even the Health Resources and Services Administration have grant opportunities that can overlap with firefighting for medical equipment.

Other government grants with less competition may be found by contacting your state fire marshal's office. State agencies frequently act as pass-through offices to distribute federal funding, but instead of 10,000 applicants at the federal level, they may have only 100, which increases your odds.

Grant opportunities also exist at the state and local level, through businesses and companies, and through organizations like the National Volunteer Fire Council.

Preparing an Application

Start early! Even if the submission period isn't open yet, start reviewing the "Notice of Funding Opportunity" (NOFO) and any guidance documents you can find now. If possible, obtain a blank copy of the application in advance to see what data and narratives they are requesting. For digital ones, many online applications won't let you advance without completing every field. A simple workaround is to enter placeholder values (like zeros) to access all sections, then update them later. Saving or printing a blank PDF copy can also help you work offline.

It's time to build your checklist:
What information can you gather yourself?
What needs coordination with others?

Before you write your first narrative, you're going to need data – and not just what the application asks for directly. Budgets, call data, vendor quotes, statistics, and anything that provides persuasive evidence that you have the greatest need and deserve to be funded. Create a schedule of when you will obtain this research. You know anecdotally that your department needs it, but data-based arguments are usually the most convincing. As this data comes in, study it. The strongest narratives match or explain the supplemental data provided.

Writing the Narrative

This is your chance to talk directly to the reviewer to plead your case.

Read each prompt carefully and decide how you want to structure your response. Aim to have at least three pieces of evidence to explain your position for each

prompt. Four is ideal. If you have less, that's okay! It's important to be truthful in your application.

Always write your narrative offline in a place where you can save it easily. Websites go up and down all the time; it's not worth the risk of losing your work.

Another benefit of working offline is using a word processor that has a "Word Count" or "Character Count" feature. Counting characters as you go will make sure your narrative fits the physical parameters of the grant application. Even when an application does not explicitly state a character limit, digital fields often still have one. You may only discover it when your narrative is cut off or truncated during entry. Treat the limit as a ceiling, not a goal for narrative length. Grant reviewers should not get bored reading your application. Clear, concise applications typically score better than verbose ones.

A newer consideration is that some grant programs use AI for an initial screening to filter out incomplete or low-quality applications. Because of this, be direct and avoid euphemisms, which might confuse the AI. Technology isn't mature for this purpose yet, but if that's what the grant authority wants to use, then it's prudent to be ready for it.

Submission!

Hopefully, you were able to gather all your data and narratives with a healthy margin of time, at least one week before the application period closes. Now it's

time to enter all the data and verify that the narratives are pasted into the correct boxes. If the application allows for saving and you have time, it is best to hold off on sending for a full day and then go back and reread it. Still happy with it? You also may want to have a friend who has no connections to it review it for you. If it makes sense to them, you're on the right track. Now, it's time to send.

Win or Lose

Win: After months of silence, Congratulations! You won! Now the real work begins. It's time to meet all the commitments you made in the application. Read your grant management documents carefully, as they will govern how you spend and be reimbursed for the grant. Best wishes to you and your department.

Lose: To review the rule above, "you can't win them all." Receiving a turndown letter can be pretty disheartening. They happen, but you're not helpless. It's time to put that backup plan into motion. While you execute that, this is a great time to email the grant office and ask for a copy of your scorecard or feedback from the grant reviewers. This isn't always available, but when it is, this is a valuable resource to learn from past mistakes, get you back in the game, and ready to try again.

Now that you're armed with the basics, it's time to go fishing with confidence! ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sara Mullins serves as the deputy fire marshal of the Jackson 105 Fire Protection District in rural Colorado, with over nine years of experience in the fire service. She holds a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering and has a special interest in fire service grant writing, having secured more than \$585,000 in funding for fire departments across Colorado. Mullins was an instructor at the 2023 National Volunteer Fire Council Regional Wildland Symposium, where she presented on grant identification and application strategies. She also volunteers as an EIIC Family Advisory Network representative, supporting research in pediatric emergency readiness with a focus on mental health. She has co-authored articles published in the American Academy of Pediatrics and JACEP Open.



The Ones that Stay With You: Post-Traumatic Stress in the Fire Service

by Chief Stephen Marsar

On September 11, 2001, I was a 12-year veteran firefighter in the Fire Department of New York's (FDNY) Ladder Company 7 located on the east side of Manhattan, five miles north of the World Trade Center (WTC). On the cusp of becoming a "Senior Man" and waiting on the eligible civil service list to become a lieutenant, it was the first morning of my vacation... or, I wouldn't be here today to tell this story. All of the members of Ladder 7 who were working that day – including one who was filling my position – were murdered in the terrorist attacks and subsequent collapses of the WTC Towers.

Arriving at the site just as the second (North Tower) collapsed, myself and 13

other firefighters (who answered the total recall of all off-duty members) went to work searching for survivors of the collapses. At one point, I looked up and saw four or five high-rise office buildings on fire around us.

It was surreal. On a "normal" day, each one of those fires would have been a multiple alarm in-and-of themselves. Yet today, we were letting them burn as we searched for survivors.

Years later, I was working as a covering captain in Ladder Company 4 – dubbed "America's Truck" after September 11, 2001 – but otherwise affectionately known as the "Pride of Mid-Town, Never Missed a Performance."

It was the afternoon of October 11, 2006. The members of Ladder 4 and Engine 54 were sitting in the firehouse kitchen having just finished lunch after a hands-on drill and catching a short break from the flurry of calls we had that cloudy, rainy morning. At 2:45 pm we received a dispatch teleprinter message to respond to a plane crash into a high-rise apartment building on East 72nd street. In seconds the members of Ladder 4 were on the truck and racing across town. We were responding as the third-due ladder company on a "10-77," the signal for a high-rise residential fire. Due to traffic, we were forced to abandon the apparatus and run an entire city block with our tools and equipment to the fire building.

When we arrived, I looked up to size up the building and saw the fire for the first time. The sight literally stopped me in my tracks. For a brief second, I was right back at ground zero on September 11, 2001. I shook my head to bring myself back to the present and stepped forward to do the job that we were there to do.

We worked on the floor directly above the main body of fire and eventually conducted secondary searches and overhaul of the apartment that was the direct point of impact.

After we returned from the fire and washed the tools, equipment, and ourselves, we went back in service ready to respond to the inevitable next bunch of calls that are the Mid-Town Manhattan firefighter's daily routine.

In the days that followed, I reflected on my actions as an officer and as a firefighter. I was proud of the work our department and the members of Ladder 4 did that day. The members of Engine Co. 44 – the first to arrive FDNY unit – did a great job and rescued a woman trapped in her apartment by breaching a wall while simultaneously stretching the first hoseline. The first and second to arrive ladder companies forced entry and rescued the severely burned occupant of the direct impact apartment. The incident commanders who managed and led the firefight were extraordinary in their focus, communications, planning, and execution.

But why did I get stopped when I looked up at that apartment building fire? As a certified peer support counselor trained in acute traumatic stress management, I knew why my mind slipped back to September 11 – it was a moment of my brain recalling the traumatic “imprint of horror” of the burning buildings that surrounded the WTC site as we dug and searched for survivors. OK, I got that.

But why was it such a surprise to me? After all, I had been involved in several stress debriefings related to line-of-duty deaths and other serious emergencies that my brother and sister firefighters and EMTs responded to and who needed help dealing with. Heck, I even attended

one or two as a participant myself. At that time, I was also one of three coordinators for the Nassau County Critical Incident Stress Management Team in the county where I live and volunteer as a firefighter/ EMT. Yet somehow this was different. It was different for me because I have never been affected like that, nor have I ever had an impact that stopped my momentum as an officer of an FDNY ladder company responding to a significant fire in an occupied high-rise building.

I know from my CISM training that my brain's response to what I was seeing at that October afternoon's plane crash was a normal reaction to an abnormal event. However, it still didn't stop it from happening.

That is exactly what we must remember about the things we – as first responders – see, hear, smell, and have to deal with. We need to accept and acknowledge that we chose to see other human beings suffering, hurting, and in physical and emotional pain sometimes. Although we are trained to help in those times of need, we must also acknowledge that it does, and will, affect us. Sometimes, when we least expect it.

The good news is that we have grown. Post-traumatic stress is not a disorder, nor is it something to be ashamed or afraid of. Peer support, mental health professional access, suicide prevention, substance abuse interventions, cancer awareness and screening, clean gear campaigns – these are all successes in confronting the long-standing by-products of what we do.

Thankfully, the national fire service, both volunteer and career, have embraced that these side-effects are real and need to be addressed. We have broken the “tough-guy / “suck it up” stigma and we have aggressively worked to offer help and education for each of the aforementioned side-effects so that we can keep first responders responding.

If you need assistance or just need to talk to someone, do not hesitate to reach out to your officers, chiefs, or someone you trust. The National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline can be reached by either calling or texting 9-8-8. The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) also maintains the First Responder Helpline (www.nvfc.org/helpline), which provides confidential counseling, resources, and referrals to assistance for a variety of behavioral health issues. In addition, the NVFC's Directory of Behavioral Health Professionals (www.nvfc.org/provider-directory) is a searchable list of local mental health providers that understand the unique needs of emergency responders and their families.

Help is available to us; don't be afraid to take advantage of it locally or on the national level. We are more educated, better prepared, and better equipped than at any other time in history to respond to emergencies. That includes taking care of the individuals who aspire to take on such awesome responsibility. Thank you for what you do. May you continue to do it for many years to come. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Marsar, MA, EFO, CIC, is a 38-year emergency services veteran. He recently retired as a battalion chief for the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) and is former chief and commissioner of the Bellmore (NY) Volunteer Fire Department. He has served as FDNY type 1 incident management team unit leader, national fire instructor I and II, NY State EMS regional faculty, and Nassau Community College (NY) adjunct professor, and he is the director of the Nassau County Critical Incident Stress Management Team. Marsar is the keynote speaker for the NVFC's 2026 Training Summit, delivering the address *Retrospective Vigilance From Ground Zero: Prepare To-, Protect From-, Inspire Against- Complacency!*

Training That Matters:

Using Evidence-Based Tools to Improve Performance on the Fireground



by Richard Ray

Today's volunteer fire service faces many challenges, from staffing and dedicated training time to fireground performance. As recruitment and retention struggles continue to rise, it is not only difficult to ensure that you have enough members responding to an incident but also that they have the correct knowledge base to mitigate the hazard. Volunteer fire departments that win on the fireground have mastered addressing these issues head-on before the incident occurs.

When it comes to training, volunteer firefighters want to know that the information is current, relevant, and worth the time they are sacrificing. Training should also offer flexible time frames and delivery methods, while remaining budget friendly.

Training within a volunteer fire department can be as dynamic as the fireground. Staying up to date with current trends and information is tough, as is meeting the needs of members diverse in age, experience, and availability. Many of these departments may not even realize what resources are available to them.

Evidence-Based Training Tools

Over my volunteer career, I have found that the best tools for training are those that are efficient, easy to access, and evidence based. Evidence-based training

is a data-driven approach that uses research-backed techniques and practical applications to improve competency.

Having research and evidence to support why we do what we do and sharing that with our firefighters is an important element in training. If firefighters understand the "why" behind specific tactics we use at each fire, they are more invested in the technique and more likely to want to master the skills needed to be successful.

However, watching videos and taking notes are just one part; it is equally critical to apply the information through hands-on training, which improves fireground performance and enables firefighters to provide a more efficient and safer service to the community.

Case Study: Putting Evidence-Based Training into Practice

To better understand how evidence-based training tools can improve department tactics and readiness, I'll share how my department utilizes these resources. While there are other sources, we rely on the free, evidence-based tools available through UL Research Institutes' Fire Safety Research Institute.

Understanding the "Why"

The ability to implement research-based tactical considerations from the Fire Safety

Research Institute's technical reports has guided my department's understanding of the impact of the actions that we do and do not take on the fireground. For years, we trained our members to use certain tactics on the fireground and shared information that was passed down over generations from past experiences. It was refreshing for the members to see the data and information from recent experiments that support tactics we have been using for years. This information has given members confidence in making fireground decisions that are applicable to the incident and the staffing level on scene, which in turn has kept our firefighters safe and allowed us to perform at a high level.

Making Informed Decisions

Tools that emphasize the role of time on the fireground have also changed how our department approaches both training and operations. For example, we have utilized time-to-task documents from the Fire Safety Research Institute's Search & Rescue Study to help our firefighters better understand the time that it actually takes to conduct a search or drag a victim. We also used these documents to inform hose stretches and advances, conducting ventilation, forcible entry, and establishing a water supply, both municipal and rural. Firefighters' ability to understand the element of time and how their actions impact victim survival helped reinforce the

importance of knowing how to perform simple basic skills.

Practicing Skills

Members have found that unless we continually practice skills, we can become rusty and make mistakes. We use the training props and drills available through the Fire Safety Research Institute's hands-on training toolkits to enhance our training, including the Dollhouse Fire Behavior Prop, window-initiated search training, and hose stream mechanics. In addition, the Fire Safety Academy has online training courses that help prepare us for the fireground.

Conclusion

I would encourage your department to utilize evidence-based training tools to help you create or improve your operational guidelines. When you apply current research and information to your staffing and resources, you can create guidelines that are relevant, up-to-date, and work for your response and staffing model. For volunteer fire departments, operational guidelines

that are based on science and research, along with staffing and resources, should

be the foundation for how your department will perform on the fireground. ■ ■

The Fire Safety Research Institute provides free evidence-based training tools relevant to all levels of experience and that can be implemented in rural, suburban, and urban environments. Use the QR codes below to access these resources.



Hands-on
Training
Toolkits



Fire Safety
Academy



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Ray, a 34-year veteran of the fire service, has both volunteer and career experience. He is a career firefighter with the Durham (NC) Fire Department, where he serves as a battalion chief. He is also a member of the Creedmoor (NC) Volunteer Fire Department, where he serves as a firefighter. He instructs on the national level and contributes to *Fire Engineering Magazine*. He is a member of the FDIC International Advisory Board and is a tech panel member for UL Research Institutes' Fire Safety Research Institute.

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MENTAL HEALTH APPS: What Firefighters Should Know Before Downloading



by Leanna Fortunato, Dennis P. Stolle, and Marnie Shanbhag

Thousands of mental health apps have promised to put wellness within easy reach. Some market better sleep. Others offer meditation, mood tracking, or stress management tools. Still others claim to provide therapy or treatment for conditions like anxiety or depression.

For firefighters, the appeal is obvious. Apps are private, flexible, and available anytime. After a long shift or a night of interrupted sleep, it can be tempting to download something that promises quick support.

But one important fact gets lost in the marketing: not all mental health apps are designed to do the same thing.

Understanding the difference can help firefighters choose tools that are useful and avoid those that may be misleading.

Two Very Different Types of Apps and Why It Matters

Most mental health apps fall into one of two categories: general wellness apps and therapeutic apps. Some newer tools, such as AI-powered chatbots, may appear in

either category or function as a separate type of support.

General wellness apps are a broad category of apps designed to support everyday well-being. They may include tools focused on wellness goals such as fitness, weight loss, or mental health. Just as fitness apps can help someone stay active, general mental health apps can support routines that help people manage stress, maintain balance, and build habits that support psychological well-being. However, much like a fitness app cannot diagnose or treat orthopedic conditions, general mental health apps cannot diagnose or treat psychological or psychiatric conditions. That would typically require seeing a licensed mental healthcare provider, such as a licensed psychologist.

Consider sleep as an example. Sleep disruption is common in the fire service. Overnight calls, irregular schedules, and the stress of emergency response can make consistent sleep difficult. A wellness app might help by offering relaxation exercises, guided breathing, and sleep

support. Those tools can help someone develop better sleep habits, but they do not diagnose or treat the clinical condition of insomnia.

Therapeutic apps, or digital therapeutics, are more regulated and structured than general wellness apps because they are designed to deliver evidence-based psychological treatments for mental health conditions diagnosed by a healthcare provider. Because they offer treatment, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) considers them “medical devices” and subjects them to regulatory oversight.

One useful rule of thumb is to look at what the app claims to do. Apps that promote general well-being – such as relaxation, mindfulness, or sleep routines – are typically general wellness tools and are widely available in app stores. Apps that claim to diagnose or treat mental health conditions operate in a different category. They generally must be ordered for you by a qualified healthcare provider. They also should have scientific evidence to demonstrate the safety and effectiveness of the app and indicate if they have been

approved by the FDA. This distinction matters because the expectations and requirements for these types of apps are different.

A New Factor: AI-Powered Chatbots

Another emerging category involves apps that use artificial intelligence (AI) to simulate conversation or coaching. These tools may respond to users' questions about stress, sleep, relationships, or other challenges.

These tools can be convenient or engaging, but users should remember that AI chatbots are not clinicians. Their responses are generated by automated systems rather than by a licensed professional responsible for your care. Many generative AI systems – meaning those that create responses rather than simply retrieve existing information – work by predicting the words most likely to come next in a conversation. In simple terms, they are closer to a very advanced form of autocomplete than trusted advice from a licensed healthcare provider. That distinction matters most when someone is seeking help for a serious or ongoing mental health concern.

That does not mean these tools have no value. But they should be understood for what they are: automated systems designed to provide entertainment or general advice, not clinical care.

How to Evaluate a Mental Health App

With thousands of apps available, how can someone decide which ones are worth trying?

While there is no perfect checklist, a few simple questions can help firefighters make more informed choices.

Who created the app?

Look for transparency about the developers. Credible apps typically identify the organization behind them and the professionals involved in their design.

Is there any evidence behind it?

Some apps are based on well-known psychological practices such as

mindfulness or cognitive behavioral techniques. Others rely primarily on marketing claims. Even basic references to research or professional input can be a positive sign.

What does the app claim to do?

Be cautious when an app claims to treat serious conditions or deliver guaranteed results. Tools that present themselves as treatments for conditions such as depression, anxiety, or insomnia should be held to a higher standard of evidence and transparency. Be cautious of tools claiming to provide treatment that do not indicate whether their tool has been approved or cleared by the FDA.

How does it handle your data?

Mental health apps often collect sensitive information. A trustworthy app should explain how user data is stored, protected, and used.

Does it seem realistic?

Good mental health tools support healthy habits and routines that have a positive cumulative impact over time. They rarely promise instant transformation.

In recent years, several organizations have begun developing frameworks to help clinicians and consumers evaluate digital mental health tools. These frameworks examine factors such as scientific grounding, privacy protections, usability, and user safety. While those reviews can be helpful, the questions above provide

a practical starting point for anyone considering a mental health app.

Apps Are Tools, Not the Whole Toolbox

Mental health apps can play a useful role in supporting well-being. They can help people practice relaxation techniques, build sleep routines, or check in with their mood. The right digital tools can make healthy habits easier to sustain.

But apps are only one part of a larger picture.

In the fire service, strong mental health also depends on leadership, peer support, healthy department culture, and access to professional care when it is needed. Technology cannot replace those foundations, all of which are needed to sustain strong performance and long-term resilience.

For volunteer firefighters, the goal is not simply to get through the work. It is to ensure that serving the community remains a source of purpose, pride, and personal growth.

Mental health apps can sometimes support that goal. But like any tool, they work best when firefighters understand what they are – and choose them with the same care they bring to the equipment they rely on when a call comes in. ■ ■



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Leanna Fortunato, PhD, is director of quality and innovation for practice at the American Psychological Association (APA). She is a licensed clinical psychologist committed to ensuring that everyone has access to high-quality mental health resources and care. **Dennis P. Stolle, JD, PhD**, is executive lead psychologist for applied psychology at the APA. He is a social and personality psychologist and attorney whose work focuses on small-group behavior and decision making, leadership, and organizational performance under pressure. **Marnie Shanbhag, PhD**, is senior director for the Office of Independent Practice at the APA. She is a licensed psychologist whose work spans clinical and applied settings, including adult psychotherapy, executive coaching, and organizational consulting.



Volunteer Voices: HEAR FROM NVFC MEMBERS

This year is a milestone on two fronts. The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) marks 50 years as the organization representing and supporting the volunteer fire, emergency medical, and rescue services. This is also the 10th issue of the *Firefighter Strong* newsletter.

In honor of these two anniversaries, we asked NVFC members for their thoughts on why they belong to the NVFC as well as what they do to support health and wellness for themselves and their department. Read their responses below.

QUESTION: Why are you an NVFC member?

"They support, educate, and empower volunteer responders. I love to stay connected to others who share the same purpose."
- Maria Torres, TX

"I am a member of the organization because it gives me access to valuable training and information that I would not normally receive on the local level. Additionally, I appreciate the values of the organization and the efforts that it gives to local and national causes."
- Michelle Wessolleck, NC

"The support and the programs for volunteers as individuals and for departments are second to none. They really care about the departments that are often locally overlooked."
- David Hackworth, AL

"I'm an NVFC member because it is the one national organization that consistently represents the realities of volunteer fire and EMS and turns that advocacy into practical support that departments can actually use. After 38 years of service, I've seen first-hand that the volunteer model survives only when it is actively supported – by policymakers who understand our constraints, by leadership development that keeps officers effective, by safety and wellness programs that keep members healthy and in service, and by recruitment and retention strategies that reflect what today's volunteers expect."
- Leonard Rivera, NY

"The NVFC is the only organization that provides essential support and resources to volunteer firefighters across the country. The organization advocates for our interests, offers valuable training opportunities, and helps strengthen local emergency response efforts, making communities we respond in safer for everyone."
- Jerry Brant, PA

"First and foremost, all volunteer fire departments need a voice, and I consider the NVFC to be that voice. I joined the NVFC for the benefits – for the forums, for all the information that you can get from other people and all the information that the NVFC provides."
- Ray Pittman, MS

"The NVFC's relentless advocacy for volunteers in the fire, rescue, and EMS community makes this organization an exceptional partner and an indispensable leader. Through operational best practices, high-quality training, mental health initiatives, and critical grant resources, the NVFC supports all of us in countless and meaningful ways. The organization shines a light on the issues that matter most, uniting us in productive collaboration to advance our life-saving mission."
- Jason Read, NJ

Take advantage of all the NVFC can offer you! Learn about benefits and join for just \$24 at www.nvfc.org/join.

QUESTION: What practices help you stay physically and mentally strong for your crew?

"Adequate sleep, ongoing training, daily workouts, healthy diet."
- Terry Sherb, WA

"I have a hobby farm. Like any farm there's lots of work, so that takes care of my physical strength. My mental strength comes from my animals. No matter how bad my day has been, my animals are always happy to see me, especially when I am carrying the feed bucket."
- Ronald Rhea, MS

"I exercise both my body and my mind, I do yoga to help me prevent injuries and relax my mind, and when on shift, I coordinate shift meals, games, and movie nights to help us all bond and stay relaxed/have fun."
- Stephanie Humberd, TX

"I personally have begun a serious weight loss program that includes Pilates, walking, and weight training. I take the time to do things that bring me joy such as reading, sewing, spending time with family and grandkids, volunteering at our local library and museum. We also love to travel. A life of service requires your own cup to be full in order to pour into others."
- Linda Pyle, KS

"At 80 years of age, I certainly practice falls prevention! Mentally, continual learning and participating in new activities keep me sharp."
- Beth Harrington, NY

"I try to exercise at least five times a week, and I regularly visit my healthcare providers. I have strong family support, and they have supported me during the good times and the bad. I have a great group of longtime friends that I can talk with and unwind with. I also have a network of special fire service 'brothers' that I routinely reach out to talk with. I make sure that I take time to vacation away from the fire service. I try to attend key training classes that will not only help me but also help my department."
- Rick Haase, IL

"Having a positive mentality is the biggest thing."
- Bill Montz, NE

"We have a roundtable talk after every tragic scene we go on, that helps everyone out."
- Troy Bishop, FL

"I'm an avid lap swimmer (swimming 1 mile 3-4 times per week). I'm also an avid hiker and distance cyclist. I'm health conscious with my low-sodium food choices and meals."
- Jack Van Wye, AZ

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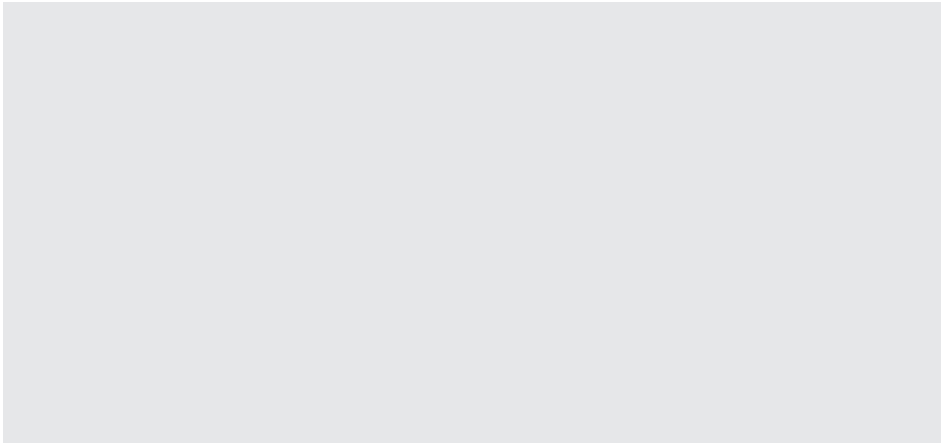
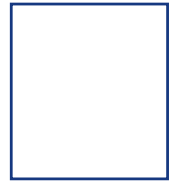
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