

Good tailgate topic for firefighters and supervisors.

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## **12 Ways to Reduce Firefighter Injuries**

By Dave Murphy

The IAFF recently released a [report](#) providing invaluable information about the factors that continue to hurt firefighters. The analysis, compiled from two years' worth of line-of-duty injury data among metropolitan fire departments, speaks for itself. According to the study, more than 94 percent of the injuries were attributable to an identifiable cluster of contributing factors.

A more detailed breakdown revealed that about one-third of the firefighter LOD injuries were caused by a cluster of factors under the direct control of the individual firefighter and chief officers. Put simply, more than 30 percent of firefighter LOD injuries can be prevented simply by changes in behavior.

The incident scene is, and always will be, a dynamic atmosphere. Humans are not robots, nor should we strive to be. We must be adaptable to the situation as it comes and be able to perform in a safe, efficient and professional manner. Because of the nature of this job, we do sustain injuries and will continue to do so. I realize that a goal of zero accidents is not realistic. However, because we know the factors that put firefighters in danger, a substantial reduction in injuries can and must be realized. Now that we have established data directly attributable for these LOD injuries, what exactly are we going to do about it? How can a reduction be achieved?

### **Leave the ego at home**

We are all programmed to be extremely aggressive from day one. I am not saying this is a bad thing. We should be aggressive in the performance of our duties, but it must be properly managed. There is a very fine line between bravery and stupidity. This is perhaps the biggest problem we need to address. Our collective ingrained brawn (peer pressure) is most often bigger than our individual brain, which directly leads to the next point:

### **Always consider risk vs. gain**

Is it really worth it? Is a viable human life truly at risk? How many times have you fought to the point of exhaustion only to see the structure torn down anyway? We are producing disposable cars and cardboard homes. You are worth more than they are. The incident commander must be the one wise enough to pull back the crews when the outcome becomes obvious — he or she should be able to rely upon the expertise and support of everyone present in making a timely judgment call.

### **Mandate higher education as a requirement for promotion**

Will higher education indeed make us safer? Sure it will. Directly or indirectly, there is no valid argument against it. You are forced to speak, write and research about budgets and related matters. Firefighter injuries are most definitely a drain on any operating budget. Safety

awareness, fostered by higher education concepts, will hopefully transcend throughout the department and beyond.

#### **Provide inter-agency training on a regular basis**

Every fire department basically inhabits its own island. Every now and then, we have to leave the island and go to someone else's. How does that work out? Sometimes it goes well, other times not so well. Why don't we invite everyone over to our island for some good training every now and then? It will definitely pay off in safety and efficiency when you have the "big one" and the other islanders come to you in mass.

#### **Maintain well-written SOPs and SOGs**

If it isn't broke, fix it anyway. The game is constantly changing; SOPs/SOGs written 25 years ago most likely need to be updated. Operating without them is legalized freelancing. Don't reinvent the wheel; find procedures and guidelines that are compatible with your department and amend as necessary. Provide training as needed — it will make your department much safer.

#### **Provide frequent, realistic and modernized training**

Why do we train? No, really, why do we train? Is the training simply done as a "check off" to satisfy incentive pay requirements or is it done with a true learning objective? Do we utilize the most effective methodology delivered by excellent instructors? Is safety automatically built in to every training event? Firefighters recognize BS for what it is; always deliver training that is worthy of everyone's time and effort.

#### **Enforce established safety-related rules**

Are safety rules actually enforced in your department? Do some officers/companies/shifts take them seriously while others blow them off completely? In private industry where safety is taken seriously, they have a way of dealing with habitual safety offenders — they fire them. Maybe we should learn from them. I do not advocate a witch hunt-type atmosphere, but it may be necessary to get their attention to show you are serious. A word of caution here: always be 100 percent fair in the enforcement of your rules.

#### **Budget for full annual physicals**

This is a budgetary item that can no longer be ignored. Departments must willingly accept this responsibility to pay for full employee annual physicals and act accordingly. Countless lives will be saved as a result. This proven life saver is perhaps the greatest intervention that could be undertaken by any fire department.

#### **Complete annual individual Performance Fitness Qualifications and take corrective action**

Building upon the previous recommendation, both the fire department and the individual must work together to minimize personal and departmental health liability. Look at the stats. We know who those with the greatest risk factors are. You can't ignore the facts. Supply your medical team with these numbers; it may help them decide a course of action for your employees.

#### **Require cessation of tobacco usage as a prerequisite to hiring**

A no brainer here as there is sufficient medical evidence to support such a mandate. This must come from administration, the chief's office or above, with the enforcement clause already built in.

#### **Exhibit a willingness to change outdated practices and traditions**

Now is the time to change. If a tradition is stupid or dangerous (hazing is one example) it simply must stop. A large percentage of firefighter injuries occur in a supposedly "controlled environment." What's up with that? Read the fire web sites and see what happens to departments where these things go awry. Not only can these antics be costly, people often sustain physical injuries as well.

#### **Adopt what is working among other departments**

Go to conferences, talk to other departments, see what they are doing in regard to proactive

safety efforts — and attempt to duplicate. Safety-minded professionals are usually very quick to share their knowledge and materials in the hope of spreading the word.

As my aunt was fond of saying, "Rome was not built in a day." Your imbedded safety problems will not go away that quickly either. Look at your injury data and find out what is hurting your members. Prioritize. Start with a workable plan to minimize their occurrence. How do you do this? Involve everyone. Do not let the chiefs mandate the plan; let the firefighters identify the problems and the steps necessary to minimize them. Give them the tools necessary to do the job and provide assistance as needed. Most people want to do the right thing — give them a chance to do it.

I applaud the IAFF and the departments that have submitted their injury data and I encourage you to read the entire report. Now that we have quantitative data, the question is what are we going to do differently? If we stay the current course, nothing is going to change. You must do something!