

The Firefighter's Safety Bulletin



February 2012

Welcome to The
Firefighter's Safety
Bulletin!

Firefighting: A Culture of Risk

By Jay Lewandowski

The Firefighter's Safety Bulletin is published for members of the Comp Alliance with fire and EMS departments. The intent of this bulletin is to help our members identify and control the leading job related hazards arising from firefighting, rescue, emergency service operations and other related activities.

This issue addresses the risk-based culture that firefighters and EMS workers are compelled to operate in as first responders.

The Firefighter's Safety Bulletin is written by Jay Lewandowski, a senior loss control specialist, FDNY.

Firefighters risk their lives to save lives and property. Many lives have been lost, injuries sustained and hard lessons learned. These lessons have taught us better ways to fight and prevent fires and safer building designs to construct homes.

Firefighters have inspired changes in building codes and code enforcement methods that have reduced the number of structure fires over the years. Yet, newer building materials and designs often make fire burn farther and faster than before. The "open floor plans" that homeowners want today offer few fire breaks. A kitchen fire used to be contained in the room by a door, thus limiting oxygen and fuel availability, containing the fire to one room. This would allow some more response time to contain the fire to the one room and retard the spread of fire. Today the "open floor plan" means that a kitchen fire spreads easily to the dining and living areas with plenty of oxygen and more fuel. Even a very fast response often results in just protecting neighboring structures and controlling the burn. (Mandatory sprinklers in new construction homes will save lives and property, but that discussion is for another day.)

Cutbacks in funding and staffing further add to the problem – additional risk that is felt by firefighters. The nature of the job is to take risks to help save lives and structures. Even though there are fewer structural fires each year, there are still about the same number of fire scene deaths and injuries.

Firefighting has been and always will be a dangerous activity. Firefighters go into uncontrolled and hazardous situations and professionally contain and control the situation at hand – all with great risk of personal safety. Over the years, firefighters have become conditioned to take greater and greater risks. While nationally it appears the number of fireground injuries per 100 fires is more or less steady with slight upward trends, the Northeast has increasing numbers of injuries per fires.

A recent study done by the University of Georgia¹ found that cultural expectations have led to an increase in risk taking. "Firefighting culture should not be construed as one of negligence, but one based on a long-standing tradition of acceptance of risk. A job that relies on extreme individual efforts and has too few resources leads to the chronic condition of doing too much with too little" said David DeJoy, co-author of the study.



"If you get used to taking risks, it's easy to take a little more risk," David DeJoy said, "Most of the time when we take risks, like walking across the street or driving a car, nothing bad happens. This level of risk gets ratcheted up and becomes part of normal activity." Acceptance of risk becomes extremely perilous in a situation in which adverse events can happen at any time and margins of safety are very thin," he added.

If this sounds familiar in your department, then it is time to change!



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Take note of this: A fire captain was injured when he climbed a ladder unassisted to get to a fire. As he reached the top of the ladder he missed the roof with his foot and hit the rain gutter. This resulted in him losing balance. The ladder tipped and slid from the roof, and he fell from the edge of the rooftop to the driveway. He ended up in the hospital, because he had chosen to go up on the ladder without the required person supporting it from the ground.

The significant part of the story is the way it was viewed and discussed by reporters and fire officials. The perspective given was that the injury was caused by recent cutbacks due to budget problems. This takes the individual's decision out of the equation when the individual's decision to do the work UNSAFELY was the primary cause of the injury.

Sadly the cause of the injury was that the fire captain chose to do something in an unsafe way. That's not to say that there are times you take greater risks to save a life. In this case it was a garage on fire. Don't you agree that the better choice would have been to wait for more help and have a fire fighter on the ground stabilizing the ladder? Putting safety first may have resulted in greater damage to the building; however, the fire captain would not have been injured. Which headline is better? "Due to recent cutbacks we lost the building!" or "Due to recent cutbacks we lost a firefighter!" The only difference is the decision to act safely.

The Fire Service needs a new philosophy! New recruits and the "Old Dogs" need to be trained to respond to all calls as SAFELY as possible, instead of as quickly as possible. Firefighters practice donning gear as quickly as possible. They practice catching hydrants and pulling hose as quickly as possible. The location of tools and equipment on the trucks is standardized so the right tool for the job can be found as quickly as possible. Speed is vital to the fire service. But just like in manufacturing, the product is made with "Quality before Quantity," the Fire Service needs to put "Safety before Speed!"

Firefighters have dedicated their lives to protect and save other people. Now it is time to dedicate your lives to protecting yourselves while you protect others.

¹Line-of-Duty Deaths Among U.S. Firefighters: An Analysis of Fatality Investigations
By: Kumar Kunadharaju, Todd D. Smith and David M. DeJoy (Oct 2010)

Drill Night Training

Are you looking for a speaker to come and give a presentation to your department on topics that is important to the members? Our Loss Prevention staff has developed a Drill Night presentation that uses your loss experience and/or the loss experience of the Fire Services Nationwide to bring attention to some of the hazards that are not often part of many fire service training sessions. For more information and/or to schedule a Drill Night Safety Training Session please contact: Jay Lewandowski, Loss Prevention Specialist, 518-764-2476

We hope you found this issue of *The FireFighter's Safety Bulletin* informative and useful. If you wish to obtain additional copies, make comments, or suggestions for future topics, please contact:

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