

2013 International Fire/EMS Safety and Health Week
June 16-22
Saving Our Own... An Inside Job

Activity Ideas

The theme of Safety and Health Week 2013 focuses on behavioral health for firefighters and EMS personnel. This is a very real health and safety issue for the entire fire and emergency medical service community. The mental well-being of personnel is just as important as their physical well-being, and it needs to be as great a priority in the department.

The following activities will help you implement Safety and Health Week in your department. To promote Safety and Health Week, utilize the posters, web banners, customizable press release, and other resources from the Safety and Health Week web site at www.safetyandhealthweek.org. This site also provides resources to help your department focus on mental health, physical health, and safety. These are issues that affect not only the individual, but also the entire department, families, and the community.

Use Safety and Health Week to reinvigorate activities that focus on safety and health, and then keep the momentum going all year long to create a safer, healthier, and stronger fire and emergency medical service. These activities should serve as a starting point to an ongoing focus on and commitment to the behavioral health of all personnel.

- Remind department members to seek help if they feel overwhelmed, stressed, or depressed. Create and distribute a listing of available resources and support systems within the department and the community. These may include counselors, helplines or local organizations, chaplains, CISM teams, and others. If your department has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), review the details with personnel.

If your department does not have an EAP, the NVFC has partnered with American Addiction Centers to create the National Fire Services Member Assistance Program (MAP). This free, 24-hour hotline is available to members of the fire service and their families to provide immediate assistance for any issues affecting their work or personal life. These may include alcohol or drug addiction, anxiety, depression, stress, PTSD, relationship problems, work-related concerns, legal problems, financial management difficulties, critical incidents, or psychological problems. Information on how the MAP works is available at <http://www.nvfc.org/hot-topics/health-and-safety/health/member-assistance-program>.

- Look at what your department can do to implement the Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives, with a particular focus during Safety and Health Week on *Life Safety Initiative 13: Firefighters and their families must have access to counseling and psychological support*. Refer to the new Initiative 13 web site at <http://flsi13.everyonegoeshome.com/> for resources and training. Find resources for all of the Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives at <http://www.everyonegoeshome.com> and <http://www.lifesafetyinitiatives.com/>.

- Educate yourself and your personnel on behavioral health issues. Have your personnel complete online training courses relating to firefighter behavioral health issues, either as independent study or as a group. The NVFC offers a course on Behavioral Health and a course on Fire Service Suicide and Behavioral Health Concerns. The Firefighters Support Foundation offers courses on Dealing with a Line of Duty Death, When a Child Dies on a Call, and When to Seek Therapy. Links to all of these trainings are available on the www.safetyandhealthweek.org web site under Behavioral Health Resources. Additional resources available from this site include the NVFC guide *Suicide in the Fire and Emergency Services: Adopting a Proactive Approach to Behavioral Health Awareness and Suicide Prevention*, which provides additional guidance on holding behavioral health training and other steps departments can take to address behavioral health issues.
- Retirement planning is often overlooked in the fire service, yet can be very difficult for someone who has dedicated their life to the fire service. Implement a retirement planning procedure, including a retirement committee, in your department to assist firefighters approaching retirement get through this difficult time. Topics to address include what steps are needed to prepare for retirement, what support systems or counseling services are available to help with the transition, what does one do when they stop being a firefighter, how to keep their identity after the fire service, ways they can still maintain some type of involvement with the department if they want, and what are the keys to success and happiness in a post-firefighter life. Additional guidance on retirement planning is available in the NVFC guide *Suicide in the Fire and Emergency Services: Adopting a Proactive Approach to Behavioral Health Awareness and Suicide Prevention*.
- Many universities or local mental health centers host annual screening days for depression and substance abuse. Encourage your department to take advantage of these offers, or work with one of these organizations to schedule a special screening event for the department. Make sure the screening includes follow-up resources for firefighters to get any help they may need.
- Encourage everyone in your department to be aware of the other members. Is one member working long hours, under a lot of stress, or drinking more heavily than usual? Be accountable for each other and don't be afraid to ask that person if you can help. Establish a culture within the department where it is okay for personnel to talk about issues that are bothering them.

Schedule a mandatory behavioral health training session and invite a local expert or mental health professional to educate personnel on how to identify signs and symptoms that something may be wrong, and to teach personnel what to do if they suspect someone may be suffering from a behavioral health issue such as depression, addiction, or PTSD. The speaker can explain how mental health is related to physical health, including heart disease and stroke, and the ramifications of ignoring mental health issues.

- Encourage play! Help first responders get rid of some stress and strengthen bonds by coordinating events that are just for fun. Have a friendly game of touch football, play board or card games in between calls, plan a heart-healthy cooking class – anything that helps build camaraderie while also reducing stress.
- Encourage members to exercise every day, even if it is just going for a walk outside. Exercise produces endorphins which improve mood and may help release stress. Establish a fitness program for the department to help firefighters stay on track. The NVFC Heart-Healthy Firefighter Program provides resources for starting and expanding a department fitness and wellness program, including

an interactive fitness challenge, monthly activity ideas, exercise demonstration videos, and more. Find these resources at www.healthy-firefighter.org. The IAFF/IAFC Fire Service Joint Labor-Management Wellness-Fitness Initiative (www.iafc.org/wfi) is a comprehensive, non-punitive wellness program for fire service personnel, addressing medical and fitness evaluations, behavioral health, rehabilitation, and data collection.

- Provide tips to department members during Safety and Health Week as to how to address behavioral health issues and promote behaviors that are healthy both mentally and physically. Find information for including in the tips from the resource sections at www.safetyandhealthweek.com. Examples of tips may include:
 - If you are feeling stressed, sad, or depressed, talk to a trusted friend, family member, colleague, support group, or counselor. Talking about what is bothering you can help relieve the stress and make you feel better. Or you can call the National Fire Services Member Assistance Program hotline at 1-888-731-FIRE (3473).
 - Find activities that help you relieve stress. Perhaps you feel better after exercising or meditating. Some people relax by listening to soothing music, taking deep breaths, or going for a walk. Find a productive activity that helps you unwind after a stressful day or incident.
 - Make sure you get a good night's sleep. Lack of sleep can lead to increased stress or a more negative mood. If you are not getting a good night's sleep, try going to bed earlier tonight and see how you feel in the morning. Find tips and resources for getting a good night sleep on the Sleep Foundation web site at <http://www.sleepfoundation.org/> and review the IAFC/USFA report, The Effects of Sleep Deprivation on Fire Fighters and EMS Responders, at www.iafc.org/sleep.