
Keeping fire safety officers busy

by Robert Laford

Within the fire service, few question the need for a safety officer at the scene of an emergency. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), the Incident Command System (ICS), and federal law all recommend or require the use of one. Even the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recognizes the impor-

tance of a fire safety officer in its confined space regulations.

Why? Because every year, firefighters and other rescuers at emergencies suffer injuries or die needlessly. In 1997, 94 firefighters in the United States died in the line of duty. In 1998, the NFPA said 42.6 percent of those fatalities occurred at the scene

of an emergency. In 1997, two-thirds of all firefighter injuries were related to an emergency.

During an emergency, a fire safety officer has an important job to do. A safety officer's knowledge of fire behavior, building construction, and a fire department's standard operating procedures helps him or her assess

risks, while helping the department establish the safest possible work environment. A safety officer acts as the incident commander's eyes and ears. He or she identifies potential trouble spots before they translate into deaths and injuries.

Safety planning

OSHA mandates that every employer provide its employees with a workplace that is free from hazards that are likely to cause death or serious injury. The law also says employees must comply with occupational health and safety standards. Firefighters are no exception. While employers in some states are not responsible for meeting OSHA requirements, in legal cases, employers in all states must comply with recognized safety standards.

Part of that responsibility is to create a risk-assessment plan in accordance with the requirements specified in FPA 1500, the Fire Department Occupational Safety and Health Standard. Such a plan must assess risks and outline specific ways fire departments can improve all aspects of safety, including administration, facilities, training, vehicle operations, equipment, and both emergency and non-emergency operations.

The department's safety officer should be a member of its occupational safety committee and should monitor the department's safety plan, review its safety needs, and develop plans to implement changes needed to improve safety. The committee should be made up of personnel from all levels of the department.

Facilities

The fire department safety officer's job away from the emergency scene is sometimes neglected. His or her observations on safety relating to the department's facilities, equipment, training, and nonemergency operations is often as important as his or her involvement in emergency operations.

FPA 1500 states that fire department facilities must comply with all legally applicable health, safety, building, and fire code requirements. But many fire departments are failing to meet these requirements. Building maintenance, for example, is often neglected, resulting in fire hazards.

During down time and emergencies, there is a risk not only for career firefighters but also for volunteers. Statistics show more volunteer firefighters suffer injuries or die each year

in fire service-related incidents than career firefighters. Some of these injuries occur during emergency operations.

Training

A recent study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health says that during the past 20 years, 20.5 percent of firefighter deaths in the United States were related to vehicle accidents. And a 1997 NFPA report says that 8.5 percent of the 94 firefighter fatalities reported in 1997 occurred during training. Other NFPA reports indicate that approximately 7 percent of reported injuries suffered by firefighters each year also happen during training. In addition to using proper protective clothing, the NFPA says one way to avert many injuries is for fire departments to hold ladder drills and ventilation drills with the use of Personal Protection Equipment or Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus. A second way is to ensure the safety officer plays an important role in any training program.

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