

Safety Officer's Corner:

Replacements and Recovery

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The fire service has come to realize that its people are its most valuable resource and its most necessary commodity. Statistics have shown that firefighter deaths and injuries have been significantly reduced over the past 20 years.

On the fireground, in the heat of the moment, however, we sometimes overlook the physical needs and limitations of our personnel as the battle plans are being executed. This is especially true in the first few moments of the emergency operation as, perhaps, a limited amount of manpower begins the aggressive attack of the fire.

Emergency service personnel in general, and firefighters specifically, are very aggressive people. Their personalities lend them to behaviors that help them excel at energy-consuming tasks, like those needed in fire suppression. These personality traits include:

- * Need to be in control
- * Desire to do a perfect job
- * Highly-motivated
- * Action-oriented
- * Easily bored
- * Risk takers
- * Rescue personality
- * Highly dedicated
- * Strong need to be needed¹

Most firefighters don't want to give up the fight for a break or to move into rehabilitation. However, rehabilitation of on-scene personnel is a necessary component of the Incident Command model—and a necessary concern of both the Safety Officer and the Incident Commander.

The statistics on fireground injuries tell us that over the past ten years, nearly one million firefighters have been injured in the line of duty.² Of those 95,000 to 105,000 reported annual injuries, over half (55.4% in 1994) have been injuries that occurred during emergency operations.

The NFPA statistics also say that each year, strains and sprains are the most common form of injury among firefighters, with slips and falls being the second most common form of injury. These specific injuries can be directly related to firefighter fatigue. As our firefighters become more tired during an incident, their potential for injuries increases. A pro-active on-scene safety program, including a rehabilitation area, will help cut down on injuries by reducing fatigue.

As the Incident Commander formulates his or her action plan, it is up to the Safety Officer to understand what tasks need to be performed and what personnel will be needed. Many times we think that, with the apparatus on hand, the incident can be controlled. We sometimes don't recognize, however, that apparatus does not extinguish fires—manpower does.

If there are more tasks to be accomplished than there are people available to perform them, then more resources (personnel) are needed at the scene. If there are "just enough" people available to accomplish the designated tasks, you still need additional personnel to allow for rehabilitation and staging.

After the incident is over and companies are beginning to make up, an assessment is needed. If it seems that someone is hurt at every fire, something is wrong. But, if we take account and everyone was rotated in and out of the incident—replaced with fresh crews—and given a chance to rest, recoup and return to personnel staging, then we are well on the way to having a safe operation.

Our people and their safety are our first priority, our most valuable resource, and our primary concern.

End Notes:

¹ Mitchell, Jeff, Ph.D., *Emergency Services Stress*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1990, pp. 21-23.

² Karter, Michael Jr. and Paul LeBlanc, "Firefighter Injuries at an 18-Year Low," *NFPA Journal*, November/December 1995.

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