

## **Preventing Firefighter Line of Duty Deaths...the Role of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation**

By: Chief Dennis Compton

### ***Background***

Major fire service organizations have historically worked to prevent firefighter line of duty deaths. The International Association of Firefighters (IAFF), International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), International Fire Service Training Association (IFSTA), United States Fire Administration (USFA), along with many other fire service organizations, associations, media, etc. have a rich history of promoting the health, wellness, and safety of firefighters. Preventing firefighter line of duty injuries and fatalities is a priority that the fire service shares and accepts as a critical element of our training and service delivery systems. In 2004, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation (NFFF) joined in these prevention efforts and vowed to assist organizations in providing additional leadership and focus for this important fire service commitment.

The United States Congress created the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation (NFFF) in 1992 to lead a nationwide effort to honor America's fallen firefighters. Since its inception, the NFFF has developed and expanded programs that fulfill that Congressional mandate. The mission of the NFFF is to honor and remember America's fallen fire heroes and to provide resources to assist their survivors in rebuilding their

lives. There can be no better way to honor the sacrifices of our fallen firefighters and their families than to work with the fire service to prevent line of duty deaths. In the fulfillment of its mission, the NFFF has responsibility for the following programs and initiatives:

- Sponsor the annual National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend which is the official national tribute to all firefighters who died in the line of duty in the previous year.
- Help survivors from the immediate family attend the annual Memorial Weekend by providing travel, lodging, and meals. This assistance provides them with additional access to trained grief counselors, the opportunity to participate in “Family Day” sessions, and the ability to attend public tributes to their lost loved ones.
- Support programs are offered to survivors that give them a place to turn and a Fire Service Survivors Network to lean on, which can serve as an important part of their healing. Current information is provided in various ways to survivors concerning Federal, State, and Local survivor benefits and other resources.
- Scholarships are available to spouses, children, and stepchildren of fallen firefighters to assist with education and/or job training.
- Training and assistance is offered to fire departments to help them handle a line of duty death, including a Chief-to-Chief network that provides technical assistance and support to help the fire department and the family.

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- Creation of a National Memorial Site in Emmitsburg, Maryland which will serve as the first permanent National Park honoring all firefighters. This includes a brick “Walk of Honor” connecting the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Chapel and the Official National Monument.
- In cooperation with, and support from the National Fire Service Organizations, the “Everyone Goes Home”® program and campaign has been launched to join with the United States Fire Administration (USFA) with the goals of reducing firefighter line of duty deaths by 25% by 2010 and 50% by 2015.

While the NFFF has long been in the role of honoring fallen firefighters and supporting the survivors, they are now very committed to working as a partner with the fire service community in preventing these tragic losses.

### ***Discussion***

At the center of the “Everyone Goes Home”® program are the sixteen Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives. These initiatives were developed by fire service leaders who participated in the “Firefighter Life Safety Summit” in Tampa, Florida in March 2004. These 250 summit participants intended the initiatives as a blueprint for making critical changes that would result in meeting the goals established as part of the program. These initiatives address contributing factors in firefighter line of duty deaths in the areas of:

- Fire Prevention and Public Education

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- Structural Firefighting
- Wildland Firefighting
- Training and Research
- Health, Wellness, and Fitness
- Vehicles

Following are the Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives:

1. Define and advocate the need for a cultural change within the fire service relating to safety, incorporating leadership, management, supervision, accountability, and personal responsibility.
2. Enhance the personal and organizational accountability for health and safety throughout the fire service.
3. Focus greater attention on the integration of risk management with incident management at all levels, including strategic, tactical, and planning responsibilities.
4. Empower all firefighters to stop unsafe practices.
5. Develop and implement national standards for training, qualifications, and certification (including regular recertification) that are equally applicable to all firefighters, based on the duties they are expected to perform.
6. Develop and implement national medical and physical fitness standards that are equally applicable to all firefighters, based on the duties they are expected to perform.

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7. Create a national research agenda and data collection system that relates to the initiatives.
8. Utilize available technology wherever it can produce higher levels of health and safety.
9. Thoroughly investigate all firefighter fatalities, injuries, and near misses.
10. Ensure grant programs support the implementation of safe practices and/or mandate safe practices as an eligibility requirement.
11. Develop and champion national standards for emergency response policies and procedures.
12. Develop and champion national protocols for response to violent incidents.
13. Provide firefighters and their family's access to counseling and psychological support.
14. Provide public education more resources and champion it as a critical fire and life safety program.
15. Strengthen advocacy for the enforcement of codes and the installation of home fire sprinklers.
16. Make safety a primary consideration in the design of apparatus and equipment.

An important part of achieving progress towards these sixteen initiatives has been the advocates that have been trained and serve throughout the country to spread the message and serve as trainers. "The Courage to Be Safe...So Everyone Goes Home"<sup>®</sup> training program was developed to assist with that process. The program underscores the need for firefighters and officers to change fundamental attitudes and behaviors in

order to prevent line of duty deaths, and promotes the courage to do the right thing so that “Everyone Goes Home”® at the end of the day. In addition to this program, the effort includes the distribution of training materials and numerous communications mechanisms. Leaders from throughout the fire service do presentations at national conferences and meetings stressing the importance of the “Everyone Goes Home”® program.

A follow-up Summit held in Novato, California in March 2007 refined and clarified the efforts surrounding the sixteen initiatives. At a NFFF sponsored meeting in Phoenix, Arizona in February 2008, the attendees suggested that the sixteen initiatives continue to serve as the long-term approach to reducing firefighter injuries and line of duty deaths, but also suggested that more immediate attention be given to the following areas of focus:

- Fitness for Duty
- Vehicle Operations and Awareness
- Offensive/Defensive Strategy
- Crew Integrity in the Hot Zone
- Training

These suggestions are being integrated into the overall “Everyone Goes Home”® effort.

## **Conclusion**

The NFFF will continue with their mission to honor the nation's fallen fire heroes and work in support of their survivors. They are also proud to serve in a leadership role shoulder to shoulder with other fire service organizations in the ongoing effort to reduce firefighter injuries and fatalities. The "Everyone Goes Home"® program and the sixteen Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives provide a roadmap and a set of tools to achieve the goals that have been established. Real success in this effort will require that the major fire service organizations and all fire departments take ownership of the initiatives that fall within their missions in order to truly bring the initiatives to life and institutionalize them as core priorities for the fire service. This is not (and cannot be) solely a NFFF effort, because without the leadership and work of the entire fire service, it will simply not be effective and any success achieved will not be sustained.

We all know that firefighters can lose their lives in the line of duty doing everything right at the time. And we also know that there are times when decisions are made and actions taken that unnecessarily contribute to the risk. The NFFF proudly joins with the fire service as a partner in reducing the risks to our firefighters, thus reducing firefighter line of duty injuries and deaths.

## **About the Author**

Chief Dennis Compton was the Fire Chief in Mesa, Arizona for five years and Assistant Fire Chief in Phoenix, Arizona, where he served for twenty-seven years. Dennis has served as Chairman of the Executive Board of IFSTA and Chairman of the CFSI National Advisory Committee. He is Chairman of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation Board of Directors, and Chairman of the Home Safety Council Board of Directors. Dennis has authored several books, many articles, and is Co-Editor of the ICMA textbook titled, *"Managing Fire and Rescue Services"*.

**About the Symposium**

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