

NO MORE FIREFIGHTER SAFETY LIP SERVICE

By: Paul H. Stein

- Career engineer dies and fire fighter injured after falling through floor while conducting a primary search at a residential structure fire – Wisconsin
- Career fire fighter dies and chief is injured when struck by 130-foot awning that collapses during a commercial building fire – Texas
- Career Lieutenant dies in a residential structure fire- Colorado
- Volunteer firefighter is killed and another is injured at a wildland interface fire- Oklahoma

The above are just a few of the many firefighter fatalities that can be found on the NIOSH Web site. Isn't it about time we stop giving firefighter safety lip service?

It's tragic and heart-breaking to learn that in June '07, nine Charleston firefighters died at a fire then, shortly after, two more FDNY firefighters died at an abandoned building close to ground zero. I watched the memorials for our fallen brothers and felt a profound sadness. They were called heroes a number of times. They were definitely heroes who gave the ultimate price in the performance of their duties.

The question we have to ask ourselves is "what do we have to do to avoid firefighter fatalities in the future?" It's time for fire departments to stop bringing victims to the incident. After 32 years of a fire service career, going through the ranks from firefighter to fire chief, and having conducted thousands of lectures on leadership and firefighter safety, I know that "firefighters should not put themselves in extremely dangerous situations while attempting to save property." We should only take a big risk when human life is in jeopardy. This is the basic risk vs. benefit concept that has been around the fire service for many years. The concept is titled, "Firefighter Safety and Survival Benchmarks." It basically states the following:

- We will take a big risk in a **calculated manner** to save people.
- We will take less of a risk in a **calculated manner** to save property.
- We will take little or no risk to try to save people or property that is already lost.

Reducing Firefighter Deaths and Injuries: Changes in Concept, Policy, and Practice

This firefighter safety concept is so simple, and it boggles my mind that we still lose firefighters in abandoned buildings and in buildings where there is nothing of value to save. If the fire service would adhere to this safety concept there is a very good possibility that annual firefighter deaths and injuries would be reduced.

Many will say “danger is part of the job and the customer expects us to do our job.” I don’t disagree that danger is part of our job and the customer expects us to do our job. However, the customer doesn’t expect us to kill ourselves in the process. They would rather lose their building versus firefighters losing their lives.

I know what I’m going to say will irritate some people, but it really needs to be said. In reality no organization, person, or thing is to blame for the tragedies in Charleston and New York. I don’t believe in “Monday Morning Quarterbacking.” Anyone who has had the responsibility of leading a fire department or to be in charge of a dynamic emergency incident, like the sofa factory fire in Charleston, realizes that it is an extremely difficult and dangerous job. Fire fighting is not a static process. Fire dynamics create serious challenges to anyone who has had the responsibility to mitigate an incident.

There is no such thing as the perfect fire officer or firefighter. All Incident Commanders try to mitigate fire incidents in an effective, efficient, and safe manner. Yet, sometimes it just doesn’t happen. However, when all fire service fatalities are reviewed, in many cases the outcome is that the fatalities could have been prevented. In wildland fires where fatalities occur, usually the 10 standing orders or the 18 conditions that shout “watch out” are violated. During structural firefighting it is often found that fatalities occur when unnecessary risks are taken, or the firefighter safety & survival benchmarks are ignored. The sad part is that we can predict bad outcomes when standard safety practices or sound strategy and tactical procedures are violated. If we can predict bad outcomes, we should definitely be able to prevent them.

One of the best learning tools to prevent firefighter fatalities are the NIOSH reports of firefighter fatalities. A NIOSH report is a complete review of the incident and the

contributing factors that led to the fatality. The NIOSH report also includes recommendations to prevent similar fatal incidents. The discouraging aspect of the NIOSH report is that in many cases the same recommendations are on every report. The idea behind the report and recommendations is for fire officers to review the “lessons learned” and prevent similar firefighter fatalities. The question is, why aren’t we doing just that? An analysis of each NIOSH report allows us to predict potential life threatening emergency situations that we might encounter. So, with the ability to review NIOSH reports and many other resources that are available regarding firefighter safety and survival, why do we still lose firefighters in places we shouldn’t?

The following is my opinion:

Throughout the national fire service we have been giving lip service to training and firefighter safety for many years. I have often heard, “our people are our most important asset” and “firefighter safety is our most important concern.” In my experience I find this to be words not supported by action. If politicians really believed that firefighter safety was their most important concern they would allow fire chiefs to staff their engines and trucks in accordance with the NFPA recommendations. If politicians really believed that firefighter safety is their most important concern, they wouldn’t require fire department budget cuts that force fire chiefs to cut important positions as in the training division. When the fire chief protests, the politicians inform the chief to “just do it” or they will get someone in the position who will.

If fire department leaders really believe that training and firefighter safety are their highest priorities, they would demand and ensure that appropriate training and firefighter safety requirements were achieved throughout the department. Along with this safety system would be an organizational accountability system that would be adhered to.

If mid level chief officers really believe that firefighter training and firefighter safety was their highest priority they would get out from behind their desks and spend more time training with their companies. A review of the NIOSH investigation reports of firefighter

fatalities reveals several constant recommendations. One of the many that apply to chief officers is that chief officers need to spend more time training with the members under their command. That indicates chief officers watch and sometimes get involved in basic company training activities. The NIOSH reports also recommend that chief officers train with their officers utilizing strategy and tactical fire simulations.

If first line supervisors really believe that training and firefighter safety is their highest priority, they would make sure their people are prepared for any emergency incident, and this includes doing everything in their power to be technically competent and make sure that their team members are technically competent. One of the questions I always ask during my training sessions is “does your department have a time requirement for donning breathing apparatus?” The usual answer is “yes, the time requirement is 60 seconds.” My next question is “how many of you are willing to bet me a Pepsi that you can go to your station, have all your members assemble on the apparatus floor, and have them all don their breathing apparatus full PPE in that required 60 second time frame with no safety errors or task errors. To my dismay, normally about 5 to 10% of the participants raise their hands.

Once again this indicates to me that fire departments throughout the country need to spend more time on basic training. The same can be said for incident accountability systems. I believe that the roles and responsibilities of fire departments have expanded to the extent firefighters have become the “jack of all trades.” This leads to doing a lot, with nothing done right. If firefighter unions and associations really believe that training and firefighter safety should receive the highest priority, they would review and revise their platforms on fire department promotions, and other provisions in the union contract that could inhibit quality leadership and technical ability.

So, let’s start from the top. I believe all will agree that, with the exception of emergency response, the most important fire department priority is training. Yet, when budget cuts are necessary, the first department division that usually gets the budget axe is the training division.

If fire chiefs really wanted to send the message that firefighter safety is their highest priority they should prove it by action not words. Fire Chiefs need to develop and insist on an organizational culture that maintains the highest level of firefighter safety. They need to make sure their chief officers and first line officers adhere to this safety concept. I'm amazed to learn that many fire departments do not even have an established position for Safety Officer. How could any fire chief ignore the safety officer recommendations identified in NFPA 1500? The same concept goes for up-to-date standard operating procedures, basic hose and ladder evolution efficiency standards, organizational accountability, personnel performance evaluations, an effective fire officer probationary procedure, a process for post emergency analysis and an organizational strategic plan.

For example, in order to become a paramedic it requires approximately 6 months of intensive training. Compare that to the training most departments require before becoming a fire officer.

Department members can obtain training through several methods: hit-or-miss, sink-or-swim, trial-and-error, or structured and systematic. Unfortunately, many departments utilize a combination of the first three to train their team members. It is obvious that the only dependable way to enhance the knowledge of the department members is to utilize the structured and systematic method. This method should be based on a careful review of the responsibilities of the position in terms of knowledge and skills. Then it involves an orderly and timely period of instruction provided by a trainer who is familiar with the job, well versed in training techniques, and aware of the learning process. The fire chief has the responsibility to make sure there are organizational procedures and designs that ensure firefighter safety like the "firefighter safety and survival benchmarks." All fire departments should **stand down** for a period of time and brain storm, then plan ways to improve the safety design and culture of their department. Then commit to that plan.

Let's discuss the battalion chiefs. If you look at NIOSH reports on firefighter fatalities you will commonly find a recommendation that the battalion chiefs should spend more time training with their companies. The battalion chiefs are usually bogged down with committees and paper work. Some departments require battalion chiefs to deliver the department mail and even the permits to event caterers. Surely, this activity should not take precedence over higher department safety priorities. Many of the battalion chiefs lose touch with basic firefighting skills, command confidence, and the people under their command. Consequently, the troops lose faith and confidence in their battalion chief's ability to command the emergency incident.

I also find that the battalion chiefs have the least amount of organizational accountability. I know this one department that calls their battalion chiefs the "free roaming vapors" because besides taking around the mail nobody knows what they are doing. Don't get me started on organizational accountability. Everybody in the organization needs to be held accountable. But that's another paper.

If there is any one group of people that has the most crucial impact on firefighter safety it is the first line supervisors. As I travel around the country conducting training I find that there are many outstanding first line supervisors who do a quality job and are a credit to their organization. I also find there are many that don't. Because firefighting in many cities has become a high risk, low frequency event, many first line supervisors have become complacent. During my training sessions, I ask several questions regarding firefighter safety. I'm often disappointed with the answers I receive in return. Once again no one appears to be holding the first line supervisor accountable.

First line supervisors need to assume the responsibility of the crew leader, not the straw boss or the pal. They need to be constantly vigilant regarding the readiness of their crew. They should set the example with their words and actions. This is especially true with basic manipulative skills. Earlier in this article I mentioned the question I ask during my training seminars about meeting the time requirement for donning breathing apparatus. I'm amazed and discouraged that many first line supervisors indicate that

they don't have the confidence that their crew can meet the minimum time requirement for donning their breathing apparatus. I would be embarrassed to admit that as a supervisor I have failed in my responsibility as a leader to keep my people prepared and safe.

Apparatus engineers, drivers and firefighters also have a role regarding their own safety and the safety of others. It's discouraging to learn how many firefighters and civilians are killed or injured in vehicle accidents each year, not to mention accidents of driving through apparatus doors or accidents while backing up. There is absolutely no excuse for those types of accidents other than complacency. There are very few vehicle accidents that are not predictable. It is predictable that while responding to an emergency incident and driving too fast, or going through a red light and not stopping, there will be an accident. If it is predictable it is preventable. When these predictable accidents happen where fire department members violate rules of the road or department standard operating procedures, there should be strict discipline administered.

Unions also have to assume some responsibility for firefighter safety. I have been a union and association leader and member my entire career. Even after my retirement I served on the California State Firefighters' Association for four years as an Executive Board Director. I believe in unions and what they represent. However, I know there are still departments that by union rule, promote by seniority only, and allow people to stay on the job who in reality, regarding physical ability or competence, don't belong there. This is no way to run an organization, especially when it jeopardizes safety. The people in all supervisory positions should be the most qualified and not just the most senior. I believe it is just wrong when a union defends a firefighter who can't meet the minimum technical or physical requirements of the position, especially when this firefighter might jeopardize the safety of other firefighters.

Summary:

After reading this paper it might appear that there are many difficult challenges within the national fire service. This is not the case. These are typical challenges that many fire departments throughout the country face. What is required is a systematic approach to attack the identified challenges. As I indicated earlier, no one person or organization is to blame for the recent tragedies in Charleston and New York. Collectively, all fire departments should take steps to prevent unnecessary firefighter fatalities and keep our nations firefighters safe.

I also said this paper might irritate some people. I hope it does. I hope it irritates many in order to start some serious dialog regarding firefighter safety. Let's stop the firefighter safety lip service and really start taking some affirmative steps to prevent similar incidents like Charleston and New York. Firefighters are already heroes in the eye of the public. We don't have to die to prove it.

About the Author

Paul H. Stein retired Chief Officer from the Santa Monica Fire Department. During his 31 year career Chief Stein has 25 years experience as a supervisor. He has served as Line Officer, Battalion Commander, Fire Marshal and Division Chief, Training Officer. After retirement he served as Interim Fire Chief for the Lakeside Fire Department in California.

Chief Stein has served as the Fire Technology Coordinator at Santa Monica College, an instructor for the California Fire Academy System and former Adjunct Faculty Member for the National Fire Academy.

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For the past 25 years, Chief Stein has worked as a Trainer and Management Consultant. He has performed services for over 200 different organizations throughout the United States. He is considered to be one of the top emergency service keynote speakers in the United States. He has keynoted over fifty conferences and conventions and spoke at over 100 events.

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About the Symposium

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