

YOUR ROLE IN FIREFIGHTER DEATHS

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Each year, the Fallen Fire Fighter's Memorial Service cuts a scar into our collective souls. It's difficult to describe feelings when you're watching a procession of family members approaching a group of fire chiefs while someone is announcing, over and over again, "Accepting are her husband and children..." "Accepting are his mother and father..." "Accepting are his brothers and sisters..." This year, there were so many line of duty deaths that there wasn't time enough to give each family an American Flag and a rose as we did each of the other years. This year, the family and friends simply stood for a moment, and then sat down. There was four hours of those moments, standing and sitting, one after the other, at the MCI Center that day.

It's a big scar; and our souls just aren't that big.

Your mind drifts; it has to. But when it does, you begin to ask yourself some critical questions. Is this the best thing for the fire service? Is this in some way a celebration of what went wrong? How do the families feel? The spouses, the children, the parents; is this what's best for them? Every single one of them? You can't absorb all of this - you take it in sips and gulps, and over the next few days, it will sink in. No one knows the answer; it seems that we're nipping at the heels of futility.

But the fact is that it isn't futile; there's a message for us if we choose to see it, hear it, and put it into action. The message is personal responsibility, but more than a few of us have to see and hear it and put it into action; all of us do.

Would any of you be interested in reducing the number of firefighter line of duty deaths by 25% in one year? You can. Make it your personal responsibility. Twenty-five percent of the firefighter line of duty deaths next year will be from vehicle accidents, going to and returning from fires. Next year we will honor some twenty-two year old driving a \$500,000 lights-and-siren, diesel mega-machine who goes just over the speed limit in order to make up time. He won't quite be able to stop in time, or control a skid. His Mom and

Dad will be making a trip to Emmitsburg next year, and maybe his young wife. They'll get a flag and a flower. Perhaps some of the firefighters on the apparatus will have their families there, too. In the background, his training officer will be there, shaking his or her head, saying, "I taught him how to drive, and told him not to speed." She or he will be crying on the shoulder of the company officer who allowed him to speed, standing among the other members of the company who never said anything to him about the risks he was taking.

It's your personal responsibility, and it takes more than words-it takes action; it takes deeds. When I was a lieutenant and a captain, I would remind the apparatus drivers that they were carrying the fathers (at that time) of between eight and ten children on this truck. On the center console, between him and me, there was an air brake valve. I told him that if he exceeded 25 mph, for any reason, I was pulling the valve and he could take his chances with the windshield (it also encouraged seatbelt usage). I never had a speeding problem after that; his peripheral vision was always on that valve and my hand was always nearby. As a deputy chief, I once was responding to a fire and pulled onto a main street behind an apparatus responding to the same alarm. A firefighter was standing up in the jump seat area, holding onto the roof for support. I called over the radio to have the engine pull over, reporting that they had a compartment door open and equipment was falling out. The engine pulled over, and the firefighter stepped down to see which compartment door was open. I called him over to the car, rolled down the window, and told him, "I want you to walk back to the rig, and tell your officer I want him to come back here to tell me why you were standing up in the jump-seat." For that firefighter, it was a very long walk back to the rig - it was obvious that his officer had warned him. There were some animated gestures, and certainly words exchanged, and the officer walked back to me just as slowly, with his head down. He started to say some-

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thing, and I interrupted him, "Am I ever going to have to pull you over again?" He said, "No." That was the end of it, and he kept true to his word. No matter where he worked, I never had the problem again. As a matter of fact, I never had the problem again in the entire division.

You see, the news spread throughout the city that I'd pulled a rig over while it was responding to a fire because of an unsafe condition. It got a lot of ribbing and comments (as you can imagine) but it sent a message. Over the remaining three or four years on the line, nothing like that ever happened again, and the joke wasn't on me—they appreciated my concern for their safety. The message is that people don't have to die in accidents, but unless you do something about it, they will. That's personal responsibility.

Want to reduce firefighter deaths by another 50% in one year? Medically screen for cardiovascular problems. Yep, I agree—someone is going to get screened out of the department; someone is going to have to go out on disability; and you don't have the staff, and the city can't afford it. But when the problem is ignored, and someone dies on duty, insurance covers the costs, right?

There are just too many complications, "yea, buts," and "you don't understand" with medical screening,

right? Pick one of your firefighters and officers between the ages of 45-60, and let's see if he or she will be the one sending a family member to Emmitsburg for a flag and a flower next year.

There will be people here to hand them out, if need be; but it wouldn't hurt one bit if this place was empty next October.

Intervene when someone is doing something wrong, something dangerous. Say something to someone who isn't physically fit. Find out when someone was last screened for cardiovascular problems. Tell someone who is clearly "past their prime" that if they are at risk, they will have to serve in ways other than line duty.

Taking personal responsibility for your actions, and those of your colleagues and subordinates is leadership in action. It's the kind of safety leadership that's going to accomplish significant change. It's not always easy, but it's the right thing to do. And there's no wrong way to do the right thing.

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