

Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives

Initiative #12



National protocols for response to violent incidents should be developed and championed.

Throughout the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives, there are opportunities for both organizational and personal change. As your department moves toward adopting a safety-minded culture, use the tools offered in the 16 initiatives as guiding documents.

From the beginning of America's fire service, firefighters have been responding to incidents that were the result of, or caused by, an act of violence. Fire departments respond to a wide range of events from the simple Saturday night altercation at the corner bar, to the large events whose place in history has been distilled to unforgettable images: Watts, Columbine, Oklahoma City, or 9/11. On most occasions, the fire department responds, renders service, and returns to quarters. But, unfortunately, over our history, not every member has been able to return home due to factors associated with violence. In response to this trend, participants at the 2004 Firefighter Life Safety Summit developed Initiative 12: National standards for emergency response policies and procedures should be developed and championed. The need for this Initiative was not born in a vacuum.

A recent California study found violence toward responders in 4.5 percent of calls during the study period (Grange & Corbett, 2002). Nearly half of those incidents of violence included physical attacks. A similar study conducted in Philadelphia in 2002 found violence toward firefighters and paramedics at a 4 percent rate (Mechem, Dickinson, Shofer, & Jaslow, 2002). Medical attention was sought in 81 percent of the incidents and the member lost time from work in over 30 percent of the cases described (Mechem, et al, 2002). The LODD rate from response to incidents of violence is not large. It is, however, a growing concern both in seriousness and frequency of the attacks. Five firefighters died in 2005 as a result of crime. Three firefighters died in arson-related fires, one firefighter was fatally shot, and one firefighter was killed in a crash with a vehicle that was fleeing law enforcement (United States Fire Administration, 2005).

The creation of protocols for fire department response to violent incidents cannot be accomplished in a vacuum. A review of recent history, currently available standards and laws, and case studies of firefighter injury and deaths that have resulted from response to violent incidents are necessary. There exist innumerable incidents that can be used as a basis for this discussion. The 1992 Los Angeles Riots, the Branch Davidian siege in Waco (TX), the shootings at Columbine High School, the Line of Duty Death of Lexington Kentucky Fire Lieutenant Brenda Cowan, and the shooting of a paramedic in Kansas City (MO) each represents a different type of incident with dissimilar outcomes for emergency responders.

As firefighters we are trained to work in a lot of hazardous areas, but we are not trained to work in violent situations. Always ensure scene safety.

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Fire departments respond, in various capacities and roles, to incidents caused by violent acts. They also encounter violent persons at what was to be an ordinary incident. In order to ensure that we meet our mission, to make sure everyone goes home, everyday, we offer the following strategies designed to reduce the likelihood of injury or death from responding to incidents of violence.

- Improved understanding and application of Dynamic Risk Management
- Initiate or improve communication with the local law enforcement component.
- Define and expand role of dispatchers in reducing risk
- Prohibit single (person) resource response to violent incidents
- Require use of an Incident Management System
- Communicate directly with Law Enforcement component prior to operating at an incident of violence.
- De-commit personnel and equipment and leave if violence commences or reoccurs during fire department operations
- Obtain stakeholder understanding and buy-in of response and deployment policies including non-response and non-engagement at incidents of violence.

The implementation of these strategies will help reduce the likelihood of fire service members being injured or killed during a response to a violent incident. The 12th Initiative expands our understanding of how and where firefighters can be injured and demonstrates the need for the development of national protocols regarding violent incidents.

Discussion

Does your department have a set policy for responding to potentially violent calls? If so, what is it and does every member understand it?

Have you ever been attacked while working on scene?

Has anyone you know been involved with a dangerous individual on a call?

Should you enter a potentially dangerous area if the police department has not arrived yet? What if you're only a few feet away from a victim?



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