

The Beginning of a Fire Department Chaplaincy Program

Fire departments by tradition have had someone in the role of chaplain since the beginning of the organized fire service. In many departments, a local clergy person has been appointed chaplain to handle emergency situations within the department, such as serious injury to the department members, line-of-duty deaths, including notification of family members, and suicides involving fire department members, and their families. Chaplains have fulfilled traditional ceremonial role by giving the invocation at fire department functions, and conducting weddings and funerals for fire department families.

All too often, the functions normally handled by a chaplain have been taken over by members of the administrative staff and firefighters within the department. When needs arose and no one was available to handle them, the staff and members of the department would do their best to handle the crisis. In the modern fire service, numerous factors have made it very desirable to establish a formal position of chaplain. With all the pressures present today, the need for this position is found in all fire departments – paid or volunteer, large or small, private or public.

As our world becomes more complex, facing the problems of life becomes dramatically more difficult. The pressures of living in a complicated world affect us all. Many become emotionally and spiritually crippled when they find what used to “work” is no longer effective in coping with the pressures. As a result, individual public servants, such as a firefighter, are confronted with stress-producing accusations of ineffectiveness, inefficiency, and ulterior motives when they attempt to help.

The firefighter is confronted with making a living in a complex world, and with having to deal with disenchanting recipients of their services. At the same time, society seems to expect firefighters to be immune of the effects of such stress. The firefighter faces some very real risks if they even hint the stress is too much or is getting to them. It is as if the firefighter is expected to be a “super-human” or the “perfect” person. They are expected to solve problems, make the complex simple, and perform emergency responses without experiencing any emotional turmoil in the process. Firefighters, who respond to life-threatening situations, have additional stresses surrounding their lives that most professions do not have.

1. Level of uncertainty

It is a fact that when the alarm sounds, firefighters are going to respond. **THIS IS THEIR PROFESSION.** There is no such thing as a routine call until after the incident is over. When the alarm hits, the firefighter faces the unknown and, all too often, becomes the victim of a service-related injury or even death. The family of the emergency worker is under the stress of not knowing what is going to happen at any given incident.

2. Interpersonal tensions

Interpersonal tensions are a constant within the emergency services simply because of the very nature of the profession. The fire service organization creates a rigid working environment with a strong, competitive mentality on the part of the emergency worker.

Most promotions are made from within and there is competition against their fellow firefighters for advancement. Shift work often leads to tension. Long periods of time are spent with co-workers in training, station and equipment maintenance, fire prevention inspections, and in highly intense emergency incidents. The adrenaline is often flowing just because they are on duty. This factor alone increases tensions as firefighters try to deal with each other and the public while the body is in a continual state of alarm.

Often tensions are heightened by the long hours spent on duty away from their families and so the fire service becomes the second family for the firefighter. This also adds stressors to the life of the emergency responder.

3. Extreme physical conditions

The difference between the tremendous physical pressures on the emergency worker, and a person in a profession that demands physical labor, is the manner in which the firefighters are called upon to perform their duties. Average workers plan out their day to complete a particular project or task. Rest periods are planned and they can also plan around weather or other problems if the need arises.

Emergency responders are called upon to perform their task regardless of the climactic or environmental conditions. In a very short period of time they can be completely physically and mentally exhausted, yet they still must keep going until the task is completed. Many times they complete one exhausting response only to be called to another crisis without having time to fully recuperate. The body and mind of a firefighter is frequently drained after a tour of duty far more than the average person in a physical occupation.

4. Human tragedy and carnage

When something bad happens, the firefighter is going to be called upon to respond. Depending on the type, the intensity, the duration of the incident, and many other factors, this response can have some far-reaching effects on the emergency worker. The continued response to tragic situations must be dealt with properly. This specific problem in the firefighting/rescue profession demands the input of a chaplain or other qualified person to identify the problems associated with response to human tragedy.

5. Fear

Fear of the incident or fear of danger does not usually have a negative impact on the emergency workers. "Fear" of the incident and what could happen normally translates into being cautious and having respect for the type of procedures needed to perform the task with the utmost safety. It is the fear of making a mistake that could cost a coworker or victim their life or cause further injury that produces the highest level of stress. Emergency workers tend to be perfectionists. When things go wrong, they start asking questions like, "What if I had only...?" Often feelings of guilt have to be dealt with after a particularly sad event.

The uniqueness of the stressors mentioned here is that they face the emergency responder at all times. There is no time while on duty that these pressures are not present. The chaplain must be able to recognize the signs of stress within department personnel and have methods to effectively help firefighters cope with the pressures they face on a daily basis.

Conclusion

The chaplain of the fire department is a vital position in the fire service. It is a job that is demanding, confidential, trusting, and needful for the lives of the firefighters and their families. The fire department administrator can be assured that it is one of the finest and most needed programs that can be started. This has been a brief overview of beginning a fire service chaplaincy program. There are many areas that could be added, depending on the needs for your department. The next step is to weigh, consider, and determine the needs and wants of the department. Then institute the chaplaincy program.