Preventing and Coping with Suicide in the Fire and Emergency Services
Participant Manual

Introduction

This course will help you recognize the signs and symptoms preceding suicide, understand what resources are available for departments and individuals, and navigate the healing process when coping with a firefighter suicide.

After completing this course, participants should be able to:

- Define suicide.
- Understand existing myths, beliefs and facts.
- Identify potential factors preceding suicide, including:
    - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
    - Depression
    - Substance abuse and addictions
    - Anxiety
    - Stress
- Understand warning signs and symptoms.
- Know where to access behavioral health resources.
- Understand the effect suicide can have within the department, including:
    - Stages of grief
    - Methods of healing
    - How to help members
    - Identifying warning signs in others after a suicide
- Identify best practices and resources available to chiefs for healing and moving the department forward.

Participant Materials

- Participant Manual
- PowerPoint Slides
- List of Available Behavioral Health and Suicide Prevention Resources

About the National Volunteer Fire Council

The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) is the leading nonprofit membership association representing the interests of the volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services. The NVFC serves as the voice of the volunteer in the national arena and provides invaluable tools, resources, programs, and advocacy for first responders across the nation.

The mission of the NVFC is to provide a unified voice for volunteer Fire/EMS organizations. This mission is accomplished by:

- Representing the interests of the volunteer fire, emergency medical, or rescue organizations at the U.S. Congress and federal agencies
- Promoting the interests of the state and local organizations at the national level
- Promoting and providing education and training for the volunteer fire, emergency medical, or rescue organizations
- Providing representation on national standards setting committees and projects
- Gathering information from and disseminating information to the volunteer fire, emergency medical, or rescue organizations

NVFC Resources

The foundation of the NVFC is its web site www.nvfc.org. This web site serves as a gateway to information for the fire and emergency services, as well as for potential volunteers. Resources such as guides, online training, data, and best practices can be found on a variety of topics.

Topics include, but are not limited to:

- EMS/Rescue
- Emergency Preparedness
- Grants and Funding

- Health and Safety
- Legislation
- Line of Duty Deaths
- Reputation Management
- Recruitment and Retention

The NVFC is the only organization dedicated to serving the interests of the volunteer fire, rescue, and emergency medical services.

NVFC Programs

The NVFC administers a wide array of programs to assist fire departments, firefighters, EMS personnel, and emergency responders. These programs address issues ranging from health and safety, recruitment and retention, fire department capacity, fire prevention, and more.

Programs include:

Fire Corps (www.firecorps.org)

Fire Corps is a program under the federal Citizen Corps initiative that connects resource-constrained fire/EMS departments with community members to assist in non-emergency roles. This allows first responders to focus on training and operational duties while at the same time increasing the department's capacity and services. Fire Corps members can assist with administration, fundraising, public fire prevention and life safety education, home safety checks and smoke alarm installation programs, apparatus maintenance, and much more.

Heart-Healthy Firefighter Program (www.healthy-firefighter.org)

Heart attack is the leading cause of on-duty firefighter fatalities, accounting for around half of all firefighter deaths each year. The NVFC launched the Heart-Healthy Firefighter Program in 2003 to combat this alarming trend through education, awareness, and resources. The Heart-Healthy Firefighter Program promotes fitness, nutrition, and health awareness for all members of the fire and emergency services, both volunteer and career.

National Junior Firefighter Program (www.nvfc.org/juniors)

Getting youth involved in the fire and emergency services fosters the next generation of first responders and creates a network of community supporters of the emergency services. The NVFC National Junior Firefighter Program serves as an umbrella for junior firefighter programs nationwide to promote youth participation within the fire and emergency services community. The program is a powerful recruitment

tool for departments and provides youth with valuable life skills such as teamwork, leadership, responsibility, and commitment.

Put It Out (www.healthy-firefighter.org/putitout)

The NVFC, with support from Pfizer, launched the Put It Out campaign to help first responders quit smoking and stay quit. The Put It Out web site provides tools and resources for firefighters and emergency personnel who are ready to take the steps to stop smoking and lead a healthier, smoke-free lifestyle. The web site contains sections to assist individuals in quitting smoking, family members in supporting first responders who are quitting, departments in establishing a no-smoking policy and smoking cessation program, and state associations in encouraging their members to adopt a smoke-free lifestyle.

Wildland Fire Assessment Program (www.nvfc.org/programs/wildland-fire-assessment-resources)

The two-year Wildland Fire Assessment Program (WFAP) is a joint effort by the U.S. Forest Service and the NVFC to provide firefighters with training on how to properly conduct assessments for homes located in wildland fire areas. This is the first program targeted to volunteers that specifically prepares a firefighter for how to conduct an assessment and what to look for during an assessment, as well as provides departments with the printed materials they may need.

Preventing and Coping with Suicide in the Fire and Emergency Services PowerPoint Slides

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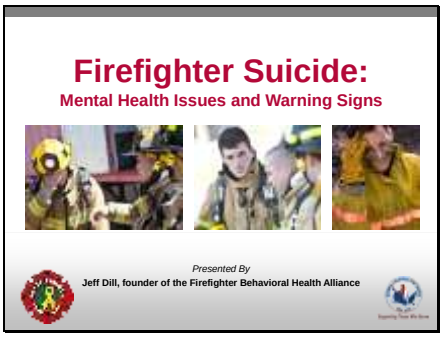

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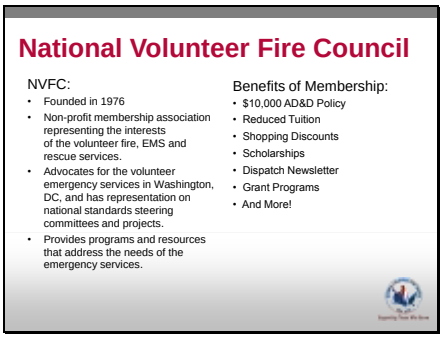

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Objectives

- Define suicide and its history
- Review the myths, beliefs and facts
- Discuss potential factors preceding suicide:
  - a) Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
  - b) Depression
  - c) Substance Abuse and Addictions
  - d) Anxiety
  - e) Stress
- Review warning signs and symptoms
- Discuss the challenges of retirement

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What is Suicide?

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Definitions

SUICIDE:

1. Taking one's own life
2. The destruction of one's own interest
3. High percentage of suicide victims were inflicted with some form of mental health issue

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Definitions

Suicide Pact: When two or more victims agree to end their lives at the same time

Murder/Suicide: When one person kills another and then takes their own life

Police Assisted Suicide: When a victim wants the police to kill them instead of by their own hand

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Myths, Beliefs, and Facts

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Factors That May Precede Suicide

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Mental Health Issues

- Substance Abuse/Addictions
  - Where do we hide our pain or inability to deal with personal issues?

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Mental Health Issues

- Depression
  - Life's ups and downs including when the "job" affects us.

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Mental Health Issues

- Anxiety
  - Recognizing how and when it affects us. How do we cope?

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Mental Health Issues

- Stress
  - Do we know our own breaking point?

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Mental Health Issues

- Post Traumatic Stress
  - The mind fighting the body

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Warning Signs

Depression

PTS

Anxiety

Suicidal Ideations

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Warning Signs

- Experiencing a change in sleeping habits
- Experiencing a change in eating habits
- Feeling trapped -- like there is no way out of a situation
- Experiencing dramatic mood changes
- Abusing drugs or alcohol
- Acting impulsively
- Losing interest in most activities
- Losing confidence in your skills

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Warning Signs

- Appearing depressed or sad most of the time (untreated depression is the number one cause for suicide)
- Talking or writing about death or suicide
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling helpless
- Feeling strong anger or rage

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The Mental Impact of Retirement

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The Mental Impact of Retirement

- Many cases of suicide occur after a firefighter leaves the department
- Life after the fire service can be difficult for firefighters – and their families

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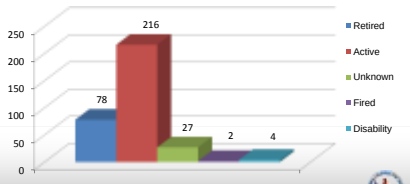
The Mental Impact of Retirement

Suicide: Active vs. Retired



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The Mental Impact of Retirement

Career Planning

I am retiring soon. What steps do I need to take?

What do I do when I stop being a firefighter?

How do I keep my identity?

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The Mental Impact of Retirement

Start planning for life after the fire service at least **six months to a year** before you retire.

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The Mental Impact of Retirement

1. Figure out what you want to do (career counseling or self-tests online or at libraries/community colleges)
2. Finish school
3. Trade schools
4. Turn hobbies into a business (understand financing, marketing, etc.)
5. Counseling for you and your family (schedule changes and life adjustments)
6. Ask: What do I stand for?
7. Remember the past but don't live in it!

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Firefighter Suicide:

Amending Our Culture and Providing Support

Presented By

Jeff Dill, founder of the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance

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Fire Service Culture

Description of firefighters: brave, strong, heroes, friendly, courageous, helpful. They are expected to protect to the public and be dependable for other company members.

Behavioral health is considered a weakness. Emotional stress falls under this category. Asking for help could display a perceived weakness and unreliability.

Personal issues are always left “at the door” and the lack of training on stress, anxiety, PTSD, and communications is the history of the fire service.

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Changes in the Fire Service

- Training in the fire academy
- Fire officer training
- Firefighter training
- Family
- “Buy-In” from administration
- Acceptance that we are people first!

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Challenge with Compassion

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Challenge with Compassion

Dealing with each other:

1. Listening/reading body language
2. Offering help
3. "Walk the walk"
4. Know your department resources and outside resources
5. Know your department policies on behavioral health
6. Saving our own off of the fireground

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Fire Department Support Structures

Department Policies:

Instituting policies and procedures to support fire officers and firefighters:

1) Development of policies and procedures focusing on mental health

2) Enacting these policies and procedures

3) Following them to ensure privacy, consistency, & confidentiality

4) Training on these policies twice a year for department members and leadership

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Fire Department Support Structures

Employee Assistance Programs

Getting to know your EAP:

1) What services do they offer?

2) Who are the counselors? Do they have experience working with firefighters/EMS? Are they willing to take courses to understand the culture?

3) Has your department offered them ride time? Attend training sessions?

4) How is your department's EAP selected?

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Fire Department Support Structures

Chaplain Programs

1) Similarities between EAP programs and Chaplain programs
2) Trust and confidentiality
3) Getting to know your department's Chaplain
4) Training sessions, ride time, responding to emergency calls

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Fire Department Support Structures

Peer Programs

Development of a first line of assistance for members.

1) Create a department peer program
2) Selecting the right "team" of peer members
3) Training involvement
4) Proven successful by numerous fire departments

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Think About It

Read the following real story. How would you react? What would you think to say? What are your concerns?

Firefighter Johnson is two months from retiring after 33 years on the job. He has done nothing but talk about spending his retirement years with his wife. He comes to you today because his wife has been diagnosed with a terminal illness and has less than six months to live.

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Life Safety Initiative #13

Firefighters and their families must have access to counseling and psychological support.

- NFFF-Everyone Goes Home Program

Firefighter Family Support

- Chicago Family Focus Days

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Existing Resources

National Volunteer Fire Council: www.nvfc.org
National Fire Services Member Assistance Hotline: 1-888-731-FIRE (3473)
Chaplain Programs: http://firechaplains.org
National Programs on Suicide: www.suicide.org or 1-800-SUICIDE
Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance: www.ffbha.org
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK(8255)
Counseling Service for Fire Fighters: www.csff.info
American Counseling Association: www.counseling.org
Safe Call Now: www.safecallnow.org or 1-206-459-3020
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation: www.firehero.org

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Firefighter Suicide:

Prevention Training & Coping With Loss

Presented By
Jeff Dill, founder of the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance

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Objectives

- Suicide within the department
- Stages of grief
- Methods of healing
- How to help members
- Identifying warning signs in others after a suicide
- Best practices for chiefs to heal and move forward
- Resources available for chiefs

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Loss of a Member

- **Emotional Loss** - Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.com)
  1) Shock
  2) Anger
  3) Guilt
  4) Despair
- **Physical Loss**
  1) Pictures
  2) Bunker Gear
  3) Family members
  4) Missing part of the "team"

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Stages of Grief

Kessler-Kubler Model

- **Denial** - 1st Stage (shock & denial)
- **Anger** - 2nd Stage (not necessarily always present)
- **Bargaining** - 3rd Stage (guilt is the companion)
- **Depression** - 4th Stage (natural response)
- **Acceptance** - 5th Stage (not the notion that everything is okay)

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Methods of Healing

Coping Strategies

- Communication - talking, acknowledging pain
- Grieving - everyone has different ways to grieve
- Reminders - dates, events, holidays
- Can't Push it Through - healing occurs at an individual pace
- Expect Set Backs - periods of remembrance
- Support Groups - find strength and purpose

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Helping Members

Fire Departments

- Offering counseling with no time limits to members
- Counselors/Chaplains should understand the fire service culture
- Fire administration needs to show support
- Individual assessments through confidential talks
- Initiate a support group among members or neighboring fire departments
- Watch for signs of members struggling

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Post Suicide Warning Signs

Physical Symptoms

1) Increased sick time
2) Insomnia, fatigue, irritability, extreme depression
3) Displays extreme anxiety, isolation, or sadness

Verbal Statements - Examples

1) "I'm having difficulty dealing with the pain or loss"
2) "I don't know if I will ever get better"
3) "I feel alone, like the world is empty"

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Post Suicide Warning Signs

Chief Brian Van Camp

- South Bay Fire Department
- Suffered a firefighter suicide in his department
- 50-60 Volunteers - run 9 shifts, 4 full time officers

In the aftermath…

- Offered intervention where they just listened
- Allowed members to take time off from their shift
- Encouraged people to work & stay together
- Offered CISM but did not make it mandatory, realized each individual deals with their pain in their own way
- Expected some volunteers to quit, no one did

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Best Practices

Behavioral Health Awareness

1) Designated for **ALL** officers and firefighters
2) Employee Assistance Programs- ensure counselors have some form of training/knowledge of fire service culture
3) Chaplain Programs - same as above
4) Have counselors/chaplains in for training, ride time, meet & greets
5) Have information training that includes immediate family
6) Fire administrations need to be proactive and involved
7) Fire departments need to be aware of retired members and off-duty injured firefighters

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References

- **Mayo Clinic** - as obtained on April 15, 2013 from www.mayoclinic.com/health/suicide/MH00048
- **The Five Stages of Grief** - Elisabeth Kubler-Ross & David Kessler - as obtained on April 15, 2013 from http://grief.com/the-five-stages-of-grief
- **Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance** - www.ffbha.org
- **Personal Interview Chief Brian Van Camp** - South Bay FD, WA
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** - www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org
- **National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention** - www.actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org
- **American Psychological Association** - www.apa.org

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Questions?

National Volunteer Fire Council
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Greenbelt, MD 20770
1-888-ASK-NVFC

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www.nvfc.org

Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance
426 W. Northwest Hwy. Mount
Prospect, IL 60056
847-485-8953

jdill@ffbha.org

www.ffbha.org

Available Behavioral Health and Suicide Prevention Resources

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