

CRITICAL ISSUE D: HEALTH AND WELLNESS



Initiative 1: Champion research on the health impacts specific to the fire and emergency services to evaluate the health risk of consecutive hours worked, sleep disruption, and the impacts on employee health.

Strategies:

1. Conduct research on the impacts of current work cycles on the health of the workforce and the impacts of sleep deprivation and sleep hygiene on the long-term health of the individual and their cognitive abilities while on duty.
2. Utilize the results of that research to make any needed operating policy changes, incorporate research results into appropriate standards, and pursue potential legislative changes to protect the health of the workforce.

Initiative 2: Proactively address the increased mental health challenge(s) facing the fire and emergency services.

Strategies:

1. Engage outside professional assistance to allow employees a confidential process to seek assistance for themselves or family members who may be struggling with mental health concerns.
2. Embrace an organizational atmosphere that removes the stigma and barriers for those seeking mental health assistance while safeguarding employee confidentiality.
3. Develop organizational processes that protect the confidentiality of what an employee is being treated for, while alerting the agency to any recommended restrictions to the employee's essential job functions and assignments.
4. Develop a comprehensive plan to address the need for employee assistance in those situations that warrant immediate intervention.
5. Develop on-going mental health assessments for emergency responders to promote early recognition of developing mental health issues aligned with a mental health assistance process if issues are detected.
6. Develop pre-employment hiring processes that provide for professional mental health pre-screening of candidates to avoid exposure for those that are highly susceptible to post-traumatic stress.

Initiative 3: Adopt and support fitness and wellness best practices throughout the whole organization and incorporate this philosophy in every aspect of operations.

Strategies:

1. Institutionalize employee wellness and fitness into the culture, practices, operational procedures, and training practices of the organization.
2. Provide structured support to maintain a healthy workforce.
3. Evaluate the level of fitness of each employee, and for those found to be unfit, assist employees in attaining a proper fitness level. If unsuccessful, address the issue with the employee.

Initiative 4: Ensure ongoing physical fitness and wellness requirements are standardized, adopted, and used within every department.

Strategies:

1. Adopt physical performance and annual fitness testing requirements for fire and emergency services employees to ensure the responder can safely do the job without injury or risk to their health.
2. Once these policies are developed, engage the workforce to adopt and implement strategies that will be employed by the agency.

Initiative 5: Continue research toward the development of comprehensive decontamination procedures for the fire and emergency services.

Strategies:

1. Address the traditional culture of the profession that promotes the wearing of soiled gear and transform it to one that sees it as contamination.
2. Conduct continued research to develop a comprehensive approach to reducing exposures, the best method(s) for decontamination, and periodic testing to help ensure a safer environment for the workforce.
3. Use research to develop best practices, comprehensive standards, and potentially, new legislation to protect the workforce.

Initiative 6: Urge personal protective equipment (PPE) manufacturers to develop new PPE and bio-metric sensors to ensure effectiveness, reduce equipment weight, and provide for the enhanced ability to monitor the physiologic health and stress markers for personnel during response to an incident.

Strategies:

1. Urge the PPE manufactures to develop a more effective ensemble that offers the protection needed and reduces the weight.
2. Champion the research and development of technologies to monitor the physiological health indicators of personnel during incident response and to determine when those indicators indicate personnel are at risk.
3. Urge PPE manufactures to design a more comprehensive ensemble for wildland firefighting that provides for better protection of personnel.
4. Provide recognition awards to manufacturers and vendors that make meaningful improvements to PPE.
5. Challenge the existing practice of allowing the PPE manufacturing industry to vote on standards that affect their business while recognizing their input is critical to the design of the PPE.

Case Study: Broward Sheriff Fire Rescue and Emergency Services Department (Broward)

Location: Fort Lauderdale, FL

Coverage Area: 1.95 million residents over 1,323 square miles

No. of Employees: 775

Annual Calls for Service: 50,000

Broward formalized its health and wellness initiatives under a division chief of health and safety. A departmental joint occupational safety and health committee meets bi-monthly to discuss safety issues and concerns. Broward conducts mandatory biannual Life Scan physicals for all personnel. Numerous exposure reduction steps, such as use of particulate filtration/blocking structural firefighting protective hoods and synthetic radio straps, issuance of post exposure reduction decontamination kits, and deployment of "healthy cab" initiatives, have been implemented by Broward. All front-line personnel have been issued ballistic protection. Working with the local University of Miami Sylvester Cancer Center, Broward has participated in a research project for the education and reduction of cancer exposures.

