

Fire Service Reputation Management

# white paper



Development of this White Paper took place under the sponsorship of the Cumberland Valley Volunteer Firemen's Association, a century-old organization dedicated to enhancing communication and continuing education among the fire service in the mid-Atlantic states. The contents of this White Paper represent a distillation of several fire service leadership meetings that identified a series of social, cultural, and ethical issues impacting the fire service nationwide that demand increased awareness.

“Like every other profession, we in the fire service suffer the embarrassment and damage to our hard earned reputation because of the very few who choose to break the law or rules. While that may be unfair; it is our reality in today's world of instant, mass communication.

The Fire Service Reputation Management White Paper clearly identifies these individuals and behaviors in a clear and cogent manner, articulates some excellent solutions, and clamors for a Code of Ethics as the next logical step for our profession. We may never have the opportunity again, and I urge all fire service leaders to develop, establish, disseminate, abide and enforce a Fire Service Code of Ethics.”

Kelvin Cochran  
United States Fire Administrator

# Fire Service Reputation Management

## Table of Contents

**A Danger to the Entire Fire Service:**  
Are We Losing our Moral Compass? ..... 3

**Examples of Actual Reputation Management Occurrences:**  
The Wrong Kind of Exposure! ..... 4

**Eroding Fire Service Ethical Foundations?**  
Implications for Fire Service Leadership ..... 5

**Eroding Fire Service Ethical Foundations?**  
Implications for Fire Service Code of Ethics..... 6

**Fire Service Reputation Management Issues:**  
Cheating ..... 7  
Firefighter Firesetting ..... 8  
Theft/Misappropriation of Fire Service Funds ..... 8  
Use/Misuse Of Departmental and Personal Information Technology ..... 9  
Misuse of Department Facilities ..... 10  
Alcohol Use by Members ..... 11  
Other Substance Abuse by Members ..... 12  
Harassment and Discrimination ..... 13

**White Paper Issue Development Group Members**..... 16

# A Danger to the Entire Fire Service: Are We Losing Our Moral Compass?

## **Fire Service Reputations are at Risk**

The nation's fire service has long been held in justifiably high esteem. This reputation has been hard earned. The fire service is that "rock of stability" to which the public knows to turn during the upheaval of a crisis -- be that crisis a dwelling fire, rescue, natural disaster, or medical emergency. Fire service members unflinchingly charge into those situations from which others flee. We render these services to a grateful nation. The public, be it those who have been aided directly by the fire service or all the others who have merely borne witness to fire service heroics on the nightly news, is thankful that we are here and ready to serve at their beck and call. But all is not well, for that hard earned respect is easily lost.

## **Undermining Public Respect and Support**

It does not take much for those few firefighters who disregard the public service underpinnings of the fire service mission to undermine the hard-earned respect and support garnered by all the others that the fire service has strived to attain. Disturbing headlines increasingly report sensational stories of firefighters acting not selflessly and heroically, but rather selfishly and irresponsibly. This White Paper is intended as a wake-up call to the fire service. The detrimental impact from fire service members that engage in unethical, immoral, inappropriate, criminal, or other activities reflects back not just to these individuals, but to their departments and the fire service as a whole.

## **Private Decisions, Public Embarrassment**

Poor personal decision making by individuals that leads to public embarrassment (or worse) might not, at first, appear to be a threat to the welfare or reputation of the fire service nationally. If a firefighter is arrested for selling drugs from a fire station in a distant state, is that really a national problem? It may not have been in the past, but now, where news proliferates quickly via many delivery methods it can and often does have state and possibly national repercussions. Moreover, even incidents that occur off duty and outside the scope of the fire service involving members of the fire service, bring similar disrepute. Stories that in the recent past the media would not have even covered at all now yield banner headlines that shout "Firefighter Arrested for \_\_\_\_\_" where the blank is often filled in with descriptors such as DUI, spousal assault, child pornography, etc.

## **Expanded Mass Communications**

Wrongdoing or misdeeds by a firefighter including transgressions that take place completely outside of the line of duty cast not only the individual(s) involved in a bad light, but can also damage *your* department's hard-earned positive reputation and the reputation of the fire service as a whole. Not only has the incidence of fire service-related public embarrassments and even criminal conduct continued to rise nationally, but moreover the expanded scale of today's mass communications outlets means that *embarrassing stories can more quickly reach a vastly greater portion of the public*. Scandal stories can proliferate across the United States literally in minutes. The Internet allows and encourages rapid access to stories that would not have been covered so extensively by the local newspaper or TV station alone. Even the most local story can now be spread far and wide via email, web pages, web blogs, and similar electronic technologies.

## **Increasing Awareness of Potential Harm**

This report seeks to increase fire service awareness of the disturbing scope of harmful incidents involving fire department members that present sudden and risky challenges for fire service reputation management. Because of the power of mass communications, failure to address these troubling issues will likely result in lowered public respect and support of fire departments everywhere.

# Examples of Firefighter/Fire Service-Related Incidents: The Wrong Kind of Exposure!

## **Cheating on Qualifying Exams**

*“Cheating Scandal Rocks State Fire Academy” • “Fire Training Ripe for Cheating” • “Cheating Scandal Leads to New EMT Test” • “Cheating by Recruit Roils Fire-Rescue: Ex-Instructor Denies Giving Answers; Some Fault Chief”*

## **Firefighter Arson**

*“When Heroes Turn Into Outlaws; Firefighters’ Arson Arrests Raise Complex Questions” • “Firefighter Arsons Raise Questions About Screening Volunteers” • “3 Years for Pyro Fireman”*

## **Theft of Fire Department Funds**

*“Bookkeeper Admits Embezzling \$1.6M from Estacada Fire District” • “Former Assistant Chief Pleads Guilty in Embezzlement Case” • “Fire Chief Given Prison Sentence for Embezzlement” • “Former California Dispatcher Arrested for Embezzlement”*

## **Misuse of Department Equipment**

*“Firefighters Busted Looking at Porn on County Computers” • “Firefighter Accused of Downloading Child Porn at Fire House” • “Fire Department Spying on Firefighters at Night” • “Two Former Volunteer Firefighters Arrested in Case of Fire Equipment Thefts”*

## **Misuse of Department Facilities**

*“Woman Sues City, Claiming Injuries in Fire Pole Fall” • “Seven Firemen Dismissed for Sex on Duty” • “Photo Shoot at Fire Station Gets Too Hot” • “Sex Scandals Turn Up Heat on Fire Chief” • “Depositions Begin in Firehouse Sex Case” Mayor, Police and Fire Chiefs to be Questioned”*

## **Alcohol Use**

*“Firefighters say drinking common at stations” • “2 Firefighters Are Among 5 Facing Charges in Bar Brawl” • “Firefighters’ Autopsies Show Drugs, Alcohol, Two Officials Say” • “Firefighter Alcohol Abuse a National Concern” • “Firefighter Sentenced for Shooting at Fire Station”*

## **Substance Abuse by Members**

*“Fire Chief Says Security Protocols Tightened after Firefighter-Paramedic’s (Drug) Arrest” • “Cops Arrest Firefighter for Steroids” • “Cops Say Firefighter Had Dope in Fire department Car” • “Firefighter Suspended With Pay after Arrest for Cocaine”*

## **Harassment and Discrimination**

*“Firefighter’s Harassment Lawsuit Settled for \$1.4M” • “Firefighter Wins \$6.2 Million Harassment Case” • “Audit Finds Harassment, Discrimination Still Plague Fire Department” • “Fire Captain Must Pay Firefighter \$2500 in Harassment Suit”*

# Eroding Fire Service Ethical Foundations?

## Implications for Fire Service Leadership

The fire service as a whole needs to be concerned with the type of reputation management issues addressed in this White Paper because such incidents involving firefighters and/or the fire service are occurring nationwide and frequently strike a common chord. The frequency with which these incidents are reported appears to be increasing and collectively they are liable to cause great harm. For better or worse, there is an ample supply of events to study and from which to draw lessons to be learned. A review of the root causes of hundreds of ethical lapses involving members of the fire service in recent years yields a critical, if not surprising finding. Just as many fire service operations-related failures have been attributed to leadership breakdowns, the same goes for these social, cultural, and ethical lapses.

### **Cheating**

Fire department cheating incidents have involved unethical individuals who attempted to take unfair advantage of department promotional exams, certification exams, mandatory training rules, and other department policies. In almost every case, the cheating was accompanied by a distressing lack of supervisory vigilance and oversight.

### **Firefighter Arson**

According to the United States Fire Administration, firefighters engaged in fire setting display known behaviors. When suspicious or unexplained fire patterns emerge, fire department leadership has a responsibility to analyze the situation and “connect the dots” as needed to identify a problem and initiate an effective investigation.

### **Theft of Department Funds**

The many incidents of fire department mismanagement that cross the line into criminal behavior typically fall into a narrow pattern of circumstances. These events have been called “unsophisticated” because of the common motivations that are often present. In this context, “unsophisticated” means that any normally careful leadership would have prevented the environment that allowed criminal behavior and theft of department funds.

### **Misuse of Department Equipment and Facilities**

Fire stations typically operate on a 24/7 basis year-round, which creates a challenge for maintaining consistent levels of supervision. Sadly, the embarrassing incidents of misuse of department equipment and facilities that become public also feature a basic lack of leadership oversight.

### **Alcohol and Other Substance Abuse by Members**

Society has a significant problem with alcohol, illegal substances, and misuse/abuse of prescription medications. But the fire service, committed to serving as public protectors, has a higher standard of duty. Leadership has an extra burden here, a duty often not met. If uncovered early, many substance abusers can benefit from enlightened employee assistance programs. Leadership is critical.

### **Harassment and Discrimination**

Organizations that suppress new and innovative ideas and approaches, or that fail to embrace changing legal or cultural landscapes, risk becoming stagnant, if not worse. Encouraging diversity is a proven and moral way to allow fair participation and stimulate new ideas.

# Eroding Fire Service Ethical Foundations?

## Implications for a Code of Ethics

Issues described in this White Paper are, generally, omnipresent on the fire service national stage; they are not isolated or limited to just the career or volunteer service, or the urban, suburban, or rural fire service. Instead, these issues have been found to be present in the fire service nationwide, in all types of communities and within all types of fire department. The occurrence of such issues/events may evidence a lack, or failure, of leadership and the damage wrought by public disclosure of these sorts of events often transcends the particular department involved. For convenience we have used the term “fire service reputation management” to describe how dangerous these issues are if they undermine public support of fire department everywhere. Once lost, a positive reputation is hard to regain.

### **Crisis of Ethics**

The most basic concept of all that can help us understand these issues and begin to plan strategies to reduce the problems experienced in the fire service is also the most important concept. The fire service seems to be suffering from a crisis of ethics or lack of ethical integrity.

Some leaders have expressed a concern that this problem of integrity, or ethics, is partly the result of a fire service culture so burnished with the moniker of “hero” that its members ultimately forget that they must continually earn the public’s trust. It is true that many firefighters have performed heroically. For this honorable and deserved commitment to public duty the citizens of our communities have been steady in their support of the fire service nationally.

### **Sense of Entitlement**

If the result of a proffered “hero” status within the fire service is not properly balanced with a sense of ethical responsibility, some fire service leaders fear that individual firefighters can develop a harmful attitude of entitlement that creates an expectation of double standards that expects one standard of behavior for the public but tolerates a different standard that exists for “hero” firefighters. While unselfish service as a firefighter deserves to be honored, a false sense of special entitlement with different rules must not be allowed to flourish.

### **Code of Ethics**

The antidote to a false sense of entitlement is to rebuild the fire service’s foundation of ethical behavior and ethical decision-making. One step in that direction is to establish a national Fire Service Code of Ethics as a guide for improved ethical decision-making. From the establishment of an agreed-upon Code of Ethics, fire service ethical behavior can become part of the training every firefighter receives, from the beginning of basic recruit training to courses at the National Fire Academy, and then expanding into fire science higher education programs for future leaders.

As a start, this White Paper seeks to increase the awareness of the fire service about the ethical foundations of our public service. Each of the fire service reputation management issues addressed in this document should give the reader pause for thought in three areas, the implications here for: (1) individual decisions that can cross the line of acceptability in the minds of the public, (2) leadership responsibility to understand the ways to minimize the harm from these types of incidents, and (3) the opportunities to clarify the ethical basis supporting the fire service mission locally and nationally.

# Fire Service Reputation Management Issues

## **Cheating**

Episodes of cheating have created numerous public and embarrassing reputation management challenges in the fire service. Cheating scandals have been reported in the media across all segments of the fire service, career and volunteer, in all sizes of departments, and in all geographic areas.

The potential temptation to cheat generally is, as would be anticipated, associated with decision points related to advancement. Examples of advancement points include, but are not limited to, promotional exams, formal certification exams, or meeting any type of fire department qualification requirement. The trouble starts when some individuals see cheating as an easy and effective low-risk way to meet all kinds of qualification requirements involving assessment tests without having to commit the same effort as others. Public discovery of cheating assaults anyone's sense of fairness.

Negative public reaction can be expected from the revelation of any fire service cheating scandal. Public perception of fire service members cheating for personal gain dilutes the public images the fire service has worked so long to achieve. It may create or reinforce among the public negative images or stereotypes including:

1. That government is not effective (which may impact decisions about how tax dollars are used or donations are made).
2. That emergencies they may experience may not be able to be capably dealt with.
3. That fire service members may be capable of stealing from them at fire or other emergency incidents.

The fire service cannot tolerate episodes of cheating that may cause the public to doubt the integrity of the fire service generally.

### ***Implications for Leadership***

Cheating scandals usually involve two elements. First, there are individuals intent on devising methods to corrupt the organization's effort to promote the most qualified individual or certify the qualifications of only those meeting the stated qualifications. Second, analysis of many, if not most, cheating episodes reveals that the organization conducting the measurement failed to implement strategies to adequately prevent or detect the cheating.

Assuming that individuals may be tempted to cheat in some circumstances, it is imperative that fire service organizational leadership put in place reasonable and consistent safeguards. Evidence has demonstrated that when cheating has occurred, the supervision of the cheating environment was usually lax. Too often the organization leadership merely assumed that the members would behave as expected. Rather than rely on assumptions, organizations need to establish written policies regarding the integrity of the testing/assessment process and the consequences of cheating. They must then actively enforce these. Policies should remind instructors of their role and responsibility to facilitate learning, not to facilitate the advancement of unqualified or ethically challenged individuals.

### ***Implications for a Code of Ethics***

A foundation of any ethical system is fairness. Cheating for personal gain is contrary to any sense of fairness and public perception that cheating is widespread or accepted in the fire service would result in diminished public support. It may also result in increased calls for stricter oversight of the fire service. Members of the fire service must understand that it is



incumbent upon them to ensure the integrity of the fire service by which it becomes understood that it is not just one's duty not to cheat, but also that there is an obligation to ensure that others are not cheating and to report any instances of which one becomes aware.

## **Firefighter Firesetting**

Firefighter firesetting may be one of the most offensive of deeds in the public's mind. Because such a hostile and destructive act is the direct opposite of the fire service mission of protecting society, firefighter fire setting has an especially jarring impact across our society.

Like the other ethical and legal issues described in this report, firefighter arson has become a national embarrassment. It certainly had national impact when CBS News anchor Dan Rather reported to an audience of millions how a firefighter burned down his own firehouse. CBS News broadcast some shocking statements, including "You've probably heard of firefighters being arrested for arson. It happens more than you might imagine." As if the impact of such stories wasn't jarring enough, the obvious impact on fire service reputation management was illustrated with the CBS broadcast statement referring to firefighter arson that "... in some communities, the trust between the public and its firefighters has been broken."

Arrests of firefighters are happening with shocking frequency and each one makes a big news splash. In one statewide study of firefighter arson titled *Local Alarm*, a fire chief said "We knew it happened occasionally, but we were surprised by numbers like this." The report analogized the outrage associated with firefighter arson to the similar public reaction when a daycare worker is found to have molested children: "They break a sacred trust and public outrage becomes the expression of private fear."

### **Implications for Leadership**

For many years firefighter arson was a problem that no one wanted to acknowledge. The United States Fire Administration acknowledged the problem in 2003 with its publication of *Special Report: Firefighter Arson*, showing that firefighter arsonists usually set more than a single fire. This document should be required reading for everyone in the fire service. The report also provides a useful firefighter arsonist profile and indicates that lack of regular fire fighting activity and the need for excitement are frequent motives.

Fire department leadership needs to be aware of this problem and how to prevent/detect it. Education about the problem is a first step. Other actions, including a background check, can be taken before an individual becomes a member of the fire department. Given that a large percentage of arson fires go unresolved, a background check may not necessarily uncover an individual's involvement with firesetting. One state fire marshal provides a one-page affidavit asking the applicant to state if they have ever been convicted, pleaded nolo contendere, or convicted of an arson crime or of creating a false alarm to any public safety agency. The affidavit became part of the member's permanent file.

### **Implications for a Code of Ethics**

Any code of fire service ethical behavior needs to clearly state that fire service members must not engage in firesetting. Included in this duty is a moral obligation to be alert for the signs that some member may be harming the public through intentional fire setting.

## **Theft/Misappropriation of Fire Service Funds**

Regardless of whether a fire company or department is funded publicly or is privately funded through donations and revenue-generating projects, financial mismanagement by a member of the department creates serious internal and external shocks. Internally there is

the reality of lost resources that could have helped the fire department fulfill its important mission. Externally there is a sense of betrayal that public servants can be thieves. Individuals who have given donations or participated in activities to help support a volunteer fire company can feel a different but deep sense of betrayal.

Embezzlement is one of the most common forms of financial mismanagement in the fire service. The crime of embezzlement occurs more frequently in the volunteer fire service which often lacks all the checks and balances typically required of government-run organizations. However this crime can be perpetrated in any type fire department. Headlines tell of a California fire department losing \$400,000 from improper purchasing practices with an outside accomplice. An internet search of "fire department embezzlement" yields tens of thousands of "hits" with examples from every state in the country.

Incidents of fire service financial embezzlement are often unsophisticated and when discovered the clear evidence often leads to guilty pleas. Many fire companies fail to put in place even the basic financial mismanagement prevention tools.

### ***Implications for Leadership***

Leadership in any fire organization must assure that there is constant financial management oversight. The requirement for oversight is not about trust (or lack thereof), but rather it is about commonly accepted financial practices. It can generally be said that any time there is a theft of funds from a fire service organization, there has been a failure of leadership to provide adequate internal controls. Repeated lessons-learned from fire service embezzlement cases reveal that embezzlers rely on unmonitored access to funds. Adequate and appropriate checks and balances ought to be in place with respect to every financial transaction. For example, a fire company can enforce a rule that requires two signatures for every expense check. Independent audits are needed to verify the accuracy of internal financial records. Other precautions include rules requiring the bonding of anyone handling money, background checks, independent third-party audits, requiring proper purchase order and requisition paperwork for purchases, and being alert regarding all cash transactions. The financial management and transaction oversight plan should be recorded in writing, applied, and enforced.

When the leadership discovers that laxity in oversight has allowed embezzlement to occur, there may be a temptation to cover up the incident as a form of reputation management. When the *Oakland Tribune* discovered an attempted cover-up of a stolen \$1,500 donation to a local fire department, the resulting damage to the department's reputation from the cover-up was much worse than if the department had admitted the management failure and described its plan to correct the problems.

### ***Implications for a Code of Ethics***

A common aspect of an ethical code is responsible stewardship of public or donated resources. This fiduciary duty includes not just the obligation to ensure appropriate accounting of the public funds, but also the responsibility to adequately ensure that someone else does not take what is not theirs.

## **Use/Misuse Of Departmental and Personal Information Technology**

Fire department operations must be maintained 24 hours a day, 365 days per year. Many fire departments have multiple remote fire stations throughout their service territory to provide the fastest response to citizens throughout a jurisdiction. While it is an ongoing challenge to fire service leaders to provide continuous oversight of all types of fire department equipment, failure to do so can create opportunity for public embarrassment and even the potential for public harm.

Computers, for example, are tools vital to accomplishing the mission of any fire department as well as virtually any other business. Computers are used routinely in the dispatching and recording of emergency calls, for mapping, maintaining finances, and for maintaining vital departmental records and information. But computers are also ripe for misuse by fire department members and it is prudent for fire departments to have and adhere to appropriate computer use and monitoring policies.

Computer use policies likely will differ with different department's circumstances. For example, it may be perfectly acceptable for a volunteer firefighter to use a departmental computer to explore the Internet, but it may not be acceptable for a salaried department office staff person to do the same. Similarly, the public might object to having an on-duty firefighter using department computers and telephones to operate a personal business on the side. Regardless, internet content restrictions are appropriate regardless of the departmental circumstances. For example, automated electronic systems should restrict access to pornographic or otherwise obscene web sites on departmental computers, while audit trails should record members' access and usage generally.

Fire departments should also be mindful of department-related material/content that members may post to their individual or other websites or blogs, including "unofficial" departmental websites. Acting within the bounds of the law and, in particular, respecting individuals' freedom of speech and expression, departments should have policies to ensure that members do not post to their own or any other website inappropriate or offensive department-related material. Such policies should, among other things, explicitly aim to prevent any disclosures that might reveal sensitive Homeland Security-related information or that might constitute a potential HIPAA or other privacy-related breach or violation.

Misuse of fire department computer resources also invites the possibility of allowing harmful computer viruses into a departmental computer system, which may be part of a much larger governmental network that is also then vulnerable. Indiscriminate computer use in the absence of adequate security controls also potentially threatens fire department data and information systems and leaves these systems at risk of physical loss or inappropriate access/destruction that does not involve Internet use. To the extent that official and sensitive department data is accessible without restriction or rules, it can also be stolen and shared or sold. This can leave fire departments vulnerable to breaches of public trust, disclosure of potentially sensitive corporate or homeland security information, and potential violation of privacy laws including HIPAA. Ubiquitous portable "thumb" drives make it all too easy to copy and transport department data for improper use.

### ***Implications for Leadership***

Fire department leaders need to prepare written policies governing the use of department computers and other equipment. Those policies must be accompanied by vigilant management oversight to assure that no improper use is occurring.

### ***Implications for a Code of Ethics***

The personal ethical issue is clear and department policy should spell out that personal use of public equipment is not only unethical but also against department policy. Furthermore, and especially troubling from an ethical perspective, when misuse of station equipment occurs other department personnel may be aware of the misuse. Failure to oppose misuse of equipment is similar to condoning the misuse.

## **Misuse of Department Facilities**

Firefighters at fire stations are not always engaged in emergency response activities. Many newspaper articles have detailed the mischief and outright criminal trouble that firefighters can get into at their fire station "home away from home."

Firefighters engaging in sexual antics or activities at a fire station have become a too-common public controversy to many departments nationwide. The harm caused to a department may vary depending on the circumstances.

One news headline speaks for itself: "Councilwoman, coalition outraged at firehouse case: Some Spokane women are reacting with outrage at the city's handling of the sexual encounter in a firehouse between a 16-year-old girl and a 35-year-old firefighter." The life cycle and public impact of this story was exacerbated when further reporting indicated that the firefighter had previously sent firehouse sex photos over the Internet while at work. A second juvenile later came forward with accusations of improper behavior. A lawsuit followed and the firefighter was eventually arrested and charged with sexual assault. Though this is merely a single example, an Internet search reveals myriad cases of illicit sexual activity occurring at fire stations. Any such case would appear to be a difficult challenge for anyone concerned with fire service reputation management.

In another case involving fire station activities, a career firefighter was arrested for selling pirated DVDs at his fire station. A subsequent search of his home uncovered more than 5,000 illegally copied DVDs. The news story does not say what the station officer knew about these activities while the firefighter was on duty or what the other firefighters knew.

### ***Implications for Leadership***

Fire department leaders need to prepare written policies governing the activities not acceptable for the time on duty at a fire station, whether the duty is by a career or a volunteer firefighter. Policies should clearly state the responsibility of the station officer to be aware of what a fire crew is doing during the time between emergency responses.

### ***Implications for a Code of Ethics***

Just as with respect to misuse of departmental equipment, the personal ethical issue is equally clear and department policy should spell out that abuse of public facilities is inappropriate and contrary to policy. Equally troublesome is that frequently such abuses are widely known, but go unreported. Condoning and/or failing to seek redress of known violations is tantamount to committing a violation oneself.

## **Alcohol Use by Members**

There can be no more tragic story depicting a preventable loss of life and immeasurable damage to fire service public support than the story of a female 16-year-old student firefighter in Wyoming killed when another volunteer firefighter, driving a 4000-gallon tanker while under the influence of alcohol, rolled the tanker during an emergency response. The unbelted 16 year old was ejected, pinned under the 25-ton tanker, and died from her injuries. The driver, according to the fire department's own records, had been previously suspended from the department for an alcohol violation and had actually been spending his weekends in jail for violating parole on a previous DUI conviction. The firefighter in this case was arrested and charged with not only driving under the influence of alcohol, but also aggravated homicide by vehicle. Prosecutors noted that the driver had a history of alcohol problems and that the driver was seen leaving a bar 15 minutes before his pager alarm went off. His blood-alcohol level was twice the legal limit. The firefighter driver is no longer a firefighter or a driver, as he was sentenced to 14 to 18 years in prison.

Despite daily seeing the carnage wrought by drunk drivers, the fire service has, by and large, had a passive attitude towards its own members' drinking excesses. Even now, drinking frequently accompanies many departmental activities and functions, including activities within the fire station. Alcohol consumption, in and of itself, is neither illegal nor inappropriate. But, like everything else, it has its time and place and that time must never be when a firefighter is on duty or is in any position to respond to emergency alarms or to act in an official public safety capacity.

### ***Implications for Leadership***

Departments must have and abide by written alcohol use/abuse policies that specify when, if ever:

- Alcohol use is acceptable in association with departmental activities/functions.
- The relationship between alcohol use and departmental response policies.
- The consequences for violation of the alcohol policies.

Moreover, firefighters should be trained to recognize any signs of intoxication (which are frequently taught as part of emergency medical response training) on the part of their colleagues and how to respond appropriately in such circumstances.

Alcohol policies that feature self-regulation (for example, where a member will not respond to a call when he or she has been drinking and whose judgment may be impaired) are essentially worthless. A person who has been drinking lacks the ability to judge the degree of his or her impairment and cannot be trusted to make a safe decision. In the case cited above, for example, there was such a policy in place but the apparatus driver simply did not heed it at the time of the emergency call.

### ***Implications for a Code of Ethics***

Any fire service code of ethics must state a fundamental incompatibility between public service, safety, and personal intoxication. Serving the public in its time of need requires the fire service member to be free of any condition that could interfere with the member's ability to provide a critical time-sensitive public service.

## **Other Substance Abuse by Members**

Substance abuse cases can be found in any state and among any population. Firefighters are not immune to substance abuse; in fact various factors including the stress of the job and the potential need for prescription painkillers to combat line of duty injuries may make firefighters particularly susceptible to substance abuse. Nor is substance abuse necessary limited to illicit or prescription drugs, as over-the-counter medications such as cough syrups and cold remedies are also ripe for abuse.

Unfortunately, the media is replete with stories of firefighters either selling or being under the influence of illicit substances. For example, shortly after the line of duty deaths of two firefighters in a major metropolitan city, newspapers reported "Firefighters Killed in Fire are Said to Have Had Drugs in System." An independent investigating panel, appointed after the disastrous revelation, recommended a new policy of random drug and alcohol testing. In December 2008 another major city newspaper reported a "Firefighter Trainee Arrested in Probe of Drug Ring." The article reported the grim details that a prospective firefighter was arrested at the department's training academy. The firefighter was one of nine people indicted on charges of conspiracy to distribute heroin as part of a sweeping drug investigation that netted several federal indictments. Not only was the firefighter recruit arrested on drug charges, but he was arrested at the department's training academy no less.

Stories connecting fire department members to cocaine and marijuana and amphetamines are all too common, but the list of abused substances is a long one that includes abuse of prescription drugs including painkillers as well. Moreover, steroid abuse has spread from the athletic world to the fire service. A television station news investigation reported widespread steroid use among area firefighters and police officers. Steroid use causes harm not just to an individual's body, but also in ways that may threaten firefighters' abilities to act com-

petently. Steroid users may become aggressive and lash out with excessive force at family, co-workers, and even the public they are supposed to serve.

### ***Implications for Leadership***

In some press reports of firefighters caught with illegal substances there have been misguided responses to point out that the entire population has an increasing drug problem, so it should not be a surprise when firefighters have the same problems. But that logic cannot be used to shelter fire service abuse of illegal substances. Firefighters' missions are to protect the public from harm, and they must abide by a higher duty; they may not be allowed to hide behind the excuse of "Everybody's doing it!" The public does not accept that excuse and fire service leadership should neither use it nor accept it.

A common response to reduce the likelihood that firefighters may take illegal drugs is a policy of random drug testing.

### ***Implications for a Code of Ethics***

Firefighters committed to serving the public and being an asset to their own fire crews should consider it to be a matter of personal ethics to be willing to take random drug tests to demonstrate that they are drug-free.

## **Harassment and Discrimination**

Practicing harassment and discrimination in the fire service is about intimidation and the abuse of power. These practices seem especially offensive and divisive because of the value of team cohesion during emergency operations. Harassment and discrimination is usually an exercise in intimidation, but it can spill over into public awareness and cause negative reaction.

Harassment is more shameful when we see it fully defined: "The act of systematic and/or continued unwanted and annoying actions of one party or a group, including threats and demands. The purposes may vary, including racial prejudice, personal malice, an attempt to force someone to quit a job or grant sexual favors...or merely sadistic pleasure from making someone fearful or anxious. Such activities may be the basis for a lawsuit if due to discrimination based on race or sex." This definition adds a final warning: "A systematic pattern of harassment by an employee against another worker may subject the employer to a lawsuit for failure to protect the worker."

As can be seen from national news reports, harassment and discrimination suits may prove costly to fire departments. One single case in which an on-duty firefighter placed dog food in the meal of a minority firefighter, and where the department's officers reportedly laughed at the prank, cost a department almost \$4,400,000 as well as untold negative publicity. This episode was apparently not an isolated one. According to the newspaper account covering the incident, the fire department "has been roiled by allegations of unchecked racism, discrimination and harassment that have cost taxpayers more than \$13 million in legal payouts."

In another state, a firefighter settled his lawsuit against the city for \$3,700,000 after he was taunted about his sexual orientation and then hit in the face with a metal kitchen chair. A newspaper report describing a judge's ruling that the city was negligent quoted the judge as saying, "[t]he record establishes that the lack of supervision at the firehouse led to violence which could have been stopped by appropriate supervision."

Discrimination is defined as "unequal treatment of persons, for a reason which has nothing to do with legal rights or ability. Federal and state laws prohibit discrimination in employment . . . rates of pay, right to promotion, educational opportunity, civil rights, and use of facilities based on race nationality, creed, color, age, sex, or sexual orientation." It would

seem to be deterrent enough to have laws in place and penalties for discrimination, but the person practicing discrimination believes he or she has the power to prevail privately in the discrimination. But these cases often become public with detrimental effect on fire department reputations.

***Implications for Leadership***

Some fire service cases of harassment and discrimination show that fire officers knew of the offenses and did nothing. A strong implication here for fire service leadership is to establish a clear policy prohibiting harassment and discrimination. Ignoring these problems should be punished as much as committing the original offenses. To make the policies effective, leadership must consider ways to enforce the policies even in remote fire stations and through 24-hour shifts.

***Implications for a Code of Ethics***

A fire service Code of Ethics must include a statement relating to harassment and discrimination. There is value in diversity of thought, and the fire service ethical behavior must support this basic concept of fairness.

## Summary

The fire service faces a host of issues that threaten its integrity and sterling public image. This risk is increased by the lightning speed at which information, and sometimes misinformation, is transmitted and propagated. Moreover, because of the continuing advent of technology, no longer can any issue be considered truly "local" as even the most isolated of matters affecting the most far-flung of departments can sully the reputation of the entire fire service.

Some of the issues discussed herein are not new. For example, various concerns about the association of the fire service with alcohol have long and notorious roots. By contrast, concerns with respect to other matters, such as misuse of information technology, are much more recent and assuredly other trends will continue to develop.

Recognizing that the actions of a small minority of bad actors can have grievous widespread consequences, the fire service as a whole must be increasingly vigilant in policing itself. Through a combination of enhanced and improved internal controls, increased vigilance, and greater acceptance of personal responsibility perhaps including, but not limited to, abiding by a Code of Ethics, the fire service can ensure that it remains true to its roots and heritage of protecting and serving this great nation.



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