Suicide and Suicide Prevention in the Fire Service

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I. Prevention: Understanding fire fighter suicide
II. Intervention: Helping a member who is suicidal
III. Postvention: What to do if a member dies by suicide
IV. Question & Answer
Do you know a fire fighter who has died by suicide?

Do you know more than one fire fighter who has died by suicide?
Prevention:
Understanding fire fighter suicide
Risk Factors for Suicide

Risk factors are characteristics that make it more likely that individuals will consider, attempt, or die by suicide:

- Previous suicide attempt(s)
- Presence of mental health conditions
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Loss (relational, social, work, or financial)
- Exposure to trauma
- Family history of suicide
- Access to firearms or other lethal means
Protective factors are characteristics that make it less likely that individuals will consider, attempt, or die by suicide:

- Connectedness to individuals, family, community, and social institutions
- Effective clinical care for mental, physical, and substance abuse disorders
- Problem-solving skills and ability to adapt to change
- Self-esteem and a sense of purpose or meaning in life
Interpersonal Theory of Suicide

Thwarted Belongingness
• Social connections vital
• Loss of reciprocal care

Perceived Burdensomeness
• “They will better off without me.”

Acquired Capability
• Increased pain tolerance
• Decreased fear of death

Increasing Suicide Rates

Suicide rates rose across the US from 1999 to 2016.

- Increase 38 - 58%
- Increase 31 - 37%
- Increase 19 - 30%
- Increase 6 - 18%
- Decrease 1%

Rate of Suicide by Race, US 2000-2016

Source: WISQARS Fatal Injury Reports, 1999–2016
Data on Fire Fighter Suicide are Lacking

- Most of what is reported about fire fighter suicide is not supported by the science
- The following are not known:
  - The rate of suicide among fire fighters
  - If fire fighter suicide is increasing or decreasing
  - If fire fighters are at higher risk for suicide than other comparable groups
- No reliable, national tracking system for fire fighter suicides
• H.R. 1646, reintroduced in 2019
• Introduced by Rep. Bera (D-CA)
• Would develop system to collect data on first responder suicide; require annual report to Congress
• Would allow grant funding to establish or enhance peer-support programs
New Suicide Death Reporting System

- Online reporting system
- Available to local union leaders
- Includes postvention resources

User guide: http://services.prod.iaff.org/ContentFile/Get/38760
Intervention:
Helping a member who is suicidal
Warning Signs for Suicide

Warning signs indicate an immediate risk of suicide:

• Talking about:
  • Wanting to die or kill themselves
  • Feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
  • Feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
  • Being a burden to others
  • Seeking revenge
Warning Signs for Suicide

Warning signs indicate an immediate risk of suicide:

• Behaviors:
  • Looking for ways to kill themselves
  • Increasing use of alcohol or drugs
  • Withdrawing or isolating

• Mood:
  • Anxious
  • Agitated or anger
  • Humiliation or shame
Asking about suicide will not make someone suicidal.

Are you having thoughts about killing yourself?
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Network

1.833.456.4566
Reducing access to lethal means is key.
2003-2005: average of 28 suicides per year

2006: Policy change- weapons not brought home on weekends

2007-2008: average of 16.5 suicide per year

Reducing Access to Lethal Means

- Let the member know you are concerned and want to help keep them safe
- Always ask about firearm access
- Involve family and friends to help reduce access
- Best option: temporary storage outside the home
- Let the member know reduced access is not permanent

https://theconnectprogram.org/resources/nh-firearm-safety-coalition/
Free, online training from the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC):

1. Identify people who could benefit from lethal means counseling,
2. ask about their access to lethal methods, and
3. work with them—and their families—to reduce access.

https://go.edc.org/CALMonline
Coming Soon: Suicide Intervention Training

• IAFF suicide intervention training under development
• Evidence-based intervention: Safety Planning
• Will be available online to IAFF-trained peer supporters
Postvention: What to do if a member dies by suicide
Suicide postvention is an organized response in the aftermath of a suicide to:

1) facilitate the healing of individuals from the grief and distress of suicide loss;

2) mitigate other negative effects of exposure to suicide; and

3) prevent suicide among people who are at high risk after exposure to suicide.

Tasks of Postvention

1. Verify the death
2. Coordinate resources
3. Disseminate information
4. Identify and support those most impacted
5. Commemorate the deceased
6. Enhance behavioral health programming

1. Verify the Death

- Verify the details: who, when, where, how, other circumstances

- If the death occurred on department or union property:
  - Contact law enforcement
  - Keep scene clear
  - Send representative to assist with family notification
2. Coordinate Resources

- What policies and SOP’s apply?
- What resources are available? Who should be involved?
  - Human resource department
  - Employee assistance program (EAP)
  - Mental health clinicians
  - Local mental health agencies or crisis center
  - Clergy
  - Peer support team
3. Disseminate Information

- Follow existing death notification procedures
- Avoid providing information about the method used
- Identify a media spokesperson
- Provide a written statement
- Notify IAFF district and state/provincial leadership, headquarters
Provide a Written Statement

Statement should include:

• Factual information about the death
• Acknowledgement it was a suicide
• Condolences to family and friends
• Plans to provide support
• Information about funeral arrangements
• Media contact
The way media cover suicide can influence behavior:

- negatively by contributing to contagion, or
- positively by encouraging help-seeking.

http://reportingonsuicide.org/
4. Identify and Support Those Most Impacted

- Who is likely to be impacted by this person’s death?
  - Assign a family liaison
  - Offer to pack up decedent’s locker
  - Ask what support is most useful

- Check in with each member
  - Cover shifts so they can attend funeral

- Provide psychoeducation
  - Refer to vetted resources
Suicide Bereavement Support Groups

- AFSP: [https://afsp.org/find-support/ive-lost-someone/find-a-support-group/](https://afsp.org/find-support/ive-lost-someone/find-a-support-group/)
- CASP: [https://www.suicideprevention.ca/Survivor-Support-Centres](https://www.suicideprevention.ca/Survivor-Support-Centres)
- SAVE: [https://save.org/save-support-groups/](https://save.org/save-support-groups/)

Healing Conversations: Survivor Outreach Program

- AFSP: [https://afsp.org/find-support/ive-lost-someone/healing-conversations/](https://afsp.org/find-support/ive-lost-someone/healing-conversations/)
5. Commemorate the Deceased

- Memorialize in the same ways you would for other deaths
- Honor how the person lived rather than how they died
- Plan ahead for: deceased’s birthday, anniversary of death
New Postvention Handouts

- Series of handouts on suicide grief and loss
- Additional handouts under development
- Download from the conference app, IAFF website, or “Report a Suicide Death” page
6. Enhance Behavioral Health Programming

- IAFF online Behavioral Health Awareness course (2 hours)
- IAFF in-person Peer Support Training (2 days)
- Wellness-Fitness Initiative 4th Edition, Chapter 5
- NFPA 1500 Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety, Health, and Wellness Program, Chapter 12
Find Your State Suicide Prevention Coordinator

https://www.sprc.org/states
Find Your Local Crisis Center

https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/our-network/

http://www.crisisservicescanada.ca/en/need-help/looking-for-local-resources-support/
Find a VA Suicide Prevention Coordinator

https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/get-help/local-resources
Question & Answer
We Need Your Feedback!

Your evaluations help us improve our workshops and presentations

Complete your evaluations using the IAFF Frontline App:

1. Open the Frontline App and click on the “≡” symbol in the top left corner by the logo
2. Select “sign in” and login with your iaff.org username
3. Click the “Events” icon and select REDMOND
4. Select “Sessions” and click on the workshop you attended
5. Click “Session Evaluation”
6. Complete the evaluation
7. Click “Submit”

For the overall evaluation, follow steps 1, 2 and 3
Then click “More”, then “Information” and “Overall Event Evaluation”.

2019 Redmond Health and Safety Symposium/Barbera EMS Conference

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS