

Summary of Designing and Implementing a Health & Wellness Initiative

The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), United States Fire Administration (USFA), International Association of Fire Chiefs and Fire Fighters (IAFC), International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) and National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA) have comparable recommendations for a comprehensive wellness and fitness program.

Here is a summary of these organizations' chief suggestions: NIOSH (2007) recommends phasing in a mandatory wellness and fitness program for fire fighters to reduce risk factors for cardiovascular disease and improve cardiovascular capacity. Additionally NIOSH (2007) suggests performing an annual physical performance assessment to ensure fire fighters are physically capable of performing the essential job tasks. IAFC & IAFF (1997) recommend an overall wellness and fitness system must be developed to maintain fire fighters' physical and mental capabilities and should be the objective of every fire department. IAFC requires mandatory participation of wellness and fitness by all uniformed personnel once the wellness and fitness program is implemented. IAFC suggests developing a holistic wellness approach that includes: annual fitness assessments and physical agility testing, annual medical physicals, rehabilitation, and behavioral health components. IAFC also recommends using the Candidate Physical Ability Test (CPAT) for new hires. USFA (2007) recommends adopting the IAFC "Fire Service Joint Labor Management Wellness-Fitness Initiative" and educating the fire service on the importance of wellness and fitness issues.

Designing a comprehensive wellness and fitness program must be followed by implementation strategies and then action. NFPA (2000) states that change should be incorporated gradually, such as setting a date for compliance and establish a phase-in schedule for specific requirements. Also fire departments should provide adequate facilities where exercise equipment is centrally located and easily accessible (NFPA, 2000). The USFA (2007) recommends adopting the IAFC "Fire Service Joint Labor Management Wellness-Fitness Initiative," which includes forming a committee with management and labor representatives, educating fire fighters on the importance of wellness-fitness, and providing medical, fitness, rehabilitation, and behavioral health components.

It is a Fire Chief's job to ensure excellent customer service by having healthy fire fighters (IFAC, 1997). The IFAC also reports that fire fighters' performance is enhanced with an atmosphere of work place safety, regulatory compliance, and positive attitudes (IAFC, 1997). Additionally, uniformed personnel have the responsibility to commit to their own health (Pearson et al., 1995). Pearson et al. (1995) also discuss implementing a successful wellness program and share that a fire department should evaluate each member's condition prior to beginning a program.

Greenburg et al. (2004) share the idea that it is important to understand and access the needs of the individual and organization in order for implementation strategies to be effective. These authors state that there are several beliefs that access readiness for change such as: the value that is placed on a goal, the likelihood of achieving the goal, the availability of the tools to take action, the perceived severity of the consequences if the actions aren't taken, the perceived benefits of the actions, and the perceived barriers will all influence an individuals or

organizational ability to implement changes (Greenburg et al., 2004). In order for implementation of a wellness and fitness program to be effectively used the research proposes several suggested steps: a social diagnosis of the needs and wants, the resources and barriers; an epidemiological diagnosis of health problems; behavioral and environmental diagnosis of factors for the program to address; educational and organizational diagnosis of reinforcing conditions that affect behavior; administrative and policy diagnosis of resources needed as well as barriers and supports available; and implementing the program and finally evaluating the program to see if long-term effects of the program change the quality of life (Greenburg et al., 2004).

Promoting positive compliance of wellness and fitness programs was addressed through an external questionnaire distributed to 100 like-sized fire departments nationally. Additionally, the literature review revealed information on how fire departments can create positive compliance of wellness and fitness programs. NFPA states that positive compliance of wellness programs within fire departments allows members to participate during scheduled working hours (NFPA, 2007). Providing rewards such as awards, extra leave time, T-shirts, patches, pins, and competitions also assists with individual motivations to participate in wellness and fitness programs (Curtis & Davis, 1983). Pearson (1994) states the most effective strategy for promoting wellness compliance among unfit fire fighters is personal motivation through education and training. Providing information through education about fitness and wellness is the initial step and then providing the tools to help them achieve lifestyle changes by prescribing personalized exercise prescriptions (Pearson, 1994). Additionally, support from the department and personnel are necessary for long-term lifestyle perspectives, emphasizing gradual change and individual needs. In order for a fire fighter to comply with a long-term exercise and healthy lifestyle changes he or she must have internal motivation (Pearson, 1994).

Greenburg et al. (2004) agree with Pearson (1994) and include that in order for individuals to create positive behavior changes they must: (a) Make realistic goals, (b) assess how they will meet those goals, (c) create a social network of support, (d) sign a contract, and (e) individualize the exercise program. Research shows that employees who are physically fit come to work more frequently, morale improves, spiritual connection improves, and there is an increased level of self-esteem and productivity (Greenburg et al., 2004).

In summary, documenting the fact that fire fighters have a stressful and physically challenging job validates the importance of continuing the research in this area of wellness and fitness. In an attempt to develop a wellness program for fire rescue personnel, it is imperative to adopt the findings of this report, including components such as: annual medical physicals, mandatory participation in annual fitness assessments; education on nutrition, physical fitness, cancer prevention, stress management and smoking cessation; individualized exercise programs; a practical assessment; a wellness committee; additional wellness staff; and unequivocal support from top management. Furthermore, changing individual behavior, fire department culture, and the nation's attitude about the vital importance of wellness and fitness programs must become the forefront of concern for all members and departments.