

# FIRE SERVICE JOINT LABOR MANAGEMENT

## WELLNESS-FITNESS INITIATIVE



# WFI

On October 28-29, 2024, 58 subject matter experts (SMEs) met in Washington, DC to discuss the WFI. This group included representatives from each of the 17 WFI Task Force Cities, staff from the IAFF, IAFC and Performance Redefined, and 3<sup>rd</sup> party leaders from the field (i.e. physicians, academics, fire chiefs, labor executives). The overall aim of the meeting was to discuss the aims, impact, and structure of the WFI to better direct the on-going efforts of the Task Force and the working groups that have been assembled to support the revising of the WFI.

A brief summary of the discussion points and meeting outcomes are highlighted below.

### 1. A NEW FOCUS AND A NEW NAME

**Historical Context:** While the WFI is widely recognized as a resource that has helped to shape fire fighter wellness and fitness over the past 25+ years, it has also been perceived by some as too prescriptive, inaccessible and/or lacking in detail to provide the necessary assistance to build or maintain a program.

**Moving Forwards:** The WFI will be restructured to place a larger focus on best practice guidelines and program implementation. Specifically, the resource will be structured in such a way that any department regardless of constraints or circumstances can use the WFI to outline a path for themselves to follow. The group all discussed dropping the term '5<sup>th</sup> Edition' and proposed that instead the WFI be branded with something like 'The IAFF/IAFC Wellness-Fitness Initiative – Igniting Change' to better reflect the aims and scope of the resource. Everyone felt it was important to acknowledge the historical significance of the WFI name while making it clear that this edition will be a substantial transformation from prior editions.

### 2. CLARIFY WHAT THE WFI AIMS TO BE

**Historical Context:** Even amongst the task force, there was much discussion about what the WFI aims to be. For example, is it meant to be a program? A series of guidelines? A resource for fire fighters and administrators? The general sentiment from the Task Force was that this lack of clarity extends across the fire service and may be one factor that is limiting the impact of the WFI. Without clarity regarding what the WFI aims to be, it will be challenging for the Task Force to structure the resource in such a way that it can provide assistance and impact wellness and fitness in the fire service.

**Moving Forwards:** The WFI will be structured as a repository of evidence, a collection of best practice guidelines, and an actionable implementation roadmap. It will not serve as a collection of operational standards, but instead point to best practices guidelines and actional steps that will help to implement a program, thus complimenting federal and local standards. In the context of fire fighter wellness and fitness, standards, best practice guidelines and minimum recommendations will be viewed as representing different levels of expectations and guidance to create, implement, and manage programs. In addition, the WFI will not be structured as a 'program' with specific, predefined objectives, steps, and protocols that must be followed as designed. Instead, it will provide a collection of best practice guidelines that fire departments can adapt to suit their unique conditions, constraints, and resources.

### 3. ARTICULATE THE INTENDED IMPACT

**Historical Context:** When the original Task Force convened to create the WFI in 1996, the aim was to establish a non-punitive initiative in support of fire fighter well-being that was endorsed by labor and

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management. At the time, there was much discussion of incumbent fitness testing, some of which resembled the fire fighter combat challenge as a gauge of operational readiness. However, the fire fighter combat challenge (or comparable tests) was not viewed as sufficiently comprehensive or inclusive to meet the wellness and fitness needs of the fire service, hence the birth of the WFI. Since its inception the WFI has been revised 3 times, each of which offered additional details regarding topics such as medical assessments, fitness and behavioral health programs, yet the intended impact was not explicitly stated, thus making it challenging to assess.

**Moving Forwards:** The Task Force is now committed to making the WFI the principal, most comprehensive and inclusive resource in support of fire fighter wellness and fitness. With this in mind, its impact will also be considered through multiple perspectives. For example, we as the Task Force will establish metrics with which we can assess its usability, appeal, reach, adoption, efficacy, etc. But we will also aim to identify a list of metrics for departments to assess the impact of the programs they have created using the guidelines and support provided by the WFI.

#### **4. MANDATORY, NON-PUNITIVE AS AN IMPLEMENTATION DECISION**

**Historical Context:** 'Mandatory' and 'non-punitive' policies have been synonymous with the WFI since its inception to promote the importance of participation without consequence. Fire fighter health, a supportive culture and an organizational commitment to change were prioritized in pursuit of wellness and fitness outcomes. However, these policies have been met and/or used with mixed reviews. For example, mandating participation in an annual medical assessment has saved numerous lives by identifying conditions early; however, this same policy has created obstacles for others, thereby preventing them from doing anything. Additionally, because of the emphasis placed on 'mandatory, non-punitive' policies, which have largely been tied to assessments, the importance of other aspects of a comprehensive wellness-fitness program have been underappreciated.

**Moving Forwards:** The WFI will serve as a resource for all fire departments (and fire fighters) via the use of evidence, best practice guidelines and tactics that assist with the creation of programs that meets their unique goals, conditions and constraints. The WFI is not a one-size fits all program and therefore any specific policy cannot be universally applied in all contexts. The Task Force has also acknowledged that mandatory participation is not an outcome, it is a policy decision used to prompt a particular action, and thus contribute to a specific outcome. In other words, there are multiple strategies that can be used to achieve target outcomes aside from explicitly stating that participation is mandatory. Particularly, when mandating something may not prompt the desired change in health or fitness that is actually being sought. Mandatory, non-punitive policies can absolutely be used and provide their intended benefit; however, the decision to use these policies must be considered within the scope of the broader implementation plan.

A more extensive summary of the meeting discussions will be produced and distributed across the Task Force. The ideas shared will also be used to inform the efforts of our working groups and serve to inform the structure of the WFI, its promotion across the service, and the pursuit of strategic partnerships, complementary programs and research initiatives that serve to support the WFI and our efforts to improve fire fighter wellness and fitness.