



# Fire Fighter Cancer Awareness and Prevention



## TRAINING BRIEF

### Occupational Cancer and Culture Change

#### DISCUSSION

**Fact:** Firefighters have a 9 percent higher risk of being diagnosed with cancer and a 14 percent higher risk of dying from cancer than the general U.S. population, according to research by NIOSH.

#### Key Points:

- Many cultural norms in the fire service serve us well.
- Other cultural norms are harmful and need to be changed.
- We need to shift our perspective and actions.

Cultural norms that increase your risk of cancer:

- Wearing dirty PPE as evidence of firefighting prowess.
- Overhauling with no SCBA
- Riding back to the station in dirty PPE and not showering

Change can be hard and requires patience. Not everyone will buy-in, but you currently possess the knowledge and tools to change your culture today.

**Culture** is generally defined as the behaviors, attitudes, values and beliefs that are shared within a group or organization.

Traditions can live long in the fire service. Over the last 30-40 years, the fire service has experienced culture change. Most notably in the mid to late 1980s with bloodborne pathogens. No longer was it considered acceptable to have blood or other bodily fluids on any exposed areas of skin. In today's fire service, we wouldn't think of touching a patient without proper PPE being worn.

We are now faced with another needed culture change in the fire service that has a profound effect on our health and safety. This culture change deals with occupational cancer, which is the leading cause of line of duty deaths in today's fire service, and the numbers are increasing drastically.

**Organizational culture change:** To secure buy-in and receive necessary feedback, cultural change campaigns need to be developed in collaboration with chief officers, company officers, labor/management, as well as city/government leadership:

- Change campaigns are most effective when they are:
  - o In alignment with the leaders' vision, intent.
  - o Accompanied by educational/motivational materials that promote change at the cognitive and emotional level.
  - o Provide the tools and equipment necessary to get the job done.

**Company-level culture change:** Company officers are the most critical pieces in a cultural change campaign:

- Company officers set the tone, and their crews follow:
  - o Lead by example: If the boss is "on-air," wears clean PPE and embraces a culture of safety, the crew will follow, and cultural norms will change.

**Individual crew member and culture change:** The hard science is done. The direct correlation to exposures and high rates of cancer in the fire service has been established. Several best practices have been identified for all departments to take advantage of to reduce and hopefully eliminate these exposures. The bottom line rests with each individual firefighter to take their own personal responsibility to ensure that they are taking the steps to protect themselves.