



Why Do You Need a Chaplain?

by Jennie Swanson

The chaplain's job is to support you; the firefighter, the chief, and your family. Initiative #13 of the 16 Life Safety Initiatives charges that "Firefighters and their families must have access to counseling and psychological support." The Illinois Mutual Aid Box Alarm System (MABAS) Chaplain Program is a fundamental part of this prevention strategy. Nearly 70 chaplains in 25 MABAS Divisions have opted into the program's standard of care, mutual aid guidelines, and training requirements. The ICFC has implemented a helpful paradigm entitled "5 Points of Service" and provides standards for care and training and, in many cases, offers the training itself.

1. Command indicates a need for the chaplain to understand the cultural dynamics of the fire service and everyday operations and administration. This requires a good working relationship and sincere trust between the chief and the chaplain. There are burdens that weigh on the heart of chief officers as they strive to personally look after their companies' wellbeing and simultaneously uphold firm discipline to maintain command and safety. The chaplain can serve as a confidant for these stressors and a liaison to offer needed intervention to the officer's subordinates where a professional distance must otherwise be maintained.

2. Firefighters and personnel represent the chaplain's primary and most difficult group with whom to foster trust and communication. This is where the chaplain's additional training, time spent at stations and availability pays off. A chaplain earns trust out on the street with their department, witnessing what firefighters do every day. After a tough call a meaningful exchange about life and death or other emotionally and spiritually charged topics can occur, allowing a healing conversation to begin.

MABAS chaplains are accountable to reporting activities and maintaining their equipment. In order to stay safe, the chaplain must train in fire operations, traumatic stress, crisis intervention and issues related to line-of-duty-death and funerals. Respect is eventually earned and a foundation built upon which bricks of trust and care will be laid. Without this foundation, the chaplain is merely an outsider and will never be considered a part of the team or a true member of the family.

3. Families of personnel are often excluded from the equation of firefighter health, safety and survival. Working as a firefighter has a significant impact on family life and family life has a significant impact of the wellbeing and functioning of the firefighter. Going from work at the firehouse to family,

and often even a second job, kids will get sick, older parents need care, and financial struggles can overwhelm. Time is sacrificed and those at home feel left out. Emotions get boxed up and walls get built. It can be hard to talk about what is seen with people who haven't been there or curb the humor used to survive it. Families may not want to hear about it, and can build walls of their own. This is a recipe for disaster, as communication and trust are critical to successful relationships.

When home life deteriorates the firefighter doesn't perform at their best. If problems continue unchecked, stress can contribute to time off work, behavioral changes, heart disease, mental health conditions and poor performance on the job. To allay these risk factors, support can be created through chaplains teaching at rookie school family-orientations and providing classes on stress management, communication, time-management and conflict resolution. Peer support can be strengthened and EAP or counseling services offered without stigma or threat of discipline.

4. Victims of emergencies and disasters often react emotionally. In the event of an

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unexpected death, a full arrest, structure fire or incident that has the potential to escalate, a chaplain's presence and intervention skill can bring calm and reassurance to the family of the victim and bystanders, while keeping them safely out of harm's way and explaining fire and police operations. Follow-up care and referral directs people toward appropriate support systems, saving tax dollars and get them on their way to healing. Having the chaplain on the scene in these types of incidents also provides the opportunity to observe firefighters behavior after the call with an awareness of who was exposed to stressors that could cause psychological harm.

5. Fellow chaplains support one another. Chaplains are exposed to the same psychological traumas and spiritual stressors as other personnel and need an opportunity

to talk about a call from time to time. Having a functioning MABAS Chaplain committee in your division presents the chaplain a set of peers to rely on, and also provides for effective mutual aid and training programs. These keep the chaplain motivated, psychologically healthy and safe and represent a best practice.

Why do you need a chaplain? You need a chaplain because it is a cost effective means of preserving firefighter health, wellness and resiliency which concurrently assists our communities in time of need. The time and effort it takes to properly train and utilize a chaplain will benefit your department and community. The program won't be accepted by everyone, and it may take months or years to weave it into the cultural fabric of the department. There will be, though, individuals in your department, in their families, and in

your community whose lives will be touched by having someone around whose sole purpose is to lend support and care for their emotional and spiritual wellbeing. You can't put a price on that, and it will contribute to saving lives.

More information on the MABAS Chaplain Program can be found by visiting www.ilfirechaplains.org or by contacting the author at 630-479-1970. ■



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