

# The Fire Chief's Guide To the Care and Feeding of Chaplains

## *About "The Fire Chief's Guide to the Care and Feeding of Chaplains"*

*Taking a relaxed approach, Fire Chief Curt Kramer (Hampshire, IL) takes us on a brief journey from finding our Chaplain through living with them on a daily basis. The special relationship between Chaplain and Chief is explored and the importance of the Chaplain role in our Nation's Fire Service Industry and Emergency Services Counterparts is given explanation.*

*Organizing chaos into manageable pieces and bringing about a successful outcome is the mainstay of the fire chief's job during emergency operations. It should go without saying that such feats are not accomplished without much planning, experience and the creation of a few parking lots along the way. If we bring together a fire chief and a chaplain within the confines of the same scenario without adequate planning things are generally bad. Help is on the way.*

*This guidebook looks specifically at the fire chief whom we expect to manage the valuable resources we call chaplains and the chaplain's role in tackling the holistic needs of the emergency scene.*

*Together we can make it all work.*



# *A final word:*

These are just some of the primary areas of consideration. As a Chief or Chief Officer, Trustee, Manager, Administrator, etc. more will be unearthed as you move forward with a Chaplain program. Don't do it alone, use multiple departments if you're a smaller city or village. Look for the best fit for your organization and talk to the Illinois Corps of Fire Chaplains, they will be more than happy to help. It is all about the mental wellness and resiliency of our personnel and thus a healthy organization. This is an area we do little to support yet often is prone to fail.

It is not a bad thing to care and not a bad thing to be taken care of from time-to-time. The human element needs to be addressed and preserved. In doing so we will better do what we do best; SERVE OUR COMMUNITIES.

## **The Fire Chief's Guide to the Care and Feeding of Chaplains**

*Curt Kramer*

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## X. Keeping the Chief and the Chaplain on Track and Moving Forward

The Chief and the Chaplain must work in concert and hand-in-hand. At the same time, each will carry the burden of confidential information that cannot be discussed between the two parties. There are simply some things the Chaplain cannot tell the Fire Chief regarding personnel. Once a problem has been identified each has their role in its resolution and each must act accordingly. While we hope both parties will be in concert with one another they may not. Such is the case of a firefighter with an emotional problem that reaches out to the Chaplain for help while the Fire Chief may be engaged in disciplinary action with the same individual. Though this example is being used for example sake it points out that each has their job to do and a healthy mutual respect for roles and responsibilities within the organization is paramount.



There are also times when leader becomes follower and vice versa. Specifically, there will come a time when things are best led by the Chaplain and not the Fire Chief. The Chief will soon learn that being a follower is a necessary component for any leader. The best utilization of resources is the key; it may in fact be the Chaplain we need.

## VIII. The Chaplain as a *Controlled Independent Resource* (huh?!)

The Chaplain reports to the scene but quickly transitions into an independent resource on behalf of the Incident Commander. He or she will work with and through multiple agencies in order to care for the scene's holistic needs. We call these actions Guided Independent Actions or GIA's. They are pre-planned actions the Chaplain will take in a non specific order but put into place to resolve emergency scene related issues dealing with victims, family members and other people on scene we otherwise have no resources dedicated to at the time of the emergency. The Chaplains will interface with the Law Branch (if operational), Red Cross, Salvation Army, OEM and other agencies as necessary to help bring closure to the incident. This may well be the case long after the initial response effort has been laid to rest. The process is further involved should their responsibility include line of duty injury or death. The Chaplain is a key figure in department related injuries and deaths; often a part of the Fire Chief's notification and wake/funeral team.

## IX. The Unnoticed Victims

The Chief, the Chaplain, the members of the organization, family members, and fellow workers in law enforcement, public works and local government can all fall prey to crisis, cumulative stress and mental health issues. We often focus on the needs of the public but those same needs are prevalent within our own organization. It is the Chaplain who we depend upon to keep their finger on the pulse of the organization especially within the realm of mental health and our own resiliency.

## I. History; so we don't repeat bad stuff

Many of us over the age of 50 may recall the kindly Preacher, Reverend, or Priest that would stop in the station from time-to-time (especially during holidays) and visit with the crews and maybe leave them with the kindness of a blessing. That image is quickly being replaced with the knowledge that clergy can do so much more for our industry. The knowledge and skills that members of the clergy bring to the table, especially in the realm of mental wellness and resiliency, are needed more today than ever before.



During emergent events the Incident Commander does not have the resources or the skills on scene to handle the holistic needs that are encountered during such events or catastrophic circumstances. Currently we turn to adjunct agencies to assist victim's families, and the distraught friends or neighbors that descend upon the scene. A trained Chaplain is an answer to such needs and not just during catastrophic events.

The Chaplain has a place in dealing with employee assistance programs, critical incident stress de-fusing and debriefing, EMS scene response where assistance is needed for family members, and in-house with firefighters who are suffering from the stressors of the job including the fire chief. The Chaplain is emerging as the psychological caretaker within both fire and police agencies in today's high stress and fast paced environments.

## II. Finding the Chaplain

(Where's the Superman store?)



Now that you have decided to take a chaplain into your organization, the hunt is on to find a good one. If you are fortunate enough to have a local pastor walk into your office and volunteer, consider yourself lucky. Suppose, though, that you have to go out looking. Where do you start? What personality might you look for and how do you know when you have the right person?

Most communities have several churches and religious organizations. There is no official requirement that a chaplain must be ordained and often times you can find a non-ordained person equally gifted to do the job needed. Deacons, retired clergy and even some retired firefighters should be on your radar. Churches reflect the personality of their pastors. Check church websites and Facebook pages to get a look at their personalities. Begin with a list of all the churches and places of worship in your area, and consider hosting a luncheon (they will come if you feed them) where you can present your vision for the fire chaplain role. It's like going fishing. Throw the line out there and see who bites.

If you have a functional mutual aid network in your area, consider inviting those departments to work with you and share a chaplain or chaplains. Be clear, don't water down your expectations and set the bar high. The best people will rise to the level of expectation. It is also imperative that the chaplain candidates understand that this is not a new church growth program and they are not there to convert anyone to their particular perspective. Proselytizing is strictly prohibited.

## VII. The Formal Paper:

*Things We Need To Do*

The sharing of services by other departments or organizations in a mutual aid atmosphere is essential.



In Illinois, the Chaplain is provided with information to assist with the understanding of the Mutual Aid Box Alarm System (MABAS) and is instructed on how the Chaplain interfaces under the Incident Management System. These conversations clear up any misconceptions of how the chaplain fits into the larger picture of the incident before the incident even occurs.

Further, we need to discuss the Chaplain's organization at the state and national level and offer suggestions as to Standard Operating Practices/Guidelines at the local level. Formal documents and procedures and training on these policies are essential to the Chaplain's understanding of how we as organizations cover each other's back and how the Chaplains may cover for one another during periods of absence or come together as a team during catastrophic events.

## VI. Teaching or Re-teaching the Chaplain



Here in Illinois we depend heavily on the Illinois Corps of Fire Chaplains (ICFC) as the mainstay of chaplain education. We suggest others consider a similar structure. The ICFC is very free with information and guidance.

The ICFC is closely tied to the Mutual Aid Box Alarm System (MABAS) in Illinois and surrounding states.

Orientation Training includes a basic understanding of: Alarm response, fire and road-way incidents, hospital and home visitations, general station visits, station and apparatus floor familiarization, introduction to department personnel, PPE training and why, introduction to victim assistance programs, Class A donning and organizational history including fire service traditions, observation of fire tactical training and EMS training, minimum 8 hours of ride along time, tour of the community from the fire departments perspective, organizational chart and the Chaplains position, and CPR/AED training and certification (some Chaplains go on to become EMT's). All this should be in process before appointment to the organization as the Chaplain.

Basic certifications include:

- International Critical Incident Stress Management courses: Group Basic, Individual intervention and (choose one) Pastoral Care Intervention, Grief Following Trauma, or Spiritual/Emotional Care. (go to <http://www.icisf.org>)
- Federation of Fire Chaplains (FFC): Level 100 Basic
- ICFC Membership (go to <http://www.ilfirechaplains.org>)
- NIMS 100, 200, 700 and 800 level certification

## III. Preparing the Troops



The old saying of 'one step at a time' works well here.

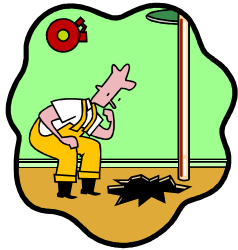
If your organization has never had a Chaplain or your organization has had a previous experience that was less than favorable you'll want to tread easy. Give the troops time to adjust to the idea that a new member will be joining them. Be specific as to what their role will be and why. Firefighters love 'why' so lay it out for them.

Consider a multi-jurisdictional approach to Chaplains. As a group, the Chaplains fair much better in such an atmosphere especially for training and networking purposes.

Trust within the organization is a big issue. The troops need to know that the Chaplain is there for everyone in a confidential manner. The Chaplain is not the Chief's spy; the Chaplain needs to be a member of the organization independent of organizational politics and cliques that so often occupy our organizations.

## IV. Dressing the Chaplain (Uniform of the Day)

The Chaplains position is unique to the department and traditions may be bent a bit as the Chief squeezes the Chaplain into the organization. Personally, the referee uniform comes to mind as a good place to start but the reality is they need to be outfitted within organization's uniform protocols.

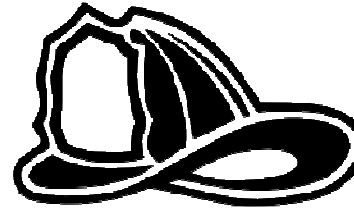


Knowing where to place the Chaplain within the hierarchy without organizational revolt is worth mentioning. It is important for personnel to know and understand that within their profession, the Chaplain is at or near the top of their game. This is why they are usually seen in

a white shirt with a gold badge. Dressing them like a firefighter makes it difficult for the Chaplain to be effective, especially within other ranks. The Chaplain also needs the association with administration for his/her work in the field with both public and private concerns. What seems to work well is dressing them like a Chief Officer with a religious symbol representative of their faith background replacing the bugle cluster (or axes if you use them). There may be strong feelings about the use of religious symbols based on your community, state or country. As for using a cross in your fire department, the Maltese cross (2 styles) is the emblem of the fire service and a similar style cross named for Saint Florian, the patron saint of firefighters differs only by having arms rounded outwards at the ends. One style is commonly found on fire service badges, patches, and emblems and the other is typical of the St. Florian medallion or medal. The cross is certainly part of our fire service history and traditions.

## V. All Dressed up and Nowhere to Go

The Chaplain will need to conform to the same uniform standards as other personnel with regard to Class A or dress uniform standards. Casual uniform wear will differ from one organization to the other and the field is open. It is important however to 'gear up' your Chaplain. The same turn-outs you or your command personnel wear work fine for the Chaplain. Please remember they will from time-to-time be exposed to scene hazards. That doesn't mean we have them don SCBA and head for the academy tower but they do need to be protected.



The question of helmet color also comes into play. Each organization has its own field politics to address this issue. Several mid-west departments use white but the helmet shield clearly bears the cross or other

religious symbol and the word Chaplain visible across the back of the bunker coat works well. A blue helmet is an acceptable alternative and can be a distinguishing feature which boldly states "I am not a firefighter" to all others on the scene.

Safety vests should be required for the chaplain on the fire scene or roadway incident. Personally, I like the white vest which goes over the coat for two reasons. First, it distinctly differs from my green COMMAND vest and that of the Safety Officer's red vest. Secondly, there is just something about needing to keep the white vest white. The white tends to remind them they are not part of the action teams but that they are part of the support team which means; stay clean!