

TITANIUM™

FEEL THE  
SPEED.

TENCATE  
protectivefabrics

Fire Engineering®



Leadership, Volunteer Fire Service

# We Must Make A Change: Ending Harassment in the Fire Service

2.11.19



*By Kevin D. Quinn*

*Via [National Volunteer Fire Council \(NVFC\)](#)*

It's 2019, and yet stories of firefighters and EMS providers being ridiculed, harassed, and hazed by their fellow responders occur on a regular basis. These actions hurt our brothers and sisters, discourage people from joining our ranks, and tarnish the reputation of everyone in the fire and emergency services.

As chair of the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), I was attending our 2018 health and safety

Training Summit, which features courses from subject matter experts regarding a variety of topics that matter to the volunteer fire and emergency services. One of these courses focused on harassment in the fire service and was delivered by firefighter and EMT Ali Rothrock.

**RELATED: [Sexual Violence: Is It a Problem in the Fire Service?](#) | [Be Nice: The Fire Service, Harassment, and Bullying](#) | [Be a Different Firefighter: Accepting Diversity and Differences](#)**

I was dismayed to hear Ali describe the harassment, disrespect, and even assault she faced when she joined the volunteer fire service. This incredible woman who was dedicating herself to the service of her community was being treated horribly by the very same people she was serving beside. In her own words, here is Ali's story:

*When I found firefighting at 16 years old, I knew I'd found where I was meant to be. I fell head-over-heels in love with it immediately and threw myself headlong into learning everything I could about the job. But I quickly learned that the firefighters I was around weren't interested in who I was or the potential I had as a firefighter. They wanted a girl who was going to fit into the stereotype they held of women and of women firefighters. They were interested in me for my body and looks; they weren't interested in training me or taking me seriously as a young firefighter.*

*The treatment I endured was dismissed as "hazing" and "nothing to get worked up about" but quickly progressed into sexual harassment, dangerous hostility, and sexual violence. Despite my passion for firefighting, my station was a place I dreaded going because I never knew if I was going to be threatened, terrorized, or arrive to find my gear or SCBA tampered with. I didn't know if I'd be graphically compared to the naked pictures of women hanging in the bay or told what the other firefighters would do to me if they could get me alone. As a 16-year-old I was constantly propositioned for sexual favors in exchange for an "easier" firefighting environment. Whenever I brought these issues up, the firefighters would say things like "you're just being too sensitive" or "if you don't like it, leave."*

*After three years in the same firehouse, I went out of town for a ride along. I was hoping to experience a better firefighting environment. But in this firehouse I experienced an attempted gang rape at the hands of three drunk firefighters. This new trauma sent my world spinning and completely shattered my sense of safety. I walked away from the fire service, determined never to step foot in another firehouse again.*

This story rattled my faith in my fellow firefighters. How could some of our own treat one of their

crew members so viciously? How could they be so unaccepting of a new member simply because of her gender? What was it about the culture in these departments that made the firefighters think this type of behavior was acceptable?

**RELATED: Morals in the Fire Service: Do No Harm! | Fire Service Sexual Harassment: Leaders Must Set the Tone | Bullying on the Job: A New Threat to the Fire Service**

No firefighter should ever have to endure such appalling behavior from anyone. Our sole mission is to protect and save lives. The astonishing treatment that Ali and many others have faced are outlandish and tragic, and are never, under any circumstance, acceptable behaviors.

This type of situation is problematic for the fire service on multiple fronts. First and foremost, the person receiving this treatment is put in harm's way. No member of a fire or EMS department should ever have to feel fearful to be at the station, among their peers. Second, it creates an environment people do not want to be a part of. Who wants to join or stay with an organization that would treat its own members with such blatant disrespect and hostility? Third, it tarnishes the reputation of the entire fire service. When the public hears stories about the harassment, hazing, and assaults that go on in some stations, the reputation and public image of the entire fire service is diminished. After all, how can we let such behavior go on in our ranks?

I am proud of the work the NVFC is doing to create a culture of diversity and inclusion in the fire service. The NVFC has taken a firm position and adopted an anti-harassment and bullying statement. The crux of this position states: "All members of fire, EMS, and rescue services should be treated and treat others with dignity and respect, free from harassment and bullying."

As defined, harassment is any verbal or physical conduct by an individual or group designed to threaten, intimidate, or coerce an employee, co-worker, or any person. Sexual harassment occurs when unsolicited and unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature is rendered.

Fire service leaders have both a responsibility and an obligation to provide a safe environment for our volunteer firefighters, rescue personnel, and EMS providers. We must take heed and educate our members on the importance of inclusion and acceptance of all into our fire departments. It is the leadership's responsibility to set clear expectations and to provide an environment safe from

harassment, hazing, and bullying. If someone does come to us with an issue involving harassment or hazing, we must take the matter very seriously and have clear policies and procedures for dealing with the situation. The volunteer fire service must establish the commitment to ensure the safety, both physically and behaviorally, of all.

Despite the trauma Ali experienced, I am very pleased to report that she ultimately did not give up on her dream of serving her community as a firefighter. She eventually found a department that treated her with the respect and dignity all our members deserve. She also turned her very negative experience into positive action by speaking nationally on this topic and helping departments understand how to identify and change a toxic culture.

In that vein, I asked Ali what advice she has for departments on how to avoid a culture that tolerates harassment and instead develop an inclusive culture that supports all its members. Here are four key tips she suggests:

1. Leaders, ensure that your firefighters actually know your expectations of them. Don't assume that they have the same standards as you. Let them know what you (and the full department leadership) consider unacceptable in terms of their words and/or behavior and what the consequences will be if they break those codes of conduct. Then make sure to follow through with those consequences if the need arises.
2. Leaders, make sure that your firefighters know that your door is always open and that you will listen to any issue with an open mind. Additionally, make sure that they know who else they can go to in order to discuss a problem if they don't feel comfortable going to you.
3. Encourage open and respectful discussions about the things that make us different. Gender, sexual orientation, religion – we are a stronger and more united fire service if we can understand that despite our apparent differences, we are much more similar than we might think.
4. Do not be afraid of concluding that some people do not belong in the fire service. There are some people who prove to us consistently that they do not care to adhere to the standards all firefighters should live up to. Do not bend the rules so they can stay. Those that refuse to follow a code of conduct and who make the environment worse for those around them should not have a place on the team.

In addition to these tips, I advise all fire departments to adopt a code of conduct and an anti-harassment and bullying statement. You can use the NVFC's documents available at [www.nvfc.org](http://www.nvfc.org) as a basis for your department's version.

I admire the courage that Ali has had to share her story in order to bring the issues of harassment, hazing, and bullying to the forefront of the volunteer fire service. Now I challenge all fire service leaders to take a hard look inside your department and gain a better finger on the pulse of exactly what is happening within. We will not tolerate sexual harassment, hazing, or bullying in our fire service organizations. I implore all volunteer firefighters, EMS providers, fire service leaders, and those involved with the fire service to make this call for action. Clean up your firehouse, foster a culture of acceptance and inclusion, and ensure a safe environment for your members!

*Kevin D. Quinn joined the fire service in 1976. He has served on the National Volunteer Fire Council board of directors for more than 30 years and currently serves as chair. He retired as a deputy chief of the Union Fire District in South Kingstown, Rhode Island, and has returned to where he began in the volunteer fire service – actively responding to fires and alarms with his original Station #3 of the Union Fire District. Kevin is a past-president of the Rhode Island State Firemen's League, Rhode Island State Advocate of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation's Everyone Goes Home-Courage to Be Safe Program, member of the Foundation's Rhode Island Local Assistance State Team, board member of the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition, member of the Hope Valley Hazmat team, and member of numerous federal, state, and local exercise design management teams. He holds a master of science degree in counseling and educational psychology and a master of science degree in education.*

**ALSO**

**Planning a Training Program**