

Elected Officials' Guide to Supporting **FIREFIGHTER MEDICAL EVALUATIONS**

Firefighters serve in unpredictable, high-risk environments that expose them to carcinogens, extreme heat, toxic smoke, and intense physical and psychological stress. These hazards increase the risk for cancer, cardiovascular disease, respiratory conditions, and mental health concerns.

As an elected official, you play a crucial role in creating the policy, funding, and infrastructure that protect those who protect your community. Supporting annual firefighter medical evaluations (sometimes referred to as occupational medical exams) is one of the most effective ways to reduce preventable injuries, illnesses, and deaths.

What Firefighter Medical Evaluations Are – and Why They Matter

Firefighter medical evaluations are comprehensive assessments conducted by trained healthcare providers to evaluate fitness for duty, detect early disease, and monitor occupational exposures. Exams typically include:

- Health history review (personal, family, occupational)
- Physical exam + vitals
- Blood work
- Vision & hearing
- Pulmonary function testing
- Electrocardiogram (ECG), chest imaging, and cardiac stress testing, when indicated
- Cancer screenings relevant to elevated firefighter risk
- Mental Health

This evaluation should occur annually to find critical medical conditions early - before they become life-threatening or impair performance.

Challenges Departments Face

- **Cost:** Smaller or volunteer departments may lack funding for annual medical evaluations.
- **Access:** Limited providers trained in firefighter-specific occupational medicine.
- **Administration:** Scheduling, documentation, and compliance require infrastructure.
- **Awareness:** Some leaders underestimate long-term benefits or see medical evaluations as optional.

The Stakes: Why Annual Exams Are Critical

Reduce Line-of-Duty Deaths

Cardiac events and occupational cancers are leading causes of line-of-duty-death (LODD). Many are undetected until too late. Early identification can prevent up to half of these deaths.

For policymakers, this translates to fewer workers' compensation claims, reduced disability pensions, and greater workforce stability.

Detect Occupational Illness Earlier

Firefighters experience higher incidence of cancers, respiratory disease, and cardiac abnormalities due to toxic exposures and extreme workload. Regular exams improve survival and reduce long-term medical costs.

Protect Fiscal Health of the Department & Community

Annual medical evaluations typically cost \$500–\$1,500 per firefighter, but can help prevent:

- Expensive disability claims
- Lost shift coverage
- Long-term healthcare burdens
- Recruitment and replacement costs

Support Mental & Behavioral Health

Firefighters face chronic stress, disrupted sleep, trauma exposure, and fatigue. Annual medical evaluations provide a natural touchpoint for screening and referral.

Enhance Liability Protection

Compliance with national standards protects municipalities and demonstrates proactive stewardship of firefighter health.

How Elected Officials Can Make the Difference

FUNDING SUPPORT

- Allocate dedicated funding for medical evaluations.
- Champion grant applications for Assistance to Firefighters Grants, Wellness & Fitness or similar federal programs.
- Introduce reimbursement legislation.
- Support insurance coverage options for uninsured or under-insured firefighters.

LEGISLATION & POLICY ACTIONS

- Enable annual medical evaluations for all fire departments, with scalable implementation and funding for small/volunteer agencies.
- Co-sponsor cancer, cardiac, and behavioral health legislation supporting firefighters.
- Create incentives for departments with compliant wellness programs.
- Ensure transparency and accountability in reporting and implementing health initiatives.
- Policies may be structured as requirements, incentives, or reimbursement mechanisms, depending on department size and local capacity.

ADVOCACY & COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

- Host town halls, briefings, or community discussions to highlight health risks/benefits of annual medical evaluations.
- Build partnerships with IAFF, IAFC, NVFC, health systems, and local unions.
- Encourage firefighters to use existing wellness benefits and preventive care resources.
- Promote public awareness of firefighter health risks to build community support.

Standards That Guide Firefighter Medical Evaluations

NFPA 1580: Emergency Responder Occupational Health and Wellness

Defines the essential components of medical evaluations to ensure firefighters can safely perform all 15 physically demanding emergency tasks.

IAFF/IAFC Wellness-Fitness Initiative

Promotes holistic programs including medical exams, fitness, behavioral health, and rehabilitation.

NVFC Recommendations

Encourages annual medical evaluations and provides flexible options for departments with fewer resources, while urging alignment with NFPA standards.

Key Takeaways:

- Firefighters face elevated cancer, cardiac, respiratory, and behavioral health risks.
- Annual medical evaluations save lives, reduce costs, and improve community readiness.
- Your leadership can drive policy, funding, and partnerships that make annual medical evaluations possible.
- Proactive investment today prevents line-of-duty tragedies tomorrow.
- Does every firefighter in my jurisdiction have access to an annual NFPA-aligned medical evaluation?

Resources for Elected Officials

- **NFPA Website:** For NFPA 1580 details (nfpa.org)
- **IAFC/IAFF Resources:** Guides and toolkits at iafc.org and iaff.org
- **NVFC Position Paper:** nvfc.org for volunteer-specific advice
- **Federal Grants:** dhs.gov for AFG and other funding
- **Healthcare Provider Guide:** Available from IAFC and Science to the Station for training providers

By championing firefighter medical evaluations, you not only protect those who protect us but also strengthen community resilience. Start by assessing your jurisdiction's current programs and reaching out to local fire leaders for collaboration.

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