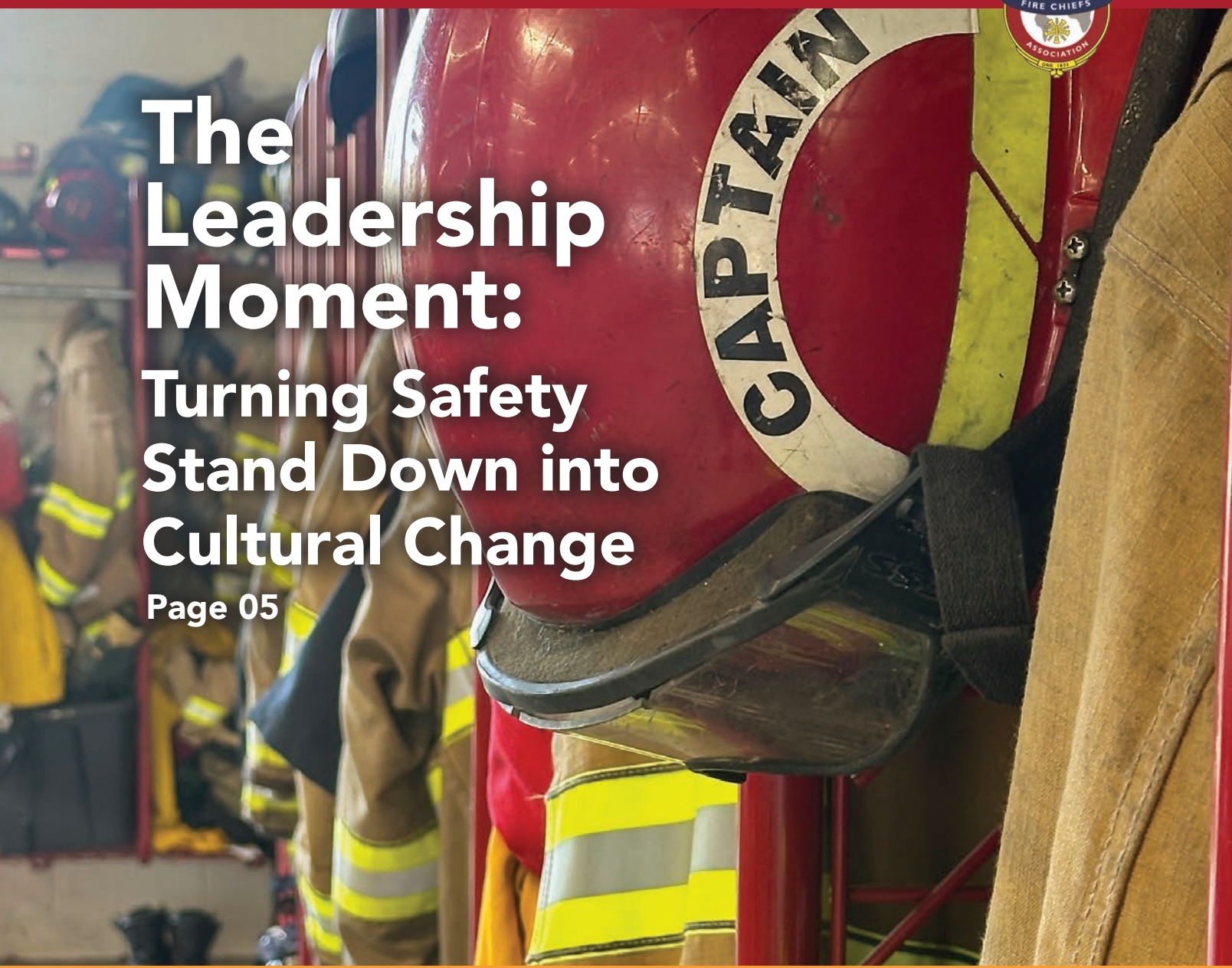
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CHIEFS

The Official Magazine of the International Association of Fire Chiefs



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Turning Safety Stand Down into Cultural Change

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CHIEFS

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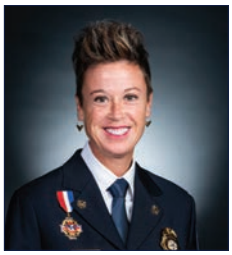
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Leading with Readiness

The fire service has always understood the importance of being ready when the call comes. But operational readiness begins long before the apparatus leaves the station. It starts with the culture we create every day and the leadership we demonstrate for those we serve alongside.

Leadership sets expectations that are often more powerful than any policy. When leaders prioritize annual medical evaluations, encourage fitness during duty hours, support rehabilitation after demanding incidents, and normalize the use of employee assistance and peer support resources, they send a clear message that taking care of ourselves is part of taking care of our communities.

Wellness is not separate from our mission — it is essential to it. Healthy firefighters make better decisions under pressure, perform more effectively on the emergency scene, and are better prepared to meet the demands of an unpredictable profession. Readiness is built through the choices we make every day, not just in the moments that test us.

Physical health extends well beyond strength and cardiovascular fitness. Sleep, nutrition, hydration, recovery between shifts, and preventive medical care all play a critical role in ensuring we can answer every call at our best. This issue explores safety, succession planning, and the critical role of reliable communications, and we recognize that our people are our most important resource. Investing in their health and well-being strengthens every aspect of our service.

Thank you for your continued leadership and your commitment to building organizations where readiness, resilience, and service remain at the center of everything we do. The strongest departments are built by leaders who understand that caring for their people is essential to caring for their communities.

Fire Chief Trisha Wolford
IAFC President & Board Chair



Stronger Together

Henry Ford once said, "Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success."

When we talk about success in the fire and emergency services, we often think about the outcomes — strong departments, effective response, trusted leadership, and safer communities. But those outcomes are the result of something much deeper. Success is built long before anyone sees the results. It begins with a foundation of trust, integrity, discipline, and service. It is strengthened every day in our stations, on training grounds, at emergency scenes, and in the communities we serve.

Successful organizations know who they are and are aligned with what they stand for and where they are going. Their people understand the mission and know their role, and their leaders provide clarity, accountability, and purpose.

Execution matters. Plans must become action, and training must become performance. High-performing organizations succeed because they consistently deliver — especially under pressure. The members and staff of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) embody this commitment every day.

Ultimately, success depends on culture and leadership. It depends on people feeling valued, supported, and empowered to grow. It depends on leaders who listen, communicate, and build trust. When foundation, alignment, execution, culture, and leadership come together, organizations become resilient, innovative, and trusted.

That is where the IAFC comes in. For more than 150 years, the association has supported fire and emergency service leaders, advocated for the profession, developed leaders, and helped agencies navigate an increasingly complex environment.

The IAFC exists to lead — to bring together the best minds in the fire service, provide education and resources, and help ensure our profession is prepared for the future. Whether supporting volunteer, combination, or career departments, strengthening community preparedness, or developing the next generation of leaders, the IAFC is here to serve.

We cannot do this alone.

To our members, thank you for your commitment, your leadership, and the work you do every day. Success is not measured solely by what we accomplish today. It is measured by what we build for tomorrow — the leaders we develop, the communities we protect, and the legacy we leave for those who follow.

It's a new day at the IAFC. We are here to support, lead, and elevate this profession. Together, we will move forward stronger, smarter, and more united than ever.

Thank you for your commitment to the mission.

Donna Black
IAFC Chief Executive Officer & Executive Director

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The Leadership Moment:

Turning Safety Stand Down into Cultural Change



By Deputy Fire Chief Darin Wallentine,
Sarasota County Fire Department

Every year, the fire service sets aside the third week of June for the Firefighter Safety Stand Down. Departments across the country focus on a specific topic, review policies, hold discussions, and remind personnel of the fundamentals that keep firefighters alive. The intent is sound, and the participation is broad. Yet, the question leaders should ask is simple: what happens after the stand down ends?

If Safety Stand Down remains a one-week campaign followed by 51 weeks of operational drift and complacency, then we have reduced a critical leadership opportunity into an annual compliance exercise. The fire service does not have a knowledge problem regarding firefighter injuries and fatalities; we have a consistency problem, a cultural problem, and at times, a leadership problem.

The real value of Safety Stand Down is not the event itself. The value is whether leaders, and in our case, chief officers, can use the week to create permanent behavioral change throughout the organization.

WHAT MATTERS MOST

As a Deputy Chief with the Sarasota County Fire Department and Vice Chair of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) Safety, Health, and Survival Section, I have had the opportunity to work alongside fire service leaders from across the country who are committed to improving firefighter safety outcomes. One common lesson continues to emerge: culture changes only when leadership behaviors change first.

Safety culture is not built through posters, slogans, or annual talking points. It is built through operational decisions made every single day by chief officers, company officers, and firefighters, both volunteer and paid alike.

The annual Safety Stand Down initiative remains one of the most important opportunities the fire service has to reset priorities and refocus on what matters most, that Everyone Goes Home, as summarized by the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation's initiative. The challenge for leaders is transforming temporary attention into permanent expectations.

The modern fire service operates in an increasingly complex environment. Departments are responding to higher call volumes, staffing shortages, escalating EMS demands, lithium-ion battery incidents, behavioral health concerns, and expanding operational expectations. Simultaneously, organizations are expected to maintain recruitment, retention, training, accreditation, community risk reduction, and fiscal accountability. That pressure creates an environment where safety can unintentionally become secondary to all other competing interests.

The danger is rarely intentional recklessness. More often, it is normalization of risk.

We normalize incomplete personal protective equipment (PPE) compliance because "it was only a quick call." We normalize fatigue because overtime becomes operationally necessary. We normalize unsafe driving behaviors because response times dominate the conversation. We normalize training shortcuts because staffing limits create scheduling challenges. Over time, those compromises become organizational habits.

That is where leadership matters most.

LEADERS SET THE TONE

Safety culture is established when leaders consistently communicate that firefighter survival and operational discipline are non-negotiable components of mission success. Departments that successfully improve safety outcomes do not separate safety from operations. They integrate safety into operational excellence and broadly into all aspects of the fire service. This includes emergency scene tactics, post-fire rehabilitation, fireground training, and initiatives designed to reinforce resilience like behavioral health support and firefighter fitness.

High performing organizations understand that aggressive firefighting and disciplined firefighting are not opposing concepts. In reality, disciplined operations are what allow aggressive operations to succeed.

This requires leaders to move beyond symbolic messaging. Firefighters are highly attuned to leadership inconsistency. If a department publicly promotes safety while privately rewarding unnecessary risk-taking, members recognize the contradiction immediately. Culture follows behavior, not speech.

One of the most influential positions in any fire department is the company officer. Battalion chiefs may establish strategic directions, but company officers establish daily cultural expectations and actions. The lieutenant who corrects unsafe seatbelt use every time matters. The captain who pauses a training evolution to address accountability matters. The officer who ensures rehab is completed properly during a working fire matters.

These moments shape organizational norms far more than an annual Safety Stand Down.

FIT TO SERVE, FIT FOR LIFE

The fire service has historically celebrated toughness, endurance, and sacrifice. Those traits remain important, but modern leadership requires reframing what professionalism looks like. Today's professional firefighters must also value physical fitness, behavioral health, cancer prevention, accountability, and risk management. These are not "soft" concepts; they are operational readiness requirements.

A firefighter who is physically unprepared, chronically fatigued, emotionally compromised, or medically neglected becomes a liability during high-risk operations. Safety and readiness are inseparable.

The 2026 Safety Stand Down theme, Firefighter Fitness: Fit to Serve, Fit for Life, directly reflects this reality. Fitness is not limited to gym performance or annual medical evaluations. It encompasses physical capability, emotional resilience, cognitive readiness, and long-term survivability. Firefighters cannot effectively protect communities if the profession fails to recognize areas like functional fitness, nutrition, hydration, and sleep.

Leadership must therefore broaden its understanding of safety. Historically, safety discussions focused heavily on traumatic injury prevention. While critical, the profession now faces equally significant threats from occupational cancer, cardiovascular disease, sleep disruptions, psychological stress, and cumulative fatigue. We are also challenged by determining whether these challenges are work related or have a personal life nexus. Some firefighters can survive the structure fire and still lose the career.

The departments making meaningful progress are the ones embedding wellness and survivability into operational systems. They are investing in annual medical evaluations, peer support teams, rehabilitation programs, sleep management initiatives, cancer prevention measures, behavioral health resources, and physical fitness standards. More importantly, they are removing the stigma associated with firefighters using those resources.

That cultural shift requires visible leadership participation.

If chief officers do not model fitness, firefighters notice. If leaders openly discuss behavioral health only after a tragedy, firefighters notice. If officers refuse rehabilitation during incidents while expecting crews to comply, firefighters notice. Organizational credibility depends on leadership consistency.



ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Another critical component is data-driven accountability. Modern fire departments possess more operational data than ever before. Vehicle telematics, injury tracking, near-miss reporting, turnout time analytics, staffing studies, and training compliance systems that provide leaders with actionable information. The challenge is whether departments use that information proactively or settle for the reactive approach.

A near-miss should never be treated as good luck. It should be treated as a warning sign.

Organizations that embrace learning cultures outperform organizations that embrace blame cultures. Firefighters are far more likely to report safety concerns when they trust leadership will address the issue constructively rather than punitively. Accountability remains essential, but accountability and learning must coexist.

One of the most effective leadership questions during Safety Stand Down is not "What policy do we need?" but rather "What behaviors are we tolerating?"

That question forces an honest organizational reflection.

Are unsafe driving habits routinely overlooked? Are fatigued firefighters continuing to operate without intervention? Are officers avoiding difficult conversations regarding fitness or performance? Are near-misses discussed openly, or quietly buried? The answers to those questions reveal the true culture of an organization.

Safety culture also extends beyond emergency scenes. Administrative decisions influence firefighter survivability every day. Staffing models, apparatus replacement schedules, station design, training investments, procurement standards, and workload expectations all directly impact operational safety.

Leaders cannot demand high reliability performance while simultaneously under resourcing the system or settling for the "doing more with less" philosophy.

Culture changes when firefighters believe safety is truly embedded into organizational identity, not temporarily emphasized during a campaign week.

Safety Stand Down provides the fire service with a leadership opportunity. The question is whether organizations will use that opportunity to reinforce temporary awareness or establish permanent expectations.

The departments that succeed will not be the ones with the best slogans. They will be the ones whose leaders consistently demonstrate that firefighter survival, wellness, and operational discipline are foundational to professional excellence.

In the fire service, culture is ultimately built one decision, one conversation, and one leadership action at a time.

Darin Wallentine serves as Deputy Fire Chief of Logistics, Safety, and Risk for the Sarasota (Florida) County Fire Department. With more than 34 years of fire service experience, Chief Wallentine is active in firefighter safety and health initiatives at the local and national levels and currently serves as the Vice-Chair for the IAFC Safety, Health, and Survival Section.



Why Firefighter Behavioral Health Matters as Much as Physical Health

Presented by

Sourcewell



By Fire Chief Shawn P. Stokes, Dunn Loring Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department



Photo supplied by Sourcewell.

Behavioral health in the fire service is at an inflection point, shifting from a culture of "suck it up" to one that increasingly recognizes psychological injuries as predictable, preventable, and treatable consequences of the job. Departments are beginning to move beyond awareness campaigns toward concrete changes in policy, training, facilities, and peer support.

For decades, the dominant expectation in many firehouses was that personnel would absorb trauma silently and keep performing consistently and without complaint. The informal rule was clear: if a call bothered you, you were supposed to be tough enough to handle it on your own.

Research on firefighter attitudes confirms a persistent culture in which admitting emotional distress is equated with weakness and can lead to stigma or social distancing from peers. Phrases like "suck it up" are commonly cited by firefighters as shorthand for the expectation to bury emotions and move on after difficult incidents.

This stoic identity — rooted in courage, self-reliance, public trust, and service — has saved lives on the fireground, but it has also discouraged many from seeking help until problems like depression, PTSD, substance use, or suicidal thoughts become crises that can result in self-harm, early retirement, divorces and other family impacts, and financial distress.

In the last 10 to 15 years, repeated line-of-duty deaths by suicide, national surveys, and firefighter-driven advocacy have pushed behavioral health from the shadows into the center of safety conversations. National organizations now treat psychological health as a core component of firefighter readiness.

The Wellness-Fitness Initiative by the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) and International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) explicitly frames wellness as physical, mental, and emotional, and has helped normalize integrated behavioral health services across career departments. National efforts such as the Everyone Goes Home initiative's "Psychological Support" component and recent U.S. Fire Administration mental health and wellbeing workgroups promote comprehensive behavioral health models, peer support, and evidence-informed prevention programs for firefighters and families. These shifts signal that behavioral health is no longer a side issue; it is a strategic risk factor tied directly to performance, safety, and recruitment and retention.

CULTURE SHIFT

One of the most visible changes in the fire service is the growth of structured peer support teams and behavioral health training woven into recruit academies, in-service classes, and officer development. These programs meet firefighters where they are — inside their own culture. Peer support models leverage firefighters with lived experience who receive training in active listening, crisis recognition, and referral, helping reduce stigma and bridge personnel to professional care when needed. National curricula now include topics such as recognizing signs of PTSD, substance misuse, and suicide, as well as skills like safety planning, resilience practices, and mental health first aid tailored to the fire service.

Alongside formal teaching, many departments encourage practical coping strategies firefighters can integrate into daily life: guided breathing exercises and meditation after tough calls, journaling, regular check-ins with trusted peers, and

scheduled one-on-one time with chaplains or mental health clinicians embedded in the organization.

Coping strategies are not limited to classroom content; they increasingly show up in how fire stations are designed, scheduled, and equipped. Departments and architects are rethinking the physical environment as a tool for mental health.

New and renovated stations often include multipurpose rooms that can flex between training, yoga, and meditation, as well as quiet spaces or outdoor patios deliberately set aside for decompression after challenging incidents. Department-run yoga sessions highlight that structured movement and mindfulness can reduce stress, improve sleep, support injury prevention, and help firefighters process cumulative trauma more effectively.

Some agencies now schedule regular yoga or mindfulness blocks on duty and encourage crews to use designated calm rooms or low-stimulus lounges to reset following pediatric fatalities, traumatic medical calls, or multi-alarm incidents, treating psychological recovery as part of post-incident operations rather than an optional extra.

IN IT TOGETHER

The most important transformation underway is cultural: moving from "you're on your own" to "we own this together." That cultural reset requires visible leadership, consistent policy, and everyday micro-behaviors that normalize care.

Surveys show that a strong majority of firefighters still perceive stigma around mental health, yet a growing share report that their departments now offer some form of behavioral health resource, peer support, or wellness program — evidence that the culture is evolving, if unevenly. Organizational leaders who openly discuss their own struggles and challenges, include behavioral health in firefighter Safety Stand Downs, and hold officers accountable for supporting mental wellness send a clear message that asking for help aligns with the fire service's core values of courage and strong bonds.

Ultimately, behavioral health in the fire service is shifting from a reactive, stigma-laden posture to a proactive, systems-level approach that recognizes trauma exposure as an occupational hazard to be mitigated — not a private failing to be hidden. As departments expand peer support, embed mental health professionals, design stations for recovery, and protect time for practices like yoga and meditation, they move closer to a future where firefighters are not just physically prepared to answer the call, but psychologically supported to live well after the sirens stop.

Shawn P. Stokes is a Program Manager with Cooperative Services, LLC. He currently works with Sourcewell on their public safety cooperative procurement initiatives. He is also the Fire Chief of the Dunn Loring Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department, Chairman of the Fairfax County, Virginia, Volunteer Fire Commission, and Secretary/ Treasurer of the IAFC's Volunteer and Combination Officers Section.





Holistic Succession in the Fire Service:

Preparing Before Vacancies Occur



By Battalion Chief Jesse Schilling,
Sarasota County Fire Department

As the fire service looks toward the future and with many unknowns ahead, one reality remains unchanged: none of us are permanent. Eventually, our time in this profession ends, whether through retirement, other career opportunities, or just life itself. But the mission of the fire service will continue. The fires will still happen. The EMS calls will still come in. Crews will still respond. The fire service is a machine that keeps moving forward with or without us. That's why our responsibility is greater than ourselves: to leave the profession better prepared for the people who come after us.

Recognizing this challenge, the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) Company Officers Section developed the Succession Management for the Fire-Rescue Service guide (available at www.iafc.org). The resource emphasizes that succession planning is no longer simply a chief officer issue but an organizational responsibility that must be addressed at every level of the department.

One of the greatest risks to any organization is allowing critical knowledge and responsibilities to reside with a single individual. Every department has people who become the subject matter experts for a specific program, process, or initiative. They know how the system works because they built it, maintained it, or carried it for years. While their expertise is valuable, it can also create vulnerability.

When those individuals retire, promote, or leave the organization, departments often discover how much knowledge was never transferred. Programs stall, processes become inefficient, and momentum is lost. In some cases, organizations spend months or years rebuilding what was already known simply because nobody else was prepared to continue the work.

Effective succession planning mitigates that risk. It creates organizational resilience by ensuring knowledge, skills, and leadership capacity are distributed throughout the department rather than concentrated in a single individual. The goal is not simply to replace people; the goal is to ensure the mission continues uninterrupted regardless of who occupies a position.

At its core, holistic succession planning is the intentional development of a broad bench of talented, ambitious, motivated, and capable leaders prepared to move the department and profession forward.

But it requires leaders who are willing to share knowledge, mentor others, and intentionally develop people around them. When organizations teach their internal processes, expose personnel to broader responsibilities, and create opportunities for learning, they build depth within the organization rather than dependence on one person.

EXPLORING BEYOND YOUR DEPARTMENT

The fire service is far larger than any single department. Across the country, individuals and organizations are developing innovative ideas, improving operations, advancing safety initiatives, and solving problems that many departments are facing right now. Yet too often, personnel

are not being encouraged to explore those opportunities to bring those ideas back to their own organizations.

If we truly want to prepare the next generation of leaders, we cannot confine development to the four walls of a fire station or an administration building. We must intentionally encourage curiosity, professional involvement, education, and engagement with the outside world. That exposure not only develops stronger individuals but ultimately creates stronger organizations and a stronger fire service overall.

The reality is that for many line firefighters, the national fire service landscape is largely unknown. Many firefighters are unaware of the larger conversations taking place throughout the profession. Some have never been exposed to concepts like community risk reduction, cancer prevention initiatives, data-driven actions, or national leadership development efforts.

That lack of exposure is not a criticism of firefighters themselves. In many cases, it is simply because nobody has ever opened that door for them. If departments are not intentionally exposing personnel to the broader industry, conferences, professional organizations, and emerging challenges, then we cannot expect future leaders to fully understand where the profession is going or how to help move it forward.

Exposure creates perspective, perspective creates growth, and growth is a foundational component of effective succession planning.

So how do we move forward? How do we better prepare our people internally for the next steps in their careers and for the future of the profession?

It starts with intentional development, from administrative opportunities to mentorship, professional involvement, and broader fire service engagement.

THE NEED TO BE PROACTIVE

Succession planning is often misunderstood as identifying who will fill the next vacancy. In reality, it is a continuous process of developing people long before positions become available. Effective succession planning requires departments to identify critical positions, recognize emerging talent, create developmental opportunities, provide mentorship, and intentionally expose personnel to broader organizational and professional experiences.

Organizations that wait until a retirement announcement to begin discussing succession planning have already started too late. Leadership development should occur continuously at every rank. When succession planning becomes part of an organization's culture rather than a response to a vacancy, leadership transitions become expected events rather than organizational disruptions.

Creating intentional opportunities for members to see how the organization truly operates helps demystify administration and builds depth in institutional knowledge. Temporary administrative assignments or time in staff roles as part of the promotional process are a couple of suggestions that allow personnel to step away from the line and experience the planning, budgeting, and decision-making that keep the organization running. In my experience, this exposure also fosters openness to change and a greater appreciation for administrative assignments, which are often misunderstood by line personnel.

Personnel need opportunities to see what exists outside of their own organization. Whether through conferences, professional associations, leadership development programs, committee involvement, or networking opportunities, firefighters and officers benefit from engaging with the broader profession and bringing those lessons back to their departments.

External perspectives change how people view the profession. It helps firefighters understand that the fire service is much larger than their own station, shift, or department. More importantly, it fosters conversations and relationships that help develop future leaders and strengthen internal succession planning.

Developing personnel internally while simultaneously exposing them to external perspectives creates the best of both worlds. Those individuals already understand the organization's culture, expectations, and operational systems, but they also return with broader perspectives, innovative ideas, professional connections, and a deeper understanding of where the fire service is headed.

When organizations invest in their people to explore the broader profession, they are not just developing individuals; they are building stronger teams, stronger cultures, and a more sustainable future for the organization itself.

PREPARING FOR SUCCESS

From firefighter to fire chief, the IAFC offers tools, resources, educational opportunities, and conferences that support professional growth for every step of the journey. The IAFC Company Officers Section (COS) supports aspiring officers, current company officers, and future chief officers through mentorship, education, and published succession-planning resources that can help departments launch or enhance their own efforts.

The Executive Fire Officers Section is leading the way in continued education through its Managing Fire Officers Program, which develops company officers, and its Executive Fire Officers Program, which builds the foundation for chief officers and supports long-term leadership sustainability within departments. The Safety, Health, and Survival Section provides current guidance and best practices on physical fitness, mental health, and cancer prevention to support a long, healthy career in the fire service.

While these are only a few of the sections helping lead the fire service forward, many other IAFC sections offer additional opportunities for members to gain exposure to the broader fire service. Long-term organizational success does not happen by accident; it requires intentional investment in people and a commitment to preparing the next generation of leaders before they are urgently needed. That is how we strengthen not only individual departments but also the fire service as a whole.

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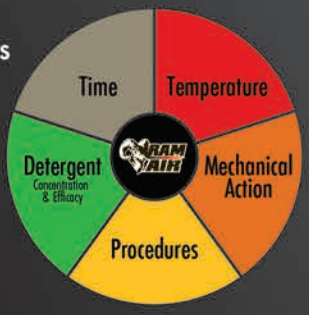
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Continued from page 11

Perhaps the most important component of succession planning is leadership mindset. Effective leaders understand that their responsibility extends beyond managing today's challenges; they are also responsible for preparing the people who will lead tomorrow.

The strongest departments are not defined by the leaders they have today. They are defined by the leaders they are developing for tomorrow. Succession planning is not about preserving individual legacies; it is about ensuring the organization's mission, culture, and values continue long after any one person has moved on.

This requires leaders who are willing to share information, delegate meaningful responsibility, and create opportunities for others to grow. It requires a willingness to make themselves replaceable. While some leaders may view knowledge as a source of job security, the strongest leaders understand that their legacy is measured not by how indispensable they became, but by how well they prepared others to succeed after they are gone.

One day, each of us will leave this profession. The question is not whether someone will replace us; the question is whether we have prepared those who follow to lead even better than we did.

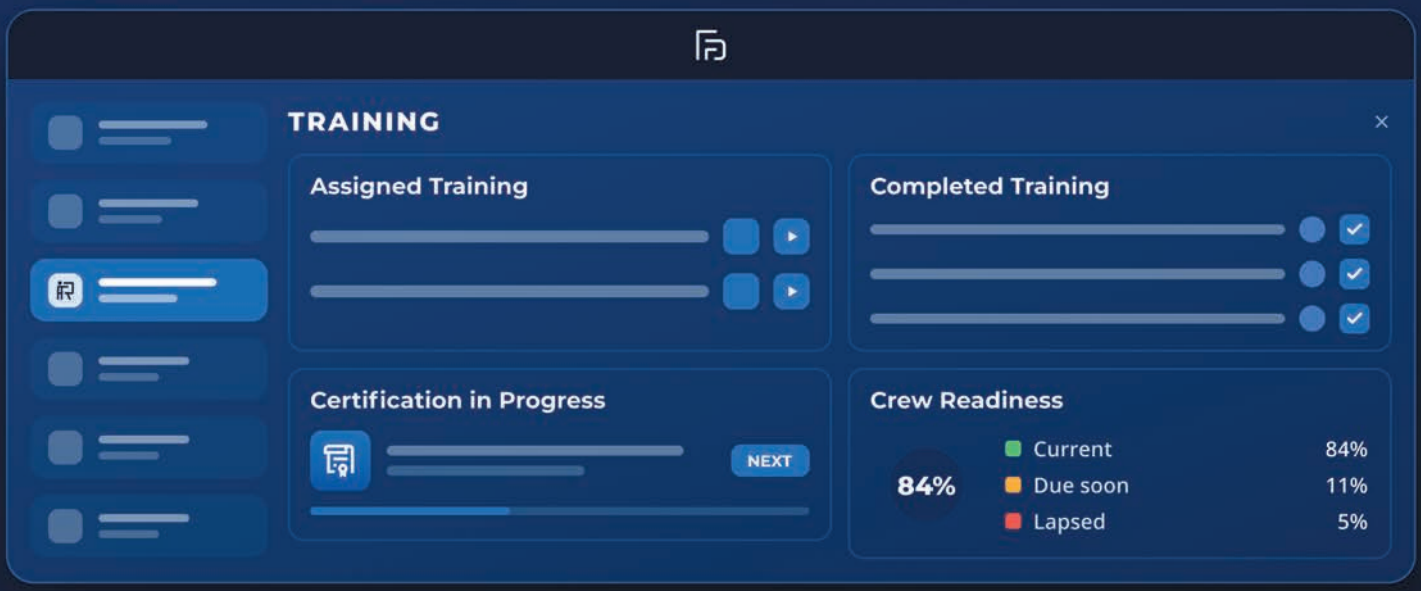
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Leaving It Better Than You Found It:
The Role of Higher Education in Succession Planning



By Keith Padgett,
Columbia Southern University

In his final message to the Boy Scouts Association he founded, Lord Robert Baden-Powell wrote, "Try and leave this world a little better than you found it" (Baden-Powell, 1941). He wrote those words not as a nostalgic farewell, but as a standard of stewardship he expected every scout to carry forward long after he was gone.

Fire chiefs would do well to take this same approach and embrace that expectation as the standard for their own organizations. Every fire chief officer that has wrapped up their time in a department and handed over the keys to the next fire chief, their successor, has faced the same defining question: Is the department better because I was here?

Succession planning is not a human resources function or an administrative checkbox. It is the most enduring answer a fire chief can give to that question.

For generations, the fire service has built its identity on training, and rightfully so. The drill ground is sacred. Repetition, muscle memory, and scenario-based competencies have saved lives in ways that no policy document ever could. However, training, by its very nature, is designed to prepare people for what is already known and how to apply those known skills effectively. Leadership succession demands something more. It requires developing people for challenges they have not yet seen, for communities that may look totally different in a decade, and for a fire department that will be asked to do more with less.

This is where higher education enters the conversation, not as a replacement for the training but as the complement to it. While training builds the firefighter, education develops the leaders who one day may lead the entire department. The most forward-thinking fire service organizations today are no longer asking if their people should pursue higher education; they are building cultures where academic and professional development are woven into the fabric of career progression. They are developing action plans and career paths, not just filling vacancies.

These departments know that succession planning without an intentional investment in higher education is little more than a game of chance, hoping the right person emerges at the right moment, rather than deliberately cultivating the leadership the organization will need in the future.

WHAT THE PRIVATE SECTOR TEACHES US

The fire service does not need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to succession planning. Some of the most lasting lessons come from organizations outside the public safety sector. These organizations discovered, often through painful experience, that leadership does not automatically reproduce itself, with General Electric (GE) as among the most studied examples in organizational history. Under

the leadership of Jack Welch, GE established what would become a model for intentional employee development. At the heart of that model was Crotonville, GE's corporate university, which offered leadership development courses and mentoring programs designed to grow leaders from within rather than import them from outside (FasterCapital, 2024). Welch did not simply identify talented individuals; he established systems to develop them, connecting academic instruction with rotational assignments and performance feedback in a continuous cycle. That philosophy produced a leadership channel that sustained the organization well beyond any single tenure.

Southwest Airlines offers another example from a very different industry. The airline's legendary founder, Herb Kelleher, understood that culture and leadership are inseparable. When planning for his own succession, Kelleher sought someone who would honor the organization's values as much as its operational metrics. A person, in his words, who would be "respectful of Southwest's culture and would be the sort of person who was altruistic in nature" (Mindtools, 2025).

Southwest invested heavily in frontline supervisors, maintaining the highest supervisor-to-employee ratio in the airline industry, precisely because it understood that succession begins at the ground level, not in the executive suite (Mindtools, 2025).

More recently, Southwest has formalized this philosophy by opening leadership development curricula, once only reserved for select individuals, to all employees through an accessible learning portal, ensuring that the opportunity to grow is not a privilege reserved for a chosen few (Southwest Airlines, 2021). That makeup of broad access is one the fire service would do well to adopt.

THE MILITARY MODEL

Perhaps no one has focused more education to leadership succession than the United States military. The Army's Officer Education System (OES) is a progressive, sequential framework that begins at commissioning and continues without interruption through the most senior levels of command (McKinley, 2005).

At each stage of an officer's career, educational accomplishment is paired with their operational responsibility, ensuring that no one advances into greater authority without the corresponding academic and institutional preparation. The Command and General Staff College (CGSC) Foundation describes this model clearly: the Army discovered that developing leaders from within "requires a continuing program of training and education during an entire career," noting that "disjointed, stand-alone, one-week courses on leadership at unpredictable times in an officer's career barely begin to meet that requirement" (CGSC Foundation, 2025).

The distinction the Army draws between training and education is instructive. Schools at the beginning of a soldier's career, the CGSC Foundation notes, "generally focus on training, to prepare them for certainty," while education at more senior levels prepares leaders for complexity and strategic vision (CGSC Foundation, 2025).

That same distinction applies directly to the fire service. We are extraordinarily good at preparing our people for certainty. We drill for the emergencies and problems we have seen before. What succession planning demands is that we also prepare our people for the challenges we have not yet imagined.

APPLYING LEARNINGS TO THE FIRE SERVICE

A chief officer who invests exclusively in today's operational needs — such as running today's calls, staffing today's shifts, and fixing today's broken apparatus — without developing tomorrow's leaders is leaving the organization no better than they found it, maybe even leaving it worse.

Succession planning is not an act of self-replacement; it is an act of organizational generosity, by giving something of value without expecting a return. It requires identifying potential at every rank, creating opportunities for formal education, and building mentoring structures that connect experienced leaders with emerging ones in a meaningful and sustained way.

Higher education, in this context, is not an elitist credential; it is a force multiplier. An associate degree develops analytical habits. A bachelor's degree builds communication and the capacity to think critically about the organization

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itself; a master's degree cultivates the strategic perspective that complex fire service leadership demands; and a doctoral degree develops the capacity to generate knowledge rather than only apply it, to investigate the profession's hardest problems, question its inherited assumptions, and contribute solutions that advance the field beyond any single department.

Each level contributes to a more capable leader without diminishing the irreplaceable value of field experience and hard training. The goal is not to replace the seasoned company officer with a classroom-trained administrator. The goal is to build leaders who are both operationally credible and intellectually equipped for the challenges that wait at the next level of responsibility.

THE QUESTION EVERY LEADER MUST ANSWER

Baden-Powell's charge was not written for scouts alone. It was written for anyone who occupies a position of leadership long enough to shape what comes after them. Every fire service leader, from the company officer managing a crew to the chief officer leading an entire organization, has the opportunity — and the obligation — to leave something worth inheriting.

That means investing in people before the need becomes urgent; it means creating systems that outlast personalities; and it means treating higher education not as an afterthought or a checkbox, but as a deliberate instrument of organizational strength.

"Leave it better than you found it" is not a slogan. In the fire service, it is a leadership essential.

Chief Keith Padgett is currently the Fire and Emergency Medical Services Academic Program Director with Columbia Southern University (CSU). Prior to that, he served as the Chief-Fire Marshal for the Fulton County Fire-Rescue Department, a metropolitan-sized department in Atlanta.

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Cell Phone Service Can Be a Matter of Life or Death for Firefighters



By Chief Jason L. Catrambone, Klein Fire Department

I've been around the fire service since I was a kid. In fact, my family has served in the North Brookfield Fire Department in Massachusetts going back to the late 1800s. So, for me, it has always been a dream to serve my community. Over 30 years ago, my dream became reality when I became an aircraft rescue firefighter in the Marine Corps. Ever since then, I've been lucky to work around the world as a firefighter and fire chief.

I have seen plenty of improvements in public safety, but one of the most important changes I've seen is in the communication tools firefighters use.

Communications used to be very basic, from sirens and pagers to spotty cell service. But after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the country saw firsthand what happened when first responders couldn't communicate with each other. In response, FirstNet was created. Today, the network is the lifeline firefighters never had before.

When I was with the Williston Fire Department in North Dakota, we used commercial cell service to connect within an ultra-rural area at the center of the Bakken oil field. Oftentimes, thousands of people would come to town for a big drilling push. Keeping the community and visitors safe amid hazardous elements was top priority. The challenge was, we had little to no cell service when a first responder drove outside the city. Navigating through rural areas, challenging terrain, and unpredictable weather conditions without cell service was a lethal situation for a first responder.

A RELIABLE CONNECTION

As we saw more FirstNet towers being built across North Dakota, my agency knew the network could be a gamechanger for our operations. So, we adopted FirstNet. Once dead zones now offered reliable connectivity. And my firefighters were equipped with new resources and data capabilities designed to aid them in daily operations. I was relieved my team had 21st-century technology on hand that kept them connected. In most situations, this connection meant they were safe.

Throughout my career, I've entered a lot of burning buildings and wrestled a lot of wildfires, but the Slater and Devil Fires in 2020 were unforgettable. The fires were part of a deadly statewide conflagration of fires, burning more than 166,000 acres. I led a task force of fire engines from North Dakota to Oregon, as requested under an Emergency Management Assistance Compact. We ended up on the California border in southern Oregon, working the fire line and providing structural protection for the Oregon Caves National Monument.

One of the main reasons we were able to successfully support this mission was because we all had FirstNet. On that drive from North Dakota to Oregon, we never lost cell phone service. Our team was able to communicate with the state emergency operations center and our home departments in North Dakota, receiving critical updates leading up to our arrival, on site, and on the way back home.

I now live in Texas, just north of Houston, where I'm fire chief for Harris County Emergency Services District 16. In our area, we're impacted by natural disasters. We experience ice storms, hurricanes, tornados, and floods on a regular basis.

Everything we do is either computer-based or cloud-based. From payroll to our response software to records management, it's all about maintaining connectivity. FirstNet has given us the connectivity we need even during disasters. Our firefighters use it daily, and all our fire stations have FirstNet technologies installed to help improve in-building coverage.

The reality is, as our society continues to experience technological upgrades, it's imperative that firefighters have the resources to match the advancements. As a chief, my goal is to make sure my team is safe and that means a stable cell phone connection — no matter what situation we find ourselves in. A reliable connection is not a nice to have resource; it's a need to have.

Jason L. Catrambone is a veteran fire chief leading Harris County Emergency Services District 16/Klein Fire Department with global experience building fire departments and deep family roots in the fire service.



Photo supplied by Chief Jason L. Catrambone.



Ken LaSala, IAFC Director of Government Relations and Policy

Legislative Update:

No Slowing Down

It has been an extremely busy year. After a winter slog, we are starting to see progress in a couple of areas. Most importantly, the National Fire Academy is back open after being shut down in the spring again. Currently, the federal government is funded, applications for important fire service grants are open, and we are even seeing some progress on important legislation. However, Congress is in session for only about two months before the election, and there is a lot to do.

THE U.S. FIRE ADMINISTRATION AND FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

On February 14, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA); and the National Fire Academy (NFA) were closed, because Congress was unable to reach an agreement on funding the Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). On April 30, Congress finally passed funding for FEMA, the USFA, and the parts of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that were not the Border Patrol or ICE. Subsequently, the NFA re-opened and the application periods for the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 Assistance to Firefighters Grant; Fire Prevention and Safety (FP&S); and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grants ran from May 19 to June 22.

Also, President Trump appointed Paul Matheis to be the U.S. Fire Administrator. He previously served as a Division Chief with the Newport Beach Fire Department. He also received his Executive Fire Officer credential and served as an adjunct instructor for the NFA. Chief Mathies met with the major fire service organizations at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend and the Metro Chiefs Conference. In addition, President Trump nominated Mr. Cameron Hamilton to be the FEMA Administrator. Mr. Hamilton briefly served as the acting FEMA Administrator in the first half of 2025. His confirmation hearing was on June 17.

With the funding for FY 2026 addressed, the House has moved on to work on funding for Department of Homeland Security (DHS), FEMA, and USFA for FY 2027. On June 10, the House Appropriations Committee voted to pass its FY 2027 DHS appropriations bill (H.R. 9310). Figure 1 shows how funding for fire service programs at DHS look.

It is good to see that the House rejected the Trump Administration's proposed cuts to our programs and instead proposed increases. The full House must now consider this legislation. The Senate Appropriations Committee has yet to release its FY 2027 DHS appropriations bill.

WILDLAND FIRES

In addition, there has been a lot of action to address the nation's wildland fire problem. Chief Brian Fennessy was appointed the Director/Fire Chief of the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service (USWFS) in January. The U.S. Wildland Fire Service is composed of the U.S. Department of Interior's (DOI) wildland firefighting services, including the fire

agencies from Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Office of Aviation Services, and the Office of Wildland Fire.

On April 3, President Trump released his FY 2027 budget with ambitious plans for the U.S. Wildland Fire Service. The budget request proposed consolidating wildland firefighting operations at the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) within the new USWFS. It also proposed $3.962 billion for Wildland Fire Service Operations at the USWFS and an additional $2.95 billion for the Wildfire Suppression Operations Reserve Fund at the DOI. Unfortunately, the budget request effectively would eliminate the State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance programs.

On June 3, the House Appropriations Committee voted to pass its FY 2027 Interior/Environment appropriations bill (H.R. 9171). The bill accepted the consolidation of wildland firefighting programs within the DOI, but did not transfer the USFS' programs over to the USWFS.

Instead, the House Appropriations decided to recognize the consolidation of DOI's wildland firefighting functions in the new U.S. Wildland Fire Service (USWFS). The USWFS would receive $1.164 billion, of which $387.157 million would be for wildland fire suppression operations. The USWFS also would receive $380 million for the wildland fire operations reserve fund. The U.S. Forest Service's State, Private, Tribal Forestry account would receive $283.5 million, including $80 million for the State Fire Assistance program and $23 million for the Volunteer Fire Assistance (both are proposed increases versus FY 2026 funding levels). The U.S. Forest Service Wildland Fire Management account would receive $2.6 billion, including $192 million for preparedness; $1 billion for suppression operations; and $1.425 billion for salaries and expenses to recruit and retain wildland firefighters.

The next step is for the full House to consider this legislation. The Senate has yet to release its FY 2027 Interior/Environment Appropriations bill.

The IAFC also continues to support efforts to pass the Fix Our Forests Act (H.R. 471/S. 1462). The bill would enact almost 50 recommendations of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission. It also would improve coordination of federal wildland fire preparedness efforts; promote the use of prescribed fires and other measures to prevent WUI fires; and promote the development of new technologies to help local fire departments. After the Los Angeles fires, H.R. 471 was rushed to the House Floor and passed on January 23 by a vote of 279-141. The Senate companion bill (S. 1462) passed the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry on October 21 by a vote of 18-5.

LIFE SAFETY

The IAFC also continues to be involved in efforts to protect the safety of fire and EMS personnel and the general public. We continue to advocate for Congress to pass the reintroduced Setting Consumer Standards for Lithium-Ion Batteries Act (H.R. 973/S. 389). The bill would require the Consumer Product Safety Commission to set fire safety regulations for both lithium-ion batteries and other components in e-bikes, electric scooters, and other micromobility devices. H.R. 973 passed the House on April 28, 2025, and we are asking the Senate to pass it. The good news is that the House included the language from H.R. 973/S. 389 in the large surface transportation bill (the BUILD America 250 Act, H.R. 8870), which is important legislation that Congress hopes to pass this year.

The IAFC also continues to advocate for the inclusion of AM radios in cars. The AM Radio for Every Vehicle Act of 2025 (S. 315) would require auto manufacturers to retain AM radios in cars. S. 315 was passed by the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation on February 5, 2025. The House companion bill (H.R. 879) passed the House Energy and Commerce Committee on September 17, 2025. The House language also was added to the BUILD America 250 Act (H.R. 8870). S. 315 has a 10-year sunset, while H.R. 879 has an eight-year sunset. We will work to pass a bill that permanently requires AM radios in cars, which is the position that President Trump supports.

The IAFC also continues to advocate in support of funding for firefighter health and safety programs at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). On June 9, the House Appropriations Committee voted to pass the appropriations bill (H.R. 9260) to fund the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education for FY 2027. In this legislation, the National Firefighter Registry for Cancer would receive an additional $1 million for FY 2027, bringing the total to $7.5 million. The National Personal Protective Technology Laboratory, which includes labs that test turnout gear and SCBAs, would receive level funding of $23 million. We are still working to retain funding for the federal Fire Fighter Fatality Investigation and Prevention Program. The Senate has yet to release its companion bill yet.

The IAFC did have one setback this summer. The House and Senate agreed to pass the 21st Century ROAD to Housing Act (H.R. 6644), which includes a provision that directs the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development to create national guidelines for single-stair apartment buildings up to six stories. The section does direct the Secretary to consider fire safety considerations and egress impacts when developing these guidelines. The IAFC and other national fire service organizations convinced the Senate to reject an earlier version of the single-stair legislation. Unfortunately, the language was restored in the final version of H.R. 6644.

COMMUNICATIONS ISSUES

On a happier note, the IAFC and a coalition of national organizations representing fire, EMS, law enforcement, emergency management, and state and local

Figure 1: Funding Levels for Fire Service Programs at DHS (in Millions ($))							
Program	**FY 2023**	**FY 2024**	**FY 2025**	**FY 2026 (President's Request)**	**FY 2026 (Enacted)**	**FY 2027 (President's Request)**	**FY 2027 (House)**
AFG	360	324	324	324	342	324	351
SAFER	360	324	324	324	342	324	351
USFA	60	71.2	71.2	64.166	72.140	69.602	83.27
UASI	615	553.5	553.5	415.5	584.25	415.5	599
SHSGP	520	468	468	351	494	351	506.5
US&R	37.83	40.83	40.83	37.83	56	37.832	60

governments made progress on legislation to preserve the federal FirstNet Authority. The FirstNet Authority is scheduled to be sunset in February 2027.

On April 20, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the First Responder Network Authority Reauthorization Act (H.R. 7386) by voice vote. H.R. 7386 would extend the life of FirstNet to September 30, 2037, and increase the representation of active public safety officers on the FirstNet Board. The bill also would reinforce the FirstNet Authority's ability to deploy emergency response capabilities and resources to emergencies and disasters; set strategic priorities for the network; develop an annual budget and outline reinvestment decisions; and manage the device and application ecosystem within the FirstNet network in a timely manner without bureaucratic interference. The Senate must now act on this legislation.

STAY INVOLVED

So far, it has been a busy year. The IAFC continues to advocate for multiple pieces of legislation to provide local fire and EMS departments with the resources that they need. Besides the issues listed above, we also are reviewing the hazardous materials response provisions in the BUILD America 250 Act (H.R. 8870), and we are working on some EMS-related legislation that we hope to see progress over the summer.

The IAFC has a weekly Washington Update discussing the major developments of the week. We also update our Hot Sheet monthly, so that our members have up-to-date information when meeting with members of Congress. Plus, we have a Legislative Action Center that our members can use to contact their Senators, Representatives, and even federal agencies about timely legislative and regulatory matters. Finally, please feel free to stop by the federal legislative update class at Fire-Rescue International. There is a lot going on, and IAFC members need to stay engaged.

Ken LaSala is the IAFC's Director of Government Relations and Policy.

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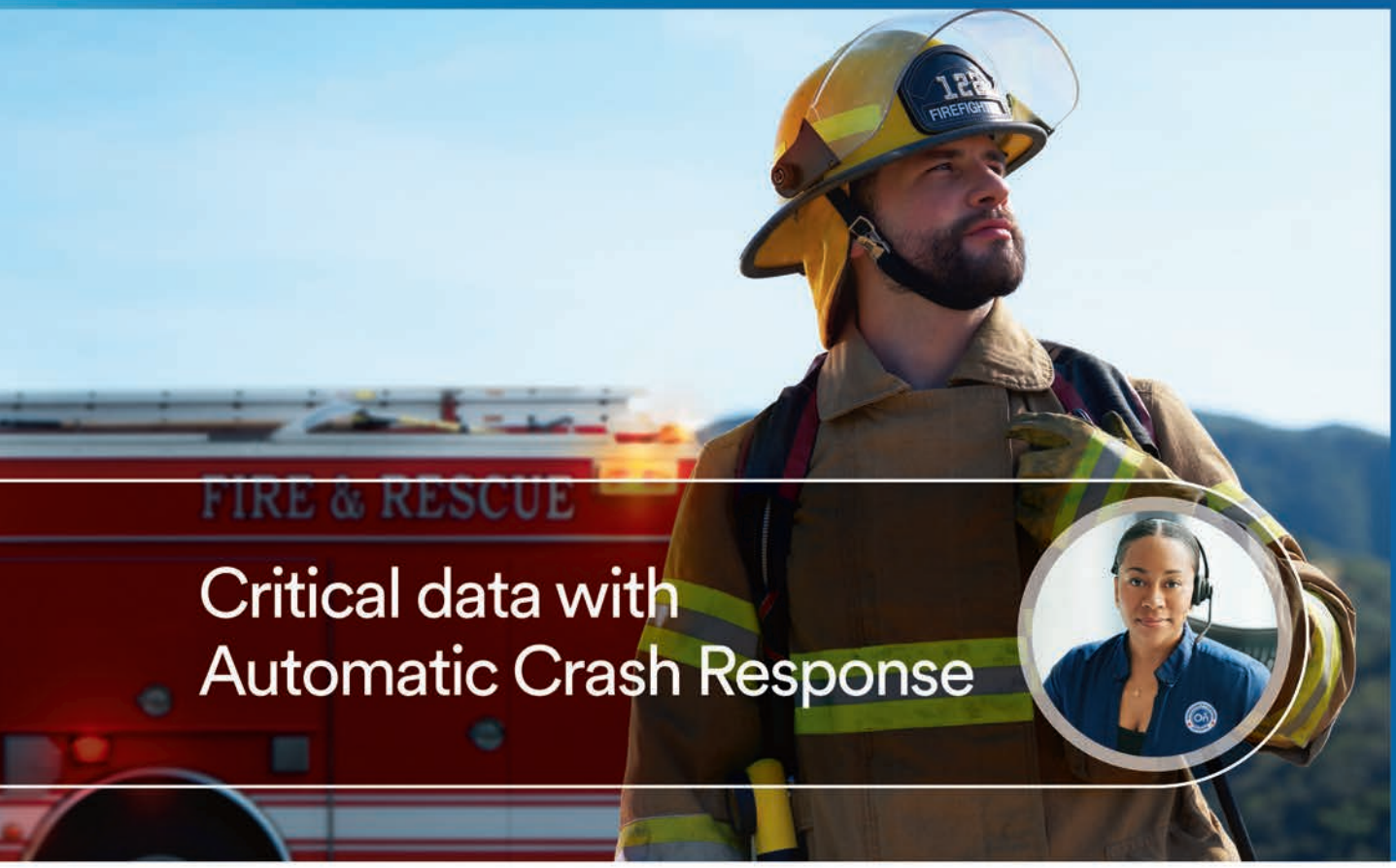
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