



BACK STEP TALKS

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The Fire Chief's Responsibility for Health and Safety

Congratulations! You have just been appointed as the Fire Chief for your department. Now is the time to put all the training and experience you've gathered into practice. Being the Fire Chief is more than just running the calls and operating the Incident Command System (ICS). As the Fire Chief, you are responsible for ensuring the safety and well-being of your community and the members of your department. You are also responsible for budgeting, staffing, training, maintenance, public education, governmental interaction, and a

slew of other tasks. Juggling all of these tasks requires either a magician or a dedicated staff to support you as the Fire Chief.

NFPA 1550, Standard for Emergency Responder Health and Safety, will help guide the Fire Chief in developing and implementing health and safety programs for their department. NFPA 1550 was revised in 2024 to incorporate the standards previously stated in NFPA 1500 (Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety, Health, and Wellness Program), NFPA 1521 (Standard for Fire Department

Safety Officer Professional Qualifications), and NFPA 1561 (Standard on Emergency Services Incident Management System and Command Safety). This revision consolidates the requirements for emergency responder health and safety into a single standard. Key to implementing the NFPA 1550 standard is the development of a Risk Management Plan (RMP) that identifies the risks within the local area and control techniques to reduce or eliminate the risks.

Fire Chiefs should also be aware of the proposed changes to OSHA Regulation 1910.156, renamed as the Emergency Response Standard. This standard, if approved in its current form, will drastically change health and safety requirements for fire departments across the nation by incorporating strict requirements that many departments are not capable of implementing. The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), and the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) have collaborated and been working with the Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to refine



The Fire Chief's Responsibility for Health and Safety *cont.*

the proposed regulation and transfer responsibility for health and safety requirements to the Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ). The Fire Chief within the AHJ will be responsible for developing and implementing a local Emergency Response Plan (ERP) that identifies hazards unique to that jurisdiction and addresses solutions to keep responders safe.

Note the parallelism between the NFPA 1550 Standard and OSHA 1910.156 for the development and implementation of a local Risk Management Plan (RMP or Emergency Response Plan (ERP). As Fire Chief, that should be one of your highest priorities in assuring the health and safety of your community and your department members.

responsibilities of the Fire Chief with regard to health and safety. These are intended to help the new Fire Chief understand his/her duties and to refresh current Fire Chiefs on these duties. Please take the time to review these articles and share them with your members so that they, too, understand the need for a strong health and safety program.

This issue of Back Step Talks highlights some of the

Dave Lewis



Key Safety Responsibilities of a Fire Chief

- **Developing Fire Safety Policies**
 - They create and enforce protocols for fire prevention, emergency response, and disaster preparedness to protect lives and property.
- **Overseeing Emergency Operations**
 - Fire Chiefs coordinate firefighting, rescue, and hazardous materials response efforts, making critical decisions during emergencies.
- **Training and Professional Development**
 - They ensure firefighters receive ongoing training in safety procedures, equipment use, and emergency tactics.
- **Equipment and Facility Maintenance**
 - Responsible for inspecting and maintaining firefighting gear, vehicles, and stations to ensure readiness and safety compliance.
- **Community Engagement and Education**
 - Fire Chiefs often lead public outreach programs to educate citizens on fire prevention, evacuation plans, and safety practices.
- **Compliance and Risk Management**
 - They ensure the department adheres to local, state, and federal safety regulations and conduct risk assessments to improve safety measures.
- **Leadership and Strategic Planning**
 - By fostering a safety-first culture and planning for future risks, Fire Chiefs guide their teams with vision and accountability.



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State Fire Marshal Announces Fire Prevention Week 2025

Fire Prevention Week, October 5–11: "Charge Into Safety – Lithium-Ion Batteries in Your Home"

STATEWIDE (September 29, 2025) - The Office of the State Fire Marshal is joining the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) in celebrating **Fire Prevention Week, October 5–11, 2025**. This year's theme, **"Charge Into Safety: Lithium Batteries in Your Home,"** highlights the importance of recognizing everyday fire risks posed by lithium-ion batteries and taking simple steps to prevent tragedy.

Lithium-ion batteries power many devices we rely on daily – from cell phones and laptops to e-bikes, power tools, and even children's toys. While efficient, these batteries can also be hazardous if damaged, overcharged, or improperly disposed of.

Since early 2023, the Office of the State Fire Marshal has tracked lithium-ion battery-related fires. Fire investigators across Maryland have reported 102 incidents directly linked to these batteries. However, based on national research and trends, the OSFM believes the number of incidents in Maryland is much higher, as many smaller fires are never reported to fire departments or investigators. These cases underscore the importance of this year's Fire Prevention Week theme and serve as a reminder that simple safety steps—buying certified products, charging responsibly, and recycling properly—can prevent devastating outcomes.

The campaign emphasizes three key safety actions:

- **BUY safely:** Only purchase devices and batteries with a safety certification mark such as UL, ETL, or CSA.
- **CHARGE safely:** Always use manufacturer-approved charging equipment, avoid overcharging, and never charge on soft surfaces like couches or beds.
- **RECYCLE safely:** Lithium-ion batteries should never be thrown in household trash or regular recycling bins. Instead, they should be taken to designated recycling centers like those listed at call2recycle.org.

"Lithium-ion batteries store a lot of energy in a small space. By learning to buy, charge, and recycle safely, Marylanders can reduce the risk of fires in their homes," said Acting State Fire Marshal Jason M. Mowbray. ***"Fire Prevention Week is the perfect reminder to make safety a daily habit."***

Throughout the week, our Fire Safety Inspectors, Deputy State Fire Marshals, professional staff, and K9 teams will share this important message across Maryland. They will distribute educational materials at school visits, firehouse open houses, and community safety events, and share safe charging and recycling practices.

Fire Prevention Week has been a cornerstone of public safety since 1922, and the Office of the State Fire Marshal is committed to continuing this tradition by promoting fire safety awareness in every corner of Maryland.

Selecting Key Personnel to Ensure Department Safety

Safety is not just applicable to incident operations, but includes day-to-day operations at the station, community events, training exercises, fundraising, and other administrative areas such as risk management. The Department's Fire Chief, and President, have the responsibility of ensuring the health and safety of their members (operational, administrative, and auxiliary) and as such they need to ensure their management team has the attributes and training necessary to create and support a safe culture.

The majority of the key personnel (operational and administrative officers & senior fire/EMS members) attributes are also those that make good leaders. The attributes the Chief and President should be looking for, encouraging and cultivating should include; being a good communicator which includes being a good listener, able to see the big picture, take responsibility for their actions, lead by example, be a good mentor, have respect for one self and others, have interest in improving the organization, be a team player, never stop learning, and embrace the safety, health, and wellness of all members.

Along with personal attributes, the Chief and President need to look for training specific to safety and health/wellness. The small

amount of safety training presented in fire school is not enough to meet the objectives and demands of the safety/wellness programs being required by local standard operating guidelines/procedures (SOG/SOP) and national standards such as National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 1550: Standard for Emergency Responder Health and Safety. The proposed Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) comprehensive Emergency Response Rule will place additional requirements on the Department's operational and administrative staff that will necessitate specific training be obtained. The Chief and President should be proactive in encouraging their officers and those wanting to become officers, take advantage of the many safety/health and wellness classes offered by the Maryland Fire Rescue Institute (MFRI), the National Fire Academy (NFA), the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), and the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation's (NFFF) Fire Hero Learning Network. As a minimum, it is recommended that all operational officers, fire & EMS, have the Incident Safety Officer (ISO) class, as they may be asked to act as the Safety Officer at incident scenes. Officers should also be aware of how to conduct an After-Action Review (AAR) to help evaluate

every incident and develop lessons learned to improve safe operations.

Some departments may establish positions specific to implementing portions of the department's health and safety program. These include the Department Safety Officer (HSO and ISO), the Training Officer, and the Department Chaplain. Each of these positions requires additional health and safety training.

Since the Safety Officer's duties cover both operational and administrative topics, their qualifications are recommended to include:

- Should be a senior member of the Department with at least 10 years' experience and meet the position requirements established by either the Department or County, or meet the job performance requirements of NFPA 1550, Chapter 4 (Health and Safety Officer), and Chapter 5 (Incident Safety Officer).
- Specific training requirements may include:
 - o Fire Department Health & Safety Officer MFRI MGMT 216
 - o Incident Safety Officer MFRI NFA 215 or MGMT 217
 - o Health & Safety Program Manager MFRI NFA 211

Selecting Key Personnel to Ensure Department Safety cont.

- o After Action Review (Online) MFRI MGMT 209
- o Conducting Safe Live Fire Training Evolutions MFRI MGMT 226 (was 271)

The department's Training Officer is responsible for defining training requirements for the members and establishing training programs to help the members meet these requirements. To ensure training is conducted with safety in mind, members must be trained to perform their tasks safely, and to assist with the promotion of the safety culture. It is recommended that the Training Officer have the following qualifications:

- Should have a minimum of 5 years of fire/rescue experience and share the same personal attributes as the operational officers.

- Specific training requirements may include:

- o Courage to be Safe (Online) MFRI FIRE 149
- o Company Officer's Health & Safety Responsibilities (Online) MFRI MGMT 231
- o Conducting Safe Live Fire Training Evolutions MFRI MGMT 226 (was 271)

Less obvious is the department's Chaplain and how they can impact the members' health and safety. Counseling and providing spiritual guidance to fire and EMS personnel can be challenging for someone who has not come up through the fire service. To help with this challenge, it is recommended that the Chaplain have the following qualifications:

- Peer Support Training

- Essentials of Fire Chaplaincy that includes topics such as Ministry to Firefighters, Ministry to Those in Crisis, Chaplain Conduct, Chaplain Response, Stress Management, On-Scene Operations, and Firefighter Injury and Death. (Offered by the Federation of Fire Chaplains)

In the end, safety is everyone's responsibility, but it is the Department's leadership's responsibility to create and support a safe and healthy culture.

I would like to thank Chief Mike Wisko, Texas Commission on Fire Protection, and Deputy Chief Robbie Blackiston, Sudlersville Volunteer Fire Department, for their input to this article.

Dave Reid

Safety-What Does It Mean To You?

SAFETY – what does that mean to you? For years “Safety” has been the elephant in the room that many were aware of, but complacency reined and being assigned “Safety” on an incident was considered to be “bottom shelf” duties. Today, that thought process has changed. A safe working environment through risk reduction has become more

prevalent in the three following primary areas:

- Station – interior and exterior
- Training – location and evolution
- Operations – location, situation and conditions

Station – interior and exterior

Interior: Step back and walk through your station, every

hallway and every room. Look for the door that does not open and close correctly. Look for the loose tile, rolled carpet, misplaced gear/equipment or the loose/missing doorway threshold. Slips and trips are the most common cause of injury. View your furniture. Older, unstable chairs ... replace them. Desks and other workspaces, ensure these spaces are

Safety-What Does It Mean To You?

adequately sized and are of the correct height. Consider elevated/standing workspaces for “on the go” tasks. Consider what we cite others for, overload outlets and nests of wires, fire stations do catch fire. Don’t forget the workshop, exercise area and storage rooms. Take the time to walk these spaces, considering all of the same items above.

Exterior: Step back, walk across the street and view your station. Go to the other side of the parking lot and view your station. You will be amazed with what others are seeing that you are not seeing. Walk the lot, walk the curb line, walk the open grassed areas. Slips and trips are the most common cause of injury. At grade depressions are the most common conditions to address.

Training – location and evolution

Location: Just as you “size-up” the emergency scene, take the time to size-up the training location. Remember, this is a training exercise. The goal is to learn and not get injured in the process due to unstable ground, unstable structures or overhead obstructions.

Evolution: “Size-up” the evolution, this includes situational awareness. Again

remember, this is a training exercise. A safe execution of



the evolution includes physical and mental success, strengthening confidence and self-control.

Ensuring the training simulation presents an as real as possible setting, in a controlled location; will yield an evolution that will strengthen one’s abilities to be successful, when tested with the unknowns of the “emergency scene”... so everyone goes home after the bell tolls.

Operations – location, situation and conditions

A safe station, from where the call for help begins and safe training, help to prepare your members to be successful. As fire chiefs, it is your responsibility to provide your members with the tools and equipment to get the job done safely. This applies to the EMS call and/or the fire

call. This includes discussion and communication in both directions. One should ask questions, and one should get the answers to encourage safe operations. Size ups, 360 perimeter assessments before entry have come about to be aware of your surroundings ... situational awareness. Again, this applies to the EMS call and/or the fire call. Look, listen, ask questions and trust your gut. If something does not look or feel right, it probably is not right ... not safe. Better to pause and regroup, ensuring everyone goes home!

I leave you with the four components of the fire service, which enhance safe travels:

1. Apparatus – you have to get there and back safely
2. Buildings – you have to start from and return to your safe base
3. People – you have to leave with and come back with the same number of teammates
4. Time – you have to consider when to move safely and when to pause for safety

Think about it, **safety** is no longer the unspoken elephant, but **the life enhancing guide** for protecting lives and property on that EMS call and/or that fire call.

Pete Mellits

Recognizing Champions of Firefighter Health & Safety

When I first entered the fire service, health and safety were not always at the top of my priorities. Like many of my peers, I began my career during a period of transition—riding tailboards before enclosed cabs became the norm, wearing gear before Nomex hoods were mandatory, and using heavy steel SCBA cylinders before today's lighter, pressure-demand systems. At the time, these changes felt like inconveniences, not necessities.

As I advanced through the ranks and ultimately became a Chief Officer, my perspective changed. I came to realize that health and safety are not simply important aspects of our profession—they are our most important responsibility. Protecting our people is the foundation of everything we do.

In Maryland, we are fortunate to honor that responsibility through three awards named for true champions of firefighter health and safety. These recognitions, supported by respected fire service organizations, celebrate individuals who have made extraordinary contributions to firefighter well-being. I was fortunate enough to know two of these champions personally, and their legacies remind us of the importance of carrying this mission forward.

Honoring the Champions

[John W. Hoglund Leadership Award**](#)

Presented by the Maryland State Fire Chiefs Association, this award recognizes leaders who advance health, safety, and readiness across the Maryland fire, rescue, and emergency services. It honors the legacy of Chief John W. Hoglund, whose career at the Maryland Fire and Rescue Institute shaped training, culture, and relationships at every level of the fire service.

[Smith N. Stathem Jr. Memorial Safety Award**](#)

Sponsored by the Maryland State Firefighters Association, this award recognizes an individual who goes above and beyond to promote firefighter and EMS safety within their own department. Its focus on individual commitment highlights the vital role that one person can play in creating a culture of safety and encouraging the development of safety officer programs.

[Chief James P. Seavey Sr. Health and Wellness Leadership Award**](#)

Presented by the National Volunteer Fire Council, this award honors volunteer firefighters, EMS providers, or rescue workers who lead efforts in cancer prevention, heart health, behavioral health, and overall wellness. Chief Seavey's legacy

continues to inspire leaders nationwide to place health and wellness at the forefront of their departments.

The Quiet Champions Among Us

While these awards highlight remarkable individuals, there are countless Safety Champions who work quietly within our organizations. They are the firefighters, officers, and members who push against tradition and organizational inertia to make meaningful changes. They rarely seek credit, but their efforts save lives and improve the future of our service.

As Chief Officers, it is our duty to recognize these individuals. We must lift up their voices, support their initiatives, and ensure that their contributions are not overlooked. Just as we honor the great champions whose names grace these awards, we must also acknowledge the unsung champions among us—those who make our service safer every single day.

Behind every safety policy, improved piece of equipment, or updated training standard, there is someone who cared enough to challenge the status quo. Let us give them the recognition they deserve and continue to build a culture where health and safety are not afterthoughts but our highest priority.

David Black

Understanding Modern Building Construction and its Impact on Safety, Including the Dangers of Lightweight, Engineered Construction.

All firefighters and officers operating on any fireground should be familiar with the basics of building construction. This is especially true with Chief Officers who should be very familiar with the building construction and construction codes in their jurisdiction. For the purposes of this article, Type III and Type V construction, specifically the hazards of the engineered wood and lightweight building components that may be found in each type will be discussed.

Type III is construction where the exterior walls are made of non-combustible materials like masonry and the interior components are made of wood. Type V is construction made entirely of wood.

Engineered wood and engineered building components are made with less mass than traditional sawn solid wood components. Engineered wood consists of oriented strand board (OSB), particleboard, and plywood, and are fabricated by banding wood particles, strands, or fibers together with glues. Engineered lightweight building components are made with a combination of components that may be either combustible or non-combustible, which may be wood or steel. These lightweight components

include Truss joist I beams and parallel-chord wood trusses. Both of these components can be used to support either flat roofs or floors, and are very strong so they can span long distances. Because of their design, they are also subject to rapid failure under fire conditions.

There are many factors that play into the rapid failure of these components. They are often used to support wood flooring and wood roofs which are made of engineered wood such as plywood or OSB. Also, these components are usually made from engineered wood. The engineered wood alone can fail faster than traditional sawn wood because it is bonded by resins and glues that are often flammable. These assemblies also may span longer distances than conventional wood assemblies and are made of less material. Heavier loads and materials that burn at higher

temperatures also contribute to faster failure times.

During laboratory testing, performed by Underwriters Laboratories, some of these assemblies were proven to fail in as little as 5-10 minutes, with most failing in less than half of the time as traditional legacy assemblies. It must also be noted that these tests are conducted under controlled conditions, with limited spanning distance, and static temperatures. Any variances with these to actual fire conditions will definitely affect the structural integrity of these components.

Chief officers must have knowledge of the types of construction within their jurisdictions. This also flows down to the company level. One of the best ways is to educate the importance of this to all members, especially the company officers. There should be a commercial



Truss Joist I-Beam

Understanding Modern Building Construction and its Impact on Safety, Including the Dangers of Lightweight, Engineered Construction.

building inspection policy implemented within the department to familiarize all members with the building construction and occupancy within their first alarm districts. Also, encourage residential construction familiarization at the company level. Although this is limited after buildings are completed, have companies conduct walkthroughs while the buildings are under construction to see what components are used in these structures.

Chief officers can also be involved in crafting the local fire codes and building codes. Whatever fire and building code a local jurisdiction is utilizing, most likely the International Fire Code and International Building Code, a fire chief may be able to issue local amendments to these codes tailored to the specific needs of the community. One example is a local jurisdiction is currently requesting an amendment to the International Fire Code in several adjoining buildings that are being converted to apartments. These buildings do not have the required means of egress required, so in order to convert these buildings into apartments, fire alarms, sprinkler systems,



Parallel Chord Wood Truss

and additional fire doors must be installed. Depending on the laws of the jurisdiction, these amendments can be initiated by either the fire department or the local elected leaders. If these proposed amendments must pass through legislation, which it most likely will, a fire chief must have the political savvy to navigate through this political procedure. If the department initiates the change, the chief must be able to defend the reasoning for the change, if the change is initiated outside the department and the chief disagrees with the amendment, the chief must have the facts in place to show why this jeopardizes the safety of the community and the department.

It is imperative that fire chiefs

are aware of the types of building construction in their community. This involves assuring all members of the department have the basic knowledge of construction and know what types of construction they may be working in. This awareness can have a direct impact on fireground tactical decision making, and improve fireground safety. Fire Chiefs must also play an active role in the jurisdictional fire and building code process. This involves assuring these codes conform to the unique needs of their community by being involved in the amendment legislative process.

Christopher Caisse

Save the Dates

[USFA Summit on Fire Prevention and Control](#): National Fire Academy, Emmitsburg, MD October 7, 2025

[MFCA General Meeting](#): Frederick County Training Center, Frederick County, MD October 18, 2025

[NFFF Advocate Summit](#), New Orleans, LA October 20-21, 2025

[Leadership for the Fire and Emergency Services \(NVFC\)](#): North East Fire Company, Cecil Co. MD
October 21, 2025

[Mid Atlantic Life Safety Conference](#): Annapolis, MD October 24, 2025

[Cornerstones of Leadership for Real World Success](#):

Arbutus Fire Department, Baltimore County, MD November 1, 2025

East New Market Fire Dept. November 2, 2025

Mechanicsville Vol. Fire Dept. November 22, 2025

Washington County Public Safety Training Center November 23, 2025.

[IAFC/VCOS Symposium in the Sun](#): Clearwater Beach, FL November 13-16, 2025

[Crash Responder Safety Week](#) : November 17-21, 2025

[NVFC course, Building a Healthy and High-Performing Fire Department](#), North East Fire Company:
North East Fire Company, Cecil Co. MD. Dec. 2, 2025

[MSFA Executive Committee Meeting](#): East New Market Fire Co., Dorchester Co. MD, Dec. 6-7, 2025

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74

The number of 1st responder
suicides through
October 1, 2025

***[Firefighter Behavioral
Health Alliance](#)***

63

The number of fallen firefighters
through October 1, 2025

[US Fire Administration](#)