

The AVFD Wellness and Fitness Initiative

The history of the fire service is replete with examples of advances and improvements in the ability to fight fire and protect lives and property. While firefighting has no doubt grown safer, and more scientific in its approach, whether through strategies, tactics, or technology, the rates and causes of death and injury in the line of duty have remained somewhat constant for decades.

The Board of Directors made a bold commitment to the membership in early 2016 by formally resolving to support the Wellness and Fitness Initiative as a departmental priority for the safety and well-being of our members, and improved service to our community.

When one considers that the statistics regarding heart disease and heart attack prevalence in the fire service mirrors that of the general population instead of a healthier, more fit subgroup of the population such as professional athletes, one has to wonder why that remains the case in the twenty-first century. In a profession (volunteer or career, it is nevertheless a profession) that demands discipline as much as it demands bravery, how is it that we as a profession have not universally accepted that force adherence to a heart-healthy lifestyle, and athletic conditioning are as indispensable when it comes to force readiness as a functioning pumper and pressurized water at the tip? If the humans that do the work are "the most valuable resource," why are municipalities, departments, and leadership all too willing to invest funds in equipment and other costs *at the expense* of health and safety programs, physicals, fitness training and monitoring, and real attention to reduction of cancer risks and suicide prevention.

If the subject comes down to personal responsibility, the same that can be said for equipment maintenance can be said for physical readiness. If it's fair that a fire chief can demand that equipment be maintained in specific level of ready condition, it is likewise fair that a chief can demand that his personnel themselves maintain a specific level of ready conditioning. However, just as the fire department provides the means necessary to maintain the equipment and train on its use, a department must likewise provide the means necessary to maintain a ready level of conditioning, and training necessary to be fit for duty.

In-house health and safety programs instituted across the nation have demonstrated positive results in decreasing costs associated with workman's comp and disability claims, lost work days, and line of duty injuries. While AVFD thankfully does not suffer from high injury rates, nor have we suffered the tragedy of a line of duty death, or loss of a member to major depression, we are not immune to the risks that are inherent to the business at hand. It is the very reason we train as we do, and maintain our equipment as we do, for were there not the risks, what would be the point? Our robust training program, and health and safety programs have no doubt played an instrumental role in keeping our members safe, and as our call volume increases, and community risks evolve, so must our membership and our programs likewise evolve.