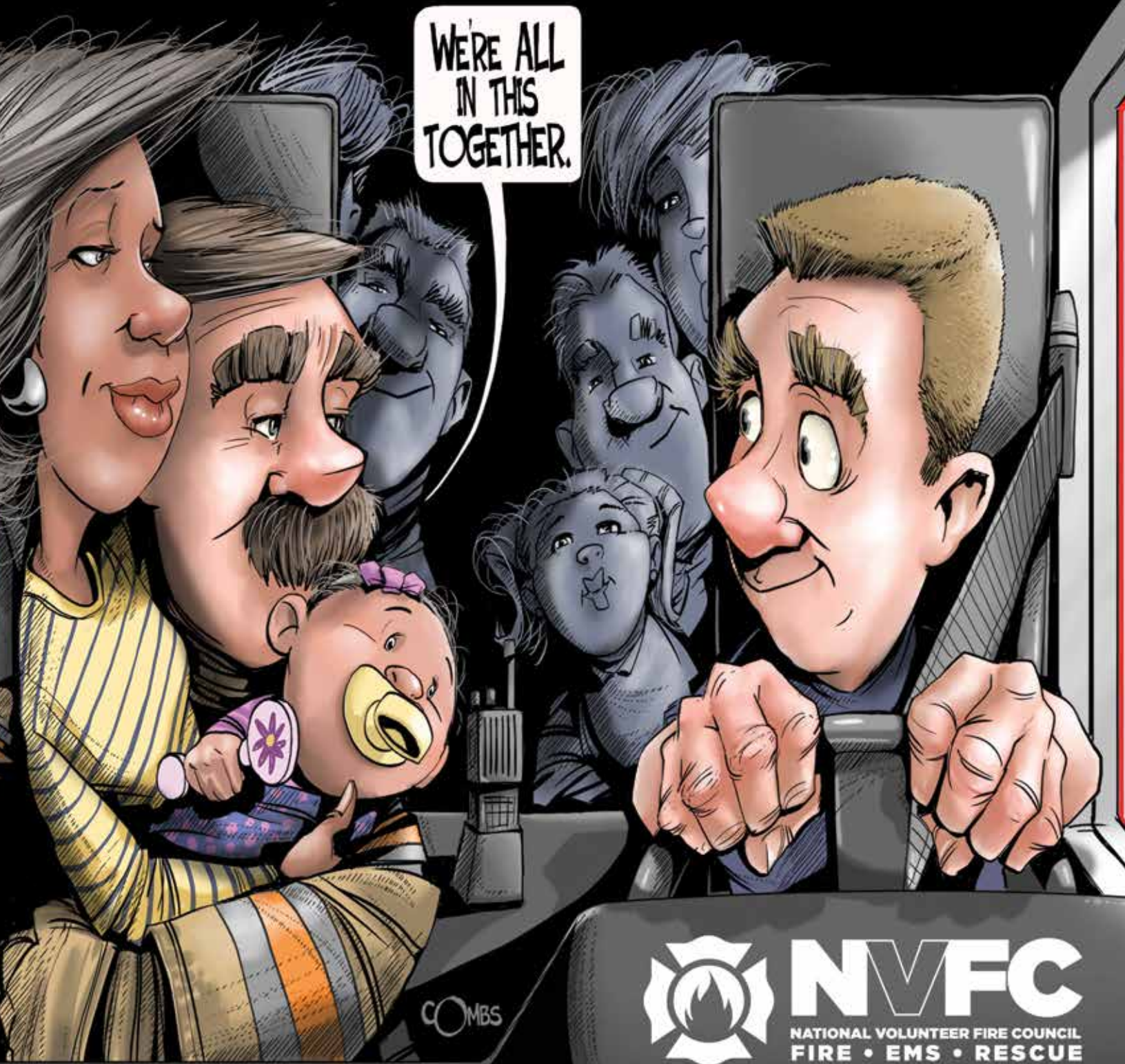


What to Expect

A Guide for New Firefighter Families

(Second Edition)



The guide is brought to you by the National Volunteer Fire Council Family Task Force.

The mission of the National Volunteer Fire Council Family Task Force is to provide volunteer first responders and families with education and supportive resources for family engagement to foster a positive impact on the lives of volunteer first responders and their families.

The vision of the National Volunteer Fire Council Family Task Force is to be the recognized voice and resource for providing support and education to volunteer first responders and their families nationwide.

Family Task Force Members:

Paul Acosta

Jennifer Bullard

Dan Degryse

Jimmie Duncan

Anita Hirsch

Steve Hirsch

Dr. Candice McDonald

Burk Minor

Sheri Nickel

Wendy Norris

Dallas Renfrew

Martie Roy

Reid Vaughn



Dear Fire Service Family,

We are thrilled to welcome you to the amazing journey of being in the fire and emergency services. You are joining a legacy that is respected, honored, and recognized for impacting the lives of the neighbors and communities in which we all live. The impact of being part of the fire service is transformative and life changing.

We partnered with the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) to develop this guide, with the goal of providing insights and answers to the families of new volunteer responders as to what being a part of this great effort means. As with anything worthwhile in life, there are sacrifices to be made, hard work to be accomplished, and challenges to be faced. But there is also a ton of fun and enjoyment in this great calling that is unique to the world of emergency response.

Firefighters and EMS providers get to do things that only a select few are ever privileged to experience. There are wondrous and inspirational moments that will redefine your standard of what is truly important and really matters. Winston Churchill described it best, “We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.”

This guide focuses on one basic truth: Being a professional volunteer responder is truly a family affair. The impacts will be felt, good and challenging, by the entire household. We will not shy away from or minimize the struggles of spending time away from home, missing events, and the realities of doing dangerous work. We hope to give you an honest view of what to expect and some strategies for navigating the challenges that come with being a firefighter family.

We’ll also highlight the incredible benefits your family will enjoy from being accepted as a member of “our family” – a family that finds its foundational values centered on goodness, courage, kindness, and camaraderie. The fire service is a time-honored institution that seeks to welcome you in and teach you a way of being that is different from the dog-eat-dog culture of the rest of the world. A way that is “other-focused” and committed to showing up for your neighbor’s very worst day and making it better.

Firefighters are our favorite people, hands down. We’ve worked in the fire service for more than 38 years now and truly believe in what you stand for and the significance of the work. And we have such love and respect for firefighter families. You are the unsung heroes behind the heroes, and we are also committed to encouraging you. So, let’s start this ride together – there is no adventure quite like the one you are about to pursue. Here’s betting the rewards will be cherished for the rest of your life. That has been our experience, as we have been truly blessed by what the fire service has meant to our family. We are honored to be at your side and look forward to serving together.

Mike & Anne Gagliano

Table of Contents

Letter from the Authors

So, What Does it Mean to be a “Volunteer First Responder?”

- The Volunteer Fire Service: A Family Like No Other
- When Someone Dials 911: The Calls
- Understanding the Volunteer Firefighter Schedule
- Firefighters & EMS Professionals Do Get Dirty
 - Uniform
 - Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
 - Carcinogens and PPE
- Responding to the Call
- Nonoperational Volunteers are Vital Members
- Interrupted Sleep is Part of the Ask
- The Benefits to Volunteering

Even the Best Families Have Challenges

- The Job is Dangerous
- Calls and More Calls
- Training Requirements
- Sleep Hygiene
- Sacrifice to Service

Becoming Aware of the Psychological Impacts

- Increased Risk for Behavioral Health Issues
- Resiliency
- Stress
- Mental Health
- Substance Misuse
- Compassion Fatigue, Secondary Traumatic Stress
 - Common Reactions to Trauma
- Coping with Trauma
 - Fire Service Support
 - Family Support
 - Seeking Outside Support

3 Mindset, Physical Fitness, and Nutrition

- Community 20
- Physical Fitness 21
 - Fit For Duty 21
 - Other Benefits of Exercise 21
- Food and Nutrition 22
 - Community-Based Nutrition Programs 22
 - Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) 22
- Wellness Programs 22

8 Keep Your Relationship Strong

- Relationship Communication 24
 - Communication in Committed Relationships 24
- Five Essential Conversations for Fire Service Couples 25
 - Conversation #1: Re-entry Time 25
 - Conversation #2: Harshness & Gallows Humor 26
 - Conversation #3: Handling the Tough Runs 26
 - Conversation #4: The Fix-It Mentality 27
 - Conversation #5: First Family First 27

11 Kids & the Fire Service

- Orientating Children to the Fire Service 29
- Balancing Parent-Volunteer Life 29
 - Maintain a Regular Home Schedule for the Kids 29
 - Commit to Routine Family Time 30
- Engage Kids in Fire Department Events 30
- The Powerful Impact of Pets 30
- Family Time is NOT Negotiable 31
- Teenagers and the Volunteer Fire Service 31

15 The Gifts from Being a Volunteer First Responder

- The Gift of Passion 32
- The Gift of a Second Family 32
- The Gift of Giving 33

18 Conclusion

19 Helpful Resources and Links for the Volunteer Fire Service Family

Notes



So, What Does it Mean to be a “Volunteer First Responder?”

Congratulations on choosing this journey with the volunteer emergency services. Your loved one may be the one who joined as a first responder, but you are also an important and valued member of the broader fire service family. You will be the one to support your loved one throughout their volunteer career. You will also feel the impacts, challenges, and rewards of the fire service life.

While you will see the term “firefighter” used at times, the guidance provided in this document is for families of volunteer firefighters, volunteer emergency medical service (EMS) providers, and other operational roles within a volunteer fire department. The term “volunteer first responder” is also used to encompass operational fire service volunteers.

As a member of the volunteer fire service family, you join the ranks of the largest fire service group in the United States, with 65% of all firefighters being volunteers.¹ These are men and women representing communities of all sizes and geographic locations. The volunteer fire service is made up of actual members of the community in which they serve. There is definite “skin in the game,” as your loved one will provide emergency care and support for your neighbors. But you already know this, and it’s likely a big part of why your family has committed to join.

This journey starts by looking at some of the more common things that come with being a volunteer responder family that might differ from what you are used to.

The Volunteer Fire Service: A Family Like No Other

Being a volunteer first responder comes with the imagery of sacrifice, serving others, and the devotion of precious time. Now, that is all very true, and that will be covered more later in this guide. But it isn’t all just giving and sacrifice. Volunteer responders get something in return that many in the world are truly looking for and not necessarily finding.

They get a connection... A team... A group of diverse but like-minded folks all coming together for an honorable and worthwhile cause. They get a seat on the bus with a group of travelers who have serious goals and work together to achieve them. This is a band of brothers/sisters who have each other’s backs – a true Fire Family that will work to help each other be successful at using their talents and energy toward the accomplishment of great things. This Second Family is one that will leave a long-lasting impression on each responder and their First Family.

The **First Family** is defined as the people who are related by birth, marriage, adoption, partnership, and those with whom you have a close relationship and consider family members. The First Family can feel more confident knowing that when their loved one is at the station, at training, or on the emergency scene, the Fire Family is watching out for them.

When Someone Dials 911: The Calls

Early on, you’re likely going to be impacted by the calls.

Home is where your emotions, your mind, and your body can be repaired.

– Dallas Renfrew

Depending on your department, these are known by different names, including “Runs,” “Jobs,” “Alarms,” or simply “Calls.” This is where the department notifies the first responder that someone needs help and has called 911. Think about how cool it is that every time you hear the term “911,” they are truly talking about YOUR loved one, YOUR firefighter?!

These calls will come in many ways depending on the locality. Notifications can arrive on a phone, computer, department-provided pager, radio, or from an actual person. These notifications can come at all times of the day and night, summoning the first responder into battle.

The calls are the reason your local fire department exists. They represent your community being in need, and a community member reaching out for help. It should be a great source of pride to know that your first responder is stepping up to that challenge and providing help where there is no other option. This is important to remember, as the calls come when they come.

They will occur at inconvenient times, at the worst possible hour, and in the middle of treasured family events. It helps to recognize that those untimely alerts mean something profound. Your volunteer is answering a cry for help. That interrupted holiday meal, as frustrating as it will be, means there is a possibility that with the fire department’s help, someone else’s holiday won’t become a tragedy. The lost sleep and time apart aren’t sacrificed for nothing. The calls are as important an endeavor as has ever existed. They can mean the difference between life and death.

Understanding the Volunteer Firefighter Schedule

Your department will provide details of specific expectations and time commitments. These vary from organization to organization, and even within your own, they will change occasionally. But the basics of most departments involve the following:

- **Initial Training and Professional Development.** Most volunteer fire departments require volunteers to attend formal training to become certified. This may be done locally or at a regional or state fire school or fire academy. While the department will work hard to give its members the tools and training needed to be successful, they cannot do it all. Your

firefighter will likely need to allow time to obtain formal fire and EMS training to meet state/national standards. This includes initial and continuing education training. While training is time consuming, it is necessary so that your volunteer is prepared to respond to calls as safely and effectively as possible.

- **Department Meetings.** Department meetings can be formal or informal and will likely occur a few times a month. Most departments require attendance at department meetings to ensure all members are made aware of the information being shared.
- **Community Events.** Community events can happen at the station or out in the community. These events showcase the department, provide education, and build community relationships.
- **Drill Nights.** Drill nights are the first responder’s training night. These are typically a weekly or bi-weekly occurrence. Drill nights are the lifeblood of your first responder’s skillsets. They will be of great importance in the early stages because the foundational skills are essential. As your firefighter increases their experience, they will not only be attending drill night but also seeking additional, more advanced training.
- **Work Shifts/Duty Crews.** Work shifts and duty crew schedules will vary depending on the configuration of the department. Each member is required to spend some designated time at the firehouse and/or be available from home. This can be for a few hours or even for a 24-hour shift.
- **Leadership Duties.** As your loved one’s volunteer career progresses, they may assume leadership roles in the department. Leaders in the fire service have a greater set of responsibilities, which also means increased time commitments. Additional time may be needed to handle administrative and logistical duties for the department, as well as for mentoring, professional development, and disciplinary duties.

The schedule of a volunteer firefighter will be something you’ll learn to adapt to over time. It may require adjusting expectations, but working together, you can make the fire service fit in with all the other important things you do as a family.

Firefighters & EMS Professionals Do Get Dirty

Those who accept the calling of firefighting and emergency medical response come from all walks and stages of life. Again, this is a family, one that is made up of many different sizes, shapes, and skill sets. The work of a first responder has aspects unlike those of a “normal job” and it’s important to discuss a few of them.

Uniform

The first thing you'll notice is the uniform. It is probably a bit more formal and colorful than what is normally worn to work. There is a desire to establish an identity of professionalism through uniforms. And while first responders often wear things like t-shirts, sweatshirts, and job shirts, the uniform itself is special. From collared shirts to shined boots, there is an appearance of honor and respect.

Firefighters will typically have three very important symbols or signatures on their uniform. The first is the firefighter **badge**. This sacred shield identifies your firefighter with every other firefighter who has ever lived. It symbolizes protection and trust, establishing that "what is done by one reflects on all."

Second is the department **patch**, typically worn on the shoulder. That iconic image narrows the focus down from firefighters everywhere to your specific department. It is a symbol that represents the hopes and dreams of the community. It is a marker for local citizens to see that this person is someone they can count on and look to for help in their weakest moments. Volunteers who provide EMS will often have the "Star of Life" as part of their uniform that distinctly identifies them as emergency medical providers.

And finally, we add one more thing to the firefighter's uniform: We add their **name**. There is simply no more personal identifier than your name. And from the moment your loved one puts on the uniform, their actions, behavior, and performance are attached to the name on that shirt. When their name is spoken, it will tell a story of the type of firefighter they are... the type of leader... the type of *person*.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Along with the uniform, you'll see a bulkier set of clothing known as turnout gear, bunker gear, or just turnouts or bunkers. This protective clothing is crucial as it is the difference between your firefighter surviving dangerous environments or getting hurt or burned. It includes big boots made of rubber or leather, a bulky coat, a set of pants with big pockets, and a firefighter helmet. There may also be a bag with an SCBA facepiece attached. The SCBA – or self-contained breathing apparatus – is the breathing tank firefighters wear into fires so they can safely breathe.

Depending on the configuration of your department, this PPE may remain at the station, or because of geographical reasons, it could be stored in a case in the trunk of your volunteer's vehicle. All this gear, the uniform, and various types of protective clothing are essential to the job. The gear allows the physical work to be

conducted in demanding environments that are full of hazards. To be quite clear, this is not a quiet, clean desk job. Volunteer firefighters are going to get dirty.

Carcinogens and PPE

Cancer is a leading health risk facing firefighters, largely due to the chemicals and carcinogens present while on the job. Firefighters are exposed to carcinogens whenever they respond to a fire, hazardous materials spill, or other event. PPE is designed to protect firefighters from these exposures and lessen these risks. Proper use of this PPE is critical during every incident to prevent the firefighter from breathing in, swallowing, or having their skin absorb the toxins.

While the PPE provides protection during an incident, once the incident is over the gear must be properly decontaminated and stored to prevent off-gassing, which can be harmful to firefighters and their families. Firefighting PPE should never be brought into the home, washed in the home washing machine, or transported in the passenger cab of the family vehicle. While tempting, firefighter PPE should not be used for photos with children nor should children be allowed to "play dress up" in them.



Learn How to Reduce the Risk of Cancer.

The *Lavender Ribbon Report: Best Practices for Preventing Firefighter Cancer* details 11 actions firefighters should take to protect themselves, their crew, and their families from exposure and reduce risks of occupational cancer.

www.nvfc.org/lrr

Responding to the Call

The simplest way to describe the work of a volunteer first responder is to say, "if it's possible, it will probably happen." And when it happens, the folks it's happening to will call 911. And remember, your loved one is now 911. That work will be at all hours of the day/night, in every type of weather, inside/outside, and in some of the worst conditions imaginable. Some days will be spent inside people's homes helping them with medical

Please take extra good care of your health by getting screened for cancer or any other health issue that may arise. Please know that each of you matters!

– Martie Roy

emergencies. Other days will be spent inside people's homes that are on fire. There is truly no limit to the types of things volunteer first responders may be asked to do.

Some common types of calls can include:

- Putting out fires of all sizes in structures, vehicles, and grass/wildland areas
- Vehicle and roadside accidents
- Rescues from dangerous environments like water, heights, and entrapments
- Medical emergencies
- Hazardous materials incidents
- Criminal assaults
- Service emergencies such as flooded structures, downed trees, and powerlines
- Natural disasters
- Aircraft crashes
- Missing children/persons

Later in this guide, we will discuss implementing strategies to deal with the impacts of this dangerous work, but know that the risks are significantly reduced with thorough training. The dangerous work is why this volunteer opportunity exists, and it is compelling, necessary, and richly satisfying to know that you were able to make a difference in the lives of your neighbors on their worst day.

Nonoperational Volunteers are Vital Members

The volunteer fire service is not just comprised of those who work in the back of an ambulance or rush into burning buildings. There are members who perform different tasks and duties that help a fire department run smoothly.

Many fire departments have structured Fire Corps or auxiliary groups to provide nonoperational support. These individuals have an essential role, both on the emergency scene and in the day-to-day life of the fire department. Departments may also engage youth in activities through junior firefighter programs.

These nonoperational programs may be an avenue for all members of the family to contribute, even if they have no intention of running into a burning building. In many departments, these groups perform the following activities:

- Provide food and water to responders during incidents and training.
- Handle recruitment and public relations functions.
- Coordinate/support fundraising activities.
- Conduct fire prevention and life safety education programs in the community.
- Plan/coordinate retention/morale activities.

Interrupted Sleep is Part of the Ask

This will be addressed in greater depth in another section, but it does deserve mention here as sleep disruption is a complex reality of this calling. Emergencies happen at all hours, so many of those calls will come while the family is sleeping. Unfortunately, this disruption will not just impact the first responder but the whole family, as the rush to respond will often be heard by everyone in the house. There will be an acclimation period to this new element of home life. Most volunteers and their families find their groove in making it work, but it's good to know going in that this can be a source of frustration and inconvenience.

The Benefits to Volunteering

Depending on your community and your department's policies, there could be some degree of compensation for being a volunteer first responder. The reality is that it will not come close to paying for the time, effort, and energy given to fulfill a volunteer firefighter's responsibilities effectively. Some fire service organizations can offer nonwage benefits to their volunteers. Regardless of any financial benefits that may be available, just know you are a welcome part of this glorious adventure with your new fire service family.

What each department/locality offers varies widely, but some examples of benefits that may be available as a reward for volunteer service could include:

- Compensation, stipends, or per-call payment


- Retirement savings programs based on length of service
- Local, county, or state tax deductions
- Health care supplements
- Life insurance programs
- Mortgage and finance options
- Education/tuition assistance
- Professional certifications and development opportunities
- Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), for the family and the volunteer
- Discounts at select stores, restaurants, and other businesses

Many of the benefits of volunteering are non-tangible – community impact, sense of purpose, skill building, camaraderie, the list goes on.

Free Tickets to Sporting and Concert Events for First Responders


Volunteer first responders can access free tickets through 1st Tix. 1st Tix secures tickets to sporting events, concerts, performing arts, educational, and family activities nationwide that first responders sign up online to receive. These events can reduce stress, strengthen family bonds, create positive memories, and encourage first responders to stay engaged with local communities.

www.1sttix.org



MEMBERSHIP


**INCREDIBLE
VALUE FOR
\$2 A MONTH!**



ACCIDENTAL DEATH & DISMEMBERMENT INSURANCE POLICY

\$10,000 death benefit for bodily injuries


\$10,000



FREE TRAINING IN-PERSON AND IN THE NVFC VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Over a **\$1,000** value including travel stipends

\$1,000+




ELIGIBILITY TO APPLY FOR VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER SUPPORT FUND


\$350 stipend after major disaster

\$350


VOLUNTEER VOICES FORUM

 **Invaluable** conversation, networking, and idea-sharing with other NVFC members


MEMBERS-ONLY DISCOUNTS

 Ability to save **hundreds of dollars** on products, services, and training/education from our partners


ELIGIBILITY TO APPLY FOR SPECIAL OPPORTUNITIES

 Over **\$1.5 million** worth of grants, gear, resources, scholarships, and stipends awarded to NVFC members each year

NVFC FIRST RESPONDER HELPLINE

 Access to behavioral health services worth **hundreds of dollars**

For more information about NVFC membership, or to join now, visit: www.nvfc.org/join or scan the QR code!





Even the Best Families Have Challenges

All families have challenges, strengths, and weaknesses. This includes the first responder family and the impacts of being a volunteer. Keep in mind the importance of the family's service to their community as we look at meeting the challenges that may arise while serving.

The homelife of volunteers will have some new elements that can cause problems if not recognized and addressed. As with every difficulty faced in relationships or professional endeavors, it's best to have a strategy for overcoming obstacles in advance of meeting them. Success is much better achieved with a solid plan that everyone on the team understands. This section aims to outline the unique aspects and realities of being a member of the volunteer fire service.

The Job is Dangerous

Let's start with the job being dangerous, because this is where many family members feel the most helpless. They cannot control the many hazards their loved ones will be exposed to. That apprehension is understandable and normal. Getting to a place of peace with the risks will involve the same process necessary for each challenge. It may sound simple, but it is absolute truth.

You must be committed to continuous and honest communication. We will return to the importance of communication repeatedly, but it is the primary way any problem in your family or

relationship should be handled. If you do this part right, most of the challenges will become annoyances, with the occasional argument thrown in for good measure. We are only human, after all.

It's okay to worry about what your loved one will be involved in when the call comes in. That means you're a normal, thinking human being. It is also okay to voice those concerns in private when time permits. Talking about your concerns and giving some voice to your fears makes for a better processing of emotions. It also allows the first responder to give their side and tell you some compelling things that may help ease your apprehension. Such as:

- Yes, the work is dangerous, but we train and prepare for the dangers continuously.
- I train with the dangers in mind to diminish the chances of a problem.
- My team works closely and looks out for each other on every call.
- Every job has its own unique hazards.
- Firefighter safety is an essential part of the leadership strategy of my department.

Having open and honest conversations regularly is important for reducing fears. While the dangers are real, honest conversations can address mitigation strategies put in place to ensure

preparedness and a safe return home. Each family will have a different dynamic of how to handle this conversation, and that's just fine. Some families will want details, while others will find comfort in the above-mentioned basics. The point is not to shy away from any discussion that helps mitigate the challenges, whatever they may be.

The volunteer needs to actively participate in this conversation to ensure their family believes that their fears and concerns are being heard. It is also critical to have a circle of support and community. Those supportive individuals can come from existing sources such as family, neighbors, and friends. It can also extend to your new fire service family, whom you'll come to know.

Connecting with the fire service families within the organization allows for shared experiences to be explored. There is wisdom from those who have already navigated the rocky terrain. And connecting with other families allows for a pool of confidants you can call to ease your mind and share encouragement with.

During stressful times when the first responder or family member need someone outside of their circle to talk to, the NVFC has a confidential First Responder Helpline to assist members and their families with a variety of behavioral health issues and work-life stresses. Fire service families may also find comfort through connections with fire department chaplains or within their own faith-based organizations.

**Humans are mind, body, and spirit.
The care provided must address this.
Chaplains can be an excellent resource
for those seeking help.**

– Chaplain Jimmie Duncan

Calls and More Calls

It is safe to say that one of the biggest challenges a fire service family will face is dealing with the life interruptions that come from responding to calls from home and/or while fulfilling a duty shift. Once again, this frustration is normal and understandable. The aggravation of having life disrupted by someone else's problem can cause a multitude of emotions. It is vital for fire service families to develop a strategy early on to deal with this reality effectively.

Life interruptions from calls are an inevitable and essential part of being a volunteer. Everyone agrees on that point, so how do we work on the more negative aspects of these "interruptions?" Much the same as with every other struggle that will be faced, the disruption of life requires thoughtful conversation – a conversation in which all sides can express the impact caused by the disruptions as well as openly listen to what the other is saying. The final goal is finding a solution through compromise and/or reasoning.

While solutions will be specific to your family and how you do life, you can find ideas on how to cope with the life interruptions by talking with family and other members of your department. As you navigate this terrain, here are a few things that first responder families have found helpful:

- Understand that when a call comes in, or a duty shift is scheduled, it is a commitment previously made to the community and not an unexpected interruption to your life.
- Respect the reason for the call even while being frustrated at the timing; remember that someone in your community is having an emergency.
- Allow the firefighter to focus on what they need to do so they can shift gears into emergency response mode. Avoid excessive questions or conversation.
- Have an agreement in place that anything that is interrupted, if possible, will be continued or rescheduled once the call is complete and time permits.
- Don't lay blame or guilt when a call or duty shift occurs, and be aware of how frustration with poor timing can impact your tone of voice and response.
 - It is understandable that the timing can cause frustration. It is not the firefighter's fault the call came in or the duty shift was prescheduled at an inopportune time.
 - Feeling anger or annoyance is a normal emotion, but don't accuse each other of bad motives. Get on each other's side and seek understanding.
- Volunteers should make a commitment to communicate home as soon as possible. This will vary, but it's a great source of stress relief for the family to get some details, even if it is a basic status update. Communicating to home should be a priority when a call or text is reasonable.
- Fire service families need to understand that their firefighters are doing serious work, may not have access to a phone, and may not be able to communicate immediately or even for extended periods of time.

- Remember, it's okay to be frustrated and, at times, resentful of the alerts. It's not okay to let it become a problem or division in your family.
- Develop a good plan for communicating with each other during longer separations or prolonged station duties.
 - Some families find comfort in downloading a scanner app to track what's happening regarding the calls. Developing a good network within your fire service family is also a great way to get updates or share information.
- Communicate honestly and develop a plan for balancing the disruption of the calls and/or duty shifts.
 - Decide when it is too much and agree as to when the alerts will be off.
 - Determine blocks of time when duty shifts will not be scheduled or coverage needs to be swapped.

Your conversations surrounding the challenges and emotions regarding calls will enable you to develop, implement, and refine your strategy. They are essential here, and in all else we will discuss.

Training Requirements

Training will likely be a double-edged sword in this new adventure. Getting better at the job is essential for the health and safety of the volunteer. Learning and honing the craft of emergency work is a huge commitment. Thus, the other edge of the training sword is that it takes a lot of time. Most likely, the volunteer will be attending the scheduled training sessions with other members of the department. This will vary from department to department, but you should know in advance what is expected. Try as a family to not let this become a source of conflict.

Anything you do as a family requires time. If your loved one were on a softball or volleyball team for fun, there would be practices as well as games. Church involvement and hobbies all require some degree of commitment to be fulfilling. So, too, the fire department needs time to help the volunteer become an efficient first responder. In addition to the scheduled training times, most volunteers who dedicate themselves to excellence seek training that is not part of the normal schedule. There are numerous opportunities to learn from other departments or other resources, which is crucial to any discipline's growth.

The family should desire their loved one to be as skilled as possible, and training is the primary way to excel. When the feeling of frustration occurs from the lost family time due to



training commitments, keep in mind some of the following:

- Volunteer responders joined to be of service to their neighbors, and that service is greatly improved by training.
- Training improves the ability to do dangerous stuff in the safest manner possible and fellow first responders are counting on them.
- Getting good at the job will be rewarding.
- The citizens of your community are counting on a skilled first responder to show up when they call 911.
- The better trained a firefighter is, the more peace you'll have knowing they can perform the job as safely and effectively as possible.

The conversations about the time spent on training are vital and are similar to the ones we've already discussed. It's okay to bring up the time element if the training commitments are getting too extreme. There is nothing wrong with working training into the overall family schedule and ensuring home life remains a priority. Getting some feedback on what the training is and how/why it matters may mitigate some of the frustration with the time away.

Sleep Hygiene

The impacts on sleep can be significant depending on how busy your fire department is. This is a recognized challenge for most emergency workers as they must get up, from a dead sleep, and

quickly get their wits about them to respond to life-or-death situations. This is particularly difficult for the volunteer as that disrupted sleep is often followed by the need to go to their regular job.

Sleep is essential to health and mental wellbeing. Here are a few tips to help you sleep better:

- Maintain a consistent sleep schedule for bedtime and alarm wake-up time, including on the weekends. The CDC indicates adults should get 7+ hours or more of sleep.²
- Naps have proven to be a great supplement to combat sleep deficit.
- Relax before bedtime; develop a routine that is soothing and eases your mind.
- Keep the bedroom quiet, dark, and a comfortable temperature.
- Remove electronic devices from the bedroom and avoid devices with blue light (cell phones, computers, tablets, TVs). Blue light is stimulating to the brain and may keep you from quickly falling asleep.
- Make your room as dark as possible. Consider light blocking curtains and/or a comfortable sleep mask.
- Gray or Brown noise has proven beneficial in diminishing other, more disruptive sounds. Numerous sleep apps or devices can provide this, or try the trusty old fan.
- Limit caffeine and alcohol.
 - Caffeine is a stimulant and should not be consumed much past the early afternoon.
 - Alcohol is habit-forming and may cause sleep disruption later in the sleep cycle.
- Be active during the day to help you fall asleep at night. Exercise is helpful for eliminating stress hormones.
- Buy a quality mattress – the sooner you can get a mattress that fits your needs, the better. There are numerous types with different features and settings.
- Supplements like melatonin or natural food sources such as tart cherry juice may help.

Volunteers don't necessarily have the time; they have the heart.

– Elizabeth Andrew

There is no escaping the reality that sleep issues are a big problem for emergency responders. But knowing this, you can develop a strategy to minimize the impacts. This effort will be good for the whole family as most lives are busy, and sleep can be a challenge.

Sacrifice to Service

Outlined above are a few main issues the fire service family faces while seeking to fulfill the honorable calling of being a volunteer first responder. Additional challenges will be discussed later in this guide, and others will be addressed by your department's leadership. It is honest to ask: Is any of this worth it? Why interject more problems into life?

Every meaningful endeavor has harmful components and painful sacrifices. Nothing worthwhile gets done without distinct and complex challenges. The fire service is no different and comes with great rewards. Your role as a fire service family may be some of the most fulfilling work you have ever done. Your service can be life-changing for you and the community you serve, and well worth your time. We hope you are up for the challenge, as this is a labor of love.



Photo courtesy of Laurelee Veitch

Becoming Aware of the Psychological Impacts

Volunteer first responders will see things that the average person does not typically see, and actively participate in life-or-death decisions. In addition, volunteer responders are serving their community so may know the person whose emergency they are responding to. These realities are both a blessing and a curse. The approach to addressing these challenges is again founded on honest and open communication within the family unit.

Increased Risk for Behavioral Health Issues

Volunteer first responders face an increased risk of experiencing behavioral health issues, including mental health and substance use disorders. Fear of being seen as weak or not up to the job of a first responder keeps many from seeking help. Responders can build their resilience by understanding the risk factors and warning signs, talking with each other, maintaining a strong support system, and using healthy coping strategies.

The fire department may offer resources to help with behavioral health issues, such as an employee assistance program, access to resources, or peer support teams. In addition, the NVFC offers the First Responder Helpline, a Directory of Behavioral Health Professionals ready to help first responders and their families, and other resources and training through the Share the Load™ program. These can be accessed at www.nvfc.org/help.

It is important to note that the family members of first responders may also require support due to the unique challenges and demands associated with their loved one's involvement in the fire service. The stress and strain related to worry may inevitably affect relationships at home. Additionally, the nature of the job may lead those at home to feel isolated and/or abandoned.

NVFC First Responder Helpline

NVFC members and their household families can utilize the NVFC First Responder Helpline for immediate assistance in a crisis moment, as well as confidential counseling, resources, and referrals to assistance for a range of issues and work-life stresses.

www.nvfc.org/helpline

Resiliency

Resiliency is the ability to adapt to a highly stressful or adverse event. Although most people are generally resilient and able to bounce back even from extreme circumstances without significant impairment, first responders have the added layer of being regularly exposed to potentially traumatic events.

Resilience won't make problems go away, but resilience can help you see a path past them. It will help you find ways to enjoy life and better handle stress. Personal resilience is vital in the volunteer fire service, as the work is often high-risk and unpredictable. Every volunteer and supportive family member should increase their resiliency awareness.

There are ways to build resilience to better cope with stressors. Fire service families can improve resilience by:

- **Being Connected.** Establishing healthy connections with others who can provide support and guidance during difficult times is important. In addition to family and friends, this may include making connections through other fire service families, volunteering, faith-based organizations, and other community groups.
- **Daily Purpose.** Do something daily that brings you a sense of purpose and meaning.
- **Learn from Yesterday.** Journal about past events and how you reacted to help guide your response to future challenging times.
- **Remain Hopeful.** Look towards the future and be open to adapting new strategies to cope with challenges.
- **Practice Self-Care.** Take care of your own needs and feelings. Engage in activities and hobbies that bring you joy. Nurture your physical, mental, and spiritual health through exercise, meditation, and/or prayer.
- **Take Action.** Develop a plan for addressing challenges that answers the following:
 - What challenges do you want to address?
 - Who will help you address the challenge?
 - Where will you find the resources needed to address the challenge?
 - When will you take action to address the challenge?

Stress

Volunteer first responder families will face stress during their service. There is the stress that comes with responding to emergencies, with facing life-or-death situations, and with being exposed to traumatic events. There is also the stress of balancing family commitments, job responsibilities, and the fire service. These are in addition to a myriad of other stressors that may be impacting you and your family.

Stress is a normal reaction designed to help humans cope with dangerous situations. Faced with a threat, this automatic response kicks us into gear so we can deal with the problem at hand. The brain triggers the release of hormones that prepare us for a “flight

or fight” response to the threat. This causes several changes within the body. It raises blood pressure, heart rate, and blood sugar. It suppresses nonessential body functions like digestion and can alter the immune system. Psychologically, it affects our mood, attention, and motivation.

Although the stress response is helpful in high-pressure situations, the human body needs recovery experiences and is not designed to withstand the physiological changes that occur over extended periods of time. Unaddressed chronic stress can lead to negative impacts on health and relationships. Finding positive coping mechanisms to help relieve stress can help mitigate the negative impacts.



Find resources to help with behavioral and mental health issues from the NVFC's Share the Load™ program at www.nvfc.org/help.

Mental Health

Responding to emergencies may impact the mental well-being of volunteer first responders and their families. Mental health struggles aren't always visible to others, and not everyone feels comfortable talking about them. Staying silent can add to the stress and impact family relationships. Not addressing the issues can also lead to anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts.

It is just as important for volunteer responders to take care of their mental health as it is to manage their physical health. Responders and their families should be aware of potential mental health impacts, signs and symptoms to watch for, positive

coping mechanisms, and where to get help if needed. The NVFC's Share the Load™ program provides access to critical resources and information to help volunteer first responders and their families manage and overcome personal and work-related problems.

Substance Misuse

Unfortunately, some volunteer first responders use alcohol and other substances to cope with stress and trauma. This may lead to “self-medicating” or unhealthy patterns of alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, drug, or prescription pain medication use. While people may temporarily feel better, these behaviors can add to stress, impair functioning, and lead to more serious problems in the long run.

Preventing and addressing substance misuse problems starts with:

- Becoming educated on alcohol and substance misuse to learn how to identify and address potential substance misuse.
- Encouraging the use of available resources for support, such as the NVFC's smoking cessation resources, the NVFC First Responder Helpline, and other health programs.
- When misuse is suspected, encouraging conversations about substance misuse with a primary care physician or clinical professional.
- Making referrals to qualified professionals who can provide confidential and non-punitive interventions.

Compassion Fatigue, Secondary Traumatic Stress

Exposure to trauma is the most impactful experience known to the human psyche. Compassion fatigue, or secondary traumatic stress disorder, is a natural but disruptive by-product of regularly working with traumatized individuals. Calls that can lead to mental distress may include:

- Violent crimes, such as shooting, stabbing, or sexual assault
- Traumatic injuries or death
- Death of a child or infant
- The inability to rescue someone, especially a known neighbor
- The loss or severe injury of a fellow first responder
- A horrific traffic crash
- A devastating fire

Witnessing and hearing about traumatic occurrences may lead to first responders experiencing compassionate trauma or secondary traumatic stress. Trauma is the Greek word for wound. In the context of a first responder, the trauma is a wounded heart.



Anyone with a heart is susceptible to being hurt, and let's face it – firefighters are all heart. When exposed to critical incidents, it is both typical and expected to have some physical and emotional reactions. Family can be crucial in helping counter these “heart hurts” by being supportive.

Common Reactions to Trauma

The National Center for PTSD indicates the following:

Common reactions to trauma:

- Losing hope for the future
- Feeling distant (detached) or losing a sense of concern about others
- Being unable to concentrate or make decisions
- Feeling jumpy and getting startled easily at sudden noises
- Feeling on guard and alert all the time
- Having dreams and memories that upset you
- Having problems at work or school
- Avoiding people, places, and things related to the event

Physical reactions to trauma:

- Stomach upset and trouble eating
- Trouble sleeping and feeling very tired
- Pounding heart, rapid breathing, feeling shaky
- Sweating

- Severe headache if thinking of the event
- Not keeping up with exercise, diet, safe sex, or regular health care
- Smoking more, using alcohol or drugs more, or eating too much
- Having your ongoing medical problems get worse

Emotional reactions to trauma:

- Feeling nervous, helpless, fearful, sad
- Feeling shocked, numb, or not able to feel love or joy
- Being irritable or having angry outbursts
- Getting easily upset or agitated
- Blaming yourself or having negative views of oneself or the world
- Being unable to trust others, getting into fights, or trying to control everything
- Being withdrawn, feeling rejected, or abandoned
- Feeling detached, not wanting intimacy³

Coping with Trauma

Studies show that there are two primary reasons first responders cope so well with trauma. One is having the support of their department leadership and crew, and the other is having the caring support of loved ones outside of the fire department.

Fire Service Support

A helpful resource is getting counsel from senior crew members. Seasoned members who are adequately equipped can help newer firefighters with strategies to cope with challenging calls because they have literally been there and done that.

Strategies that may be offered by the fire department may include:

- Talking about and posting resources for support for first responders and their families.
- Providing resiliency training for first responders and their families.
- Implementing a peer support program for the first responder and their families.
- Providing a wellness program for the first responder and their families.
- Implementing debriefing procedures and events facilitated by trained professionals.
- Making it part of the culture to look out for the well-being of other first responders and their families.

- Establishing a mentoring program.
- Implementing exercise programs.
- Making available massage therapists and other stress-reducing activities.
- Hosting or coordinating educational programming on secondary trauma, behavioral health, substance misuse, and resiliency for first responders and their families.

Family Support

Positive family support provided to volunteer first responders is a highly effective intervention for helping first responders cope with job-related traumas. Families should never underestimate their value. While the specifics of what occurs at home may vary, the following have proven critical:

- **Take Time** – Not every hurt heals quickly, and it's essential to give the injured a chance to heal. Time together, having fun, enjoying the good, and just everyday home life activities are great medicine. The goal is to “make peace” with the memory of trauma, and that takes time.
- **Understanding** – Understanding is not empathy or sympathy. It is simply knowing and accepting that we will never fully know. Many fire service families will never know what their loved one has been through. It is important to not press for details but offer a listening ear and openly listen IF and when the first responder does decide to share. The gap in what occurred on scene and the impact it had on the first responder will always exist and is something that must be accepted.
- **Support Peer Sharing** – Understand that the first responder may need to share some of the details with a department coworker instead of a family member. Encourage this. Numerous first responders have relayed that debriefing with fellow responders is both healing and healthy. Rehashing the experience with those who were there or that have similar lived experiences may help make peace with the memories.
- **Respect** – Respecting the feelings of a loved one is important. We should never tell another how they should feel when we clearly cannot know. What they need to hear first and foremost is that you're glad they're home safe, that you're there for them, and that you love them, no matter what.
- **Affirmation** – The traumatized are vulnerable to guilt, shame, or self-loathing. Strong, confident first responders may misconstrue feelings of sorrow as weakness, even failure. A loving presence powerfully refutes these lies. Tell them you are proud of them, even if they made mistakes. Your unwavering belief in them will help restore their shaken confidence.

Fire service families are the unsung heroes who stand behind the brave men and women on the front lines. Their unwavering support is crucial to the success of the firefighter and the work they do in serving their community. But it is also just as vital for the firefighter's family to feel supported, cared for, and heard by their loved one and the agency. The holistic wellness of the firefighter is often dependent on the wellness of their support system at home.

– Wendy Norris

- **Support** – True support means saying ‘thank you’ for all that they do. It is an appreciation for a tough job that most people would not or could not do. And when it comes from a loving family member, it restores and revitalizes like nothing else. Support means to help stand, giving the first responder the strength to endure incredible adversity.

Seeking Outside Support

If a first responder or family member continues to struggle, encourage them to seek more help and tell them that professional counseling is a legitimate option and should not be viewed as a weakness. Let them know that there are programs designed specifically for first responders and their families, such as the NVFC First Responder Helpline and the NVFC's Directory of Behavioral Health Professionals.

Serving as a volunteer firefighter can be stressful for the first responder and family, and seeking help to cope with these stressors is a sign of strength. First responders and their families are capable of incredible devotion and commitment. Our calling requires that of us. Imagine that devotion turned full-on towards you, the person who is always there. When we face psychological challenges as a team with the right tools, the effects of the trauma don't stand a chance.

Directory of Behavioral Health Professionals

Emergency responders and their families face unique challenges that can have a significant impact on behavioral health, and it is important that they have access to providers that understand this. The providers listed in this directory are behavioral health professionals vetted by the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (FBHA).

www.nvfc.org/provider-directory



Mindset, Physical Fitness, and Nutrition

The stress and the physical demands of the fire service can impact the health and well-being of the volunteer first responder. Exposure to dangers may lead to physical problems such as injury, sleep deprivation, and disease. Not being prepared to address such issues can lead to disruption to our home life in a variety of ways. There are some key things to strengthen the mindset and physical well-being of the volunteer first responder. In this section we'll highlight four of these: community, physical fitness, nutrition, and wellness programs.

Community

It is an established fact that community is an essential component of happy living, and there is no substitute for having others standing beside you in your life so you never have to 'walk alone.' The volunteer fire service IS YOUR community of brothers and sisters. A community with mutual interests, common goals and shared experiences is crucial to mindset well-being.

Participating in this new community of volunteer emergency work checks the boxes on some of the most important aspects of a rewarding life:

- **Purpose.** Everyone wants a reason to get out of bed in the morning, something that lights them up and gives their life meaning. The work and the people the fire department connects you with provide a purpose. Your family will benefit from the shared vision and enthusiasm surrounding a mission that truly matters. It is a place where the skills and talents of each volunteer, emergency AND nonemergency, are needed, utilized, and appreciated.
- **Belonging.** As the old song in the TV series "Cheers" once opined: "You wanna go where everybody knows your name." Many are stories of people going the wrong way in life simply because they wanted to belong somewhere. Street gangs, cults, and countless other groups with bad intentions thrive because of this desire to have a place 'where everybody knows their name.' Your family can find a positive community to be part of in the fire department. As mentioned earlier, each volunteer's name will be written on the uniform shirt with the sacred honor of wearing the uniform as a member of the family. The fire service quickly becomes a second family and a second place to call home.

- **Support.** There is comfort in knowing you have people, your fire service family, that you can trust and turn to for help. Your existing family has now joined a group with a primary mindset to provide help when others are in need. This includes everyone. Your family will benefit greatly from those connections and will be a reciprocal part of helping other members of the fire service family.



Physical Fitness

Physical fitness should be a top priority for first responders and their families. Unfortunately, the hectic nature of life seems to leave little time to focus on a healthy lifestyle. It is critical to make adequate time to keep your family and your first responder healthy. Implementing a lifestyle of physical fitness may be effective for preventing or lessening hypertension, diabetes, cardiac events, and obesity among firefighters.⁴

Fit For Duty

Becoming fit for duty is essential for job preparedness and longevity. To be fit for duty, first responders must exercise. Fitness programs should include strength training to increase muscle strength and aerobic exercise to increase agility. Increased strength and agility can lead to a greater likelihood of returning home injury-free. One method for becoming fit for duty is following a functional fitness program. Functional fitness targets the muscle groups you use during firefighting tasks and gets the body ready to respond.

Other Benefits of Exercise

Families can engage together in fitness activities. This can become a family lifestyle and can be used as bonding time to strengthen your relationships.

Physical activities can also have the following benefits:

- **Reduces Stress.** Stress is an emotional and physical carnivore. No one encounters more stress than a first responder. The stress response primarily occurs due to hormones released by the body that allow action in the face of danger or threats. Norepinephrine, epinephrin (adrenalin), and cortisol are three of the primary chemicals released. Exercise helps the individual better utilize these hormones and alleviate the negative elements they produce.
- **Improves Depression and Anxiety.** Depression and anxiety can develop from stress. They are leading causes of decreased health, poor job performance, and suicide. Exercise works its magic by elevating endorphins, raising the levels of productive chemicals, and regulating all the neurotransmitters targeted by antidepressants. Exercise helps to balance fluctuating hormone levels, making them not as drastic or severe. As little as 10 minutes of vigorous exercise can immediately improve mood and vigor. Exercise alleviates sensitivity to the physical arousal of anxiety by burning off stress hormones. Exercise can snap your brain out of the downward spiral of depression or anxiety by naturally restoring the proper balance of chemicals needed to do so.
- **Strengthens Mental Acuity.** Exercise increases dopamine and norepinephrine levels the same way that stress does, minus the cortisol. These two neurotransmitters are the leaders in regulating the attention system.
- **Better Sleep.** Nothing is more healing for the highly stressed than a good night's sleep. But sleep can be elusive for the first responder, often full of adrenaline and cortisol. Exercise effectively burns off the stress hormones that keep first responders awake. Stretching (or yoga) before bed is also



highly effective as it releases lactic acid and ammonia build-up in muscles that cause tightness. Both exercise and stretching raise dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine levels, the three ‘feel good’ neurotransmitters that counter anxiety. With a more “peaceful, easy feeling” the first responder is more likely to sleep naturally, thus avoiding addictive sleeping pills and alcohol.

- **Helps Combat Addiction.** Alcohol, drugs, food (especially carbs), video games, gambling, and shopping all have the same biological effect – they stimulate the nucleus accumbens or the reward center of the brain. These addictions (as well as sex and nicotine) accomplish this stimulation by boosting dopamine levels in the reward center, which makes us ‘feel good.’ Raised dopamine levels lead to ‘cravings’ for more and more – and this may have some relationship to the development of addictions. Exercise is not only a legitimate antidote but an inoculation against future relapse. Exercise raises dopamine levels the same way that drugs do, but to natural, healthy levels. It also regrows gray matter, the part of the brain that regulates self-control. Addictions form superhighways in the brain – the quickest route to pleasure. Habits are formed. But exercise helps build synaptic detours around these well-worn connections, enabling the addict to find alternate routes to reward. Thus, better habits can be formed.

Food and Nutrition

Just like for the general population, cardiovascular disease is a leading cause of death among firefighters, with obesity as an important risk factor. One behavioral risk factor for heart disease and stroke is an unhealthy diet. The unpredictable schedule of the volunteer first responder may lead to fast and unhealthy food choices.

With the endless advertisements of fad diets and programs, it can become challenging for families to identify a food and nutrition program that is effective and safe. The belief that healthy food is not budget-friendly sometimes complicates the desire to make healthier food choices. However, there are some easy ways to tame those costs and still make healthy food choices that lead to being a heart-healthy first responder.

Community-Based Nutrition Programs

Many communities have community-based health and nutrition programs through their local health department, hospital, or university. Families of first responders can reach out to these programs for assistance with developing an effective health and nutrition program based on the specific needs of their families.

Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP)

The U.S. Department of Agriculture funds food and nutrition education, known as EFNEP, in all 50 states and 6 U.S. territories. EFNEP utilizes education to support participants’ efforts toward self-sufficiency, nutritional health, and well-being. EFNEP combines hands-on learning, applied science, and program data to ensure program effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability. In many areas, this program can be brought to the fire department for the first responders and their families.

Wellness Programs

Formal wellness programs can come from your fire department, town/county, or a membership association, like the NVFC. These offerings will vary, so it’s essential to determine what your organization has in place. Here are some of the things to look for/ask about:

- **Peer Support Program** – This is a broader term that can mean a lot of different things. The key component is members of the job being there for each other and getting specific training to help. They will likely be the ones to run things like debriefings or follow-ups when traumatic events or calls occur. They can also be an excellent source for recommending additional levels of support, such as counseling or other programs.
- **Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)** – These programs can be offered by your employer or fire department, or by your locality, state, or a national organization. EAPs are intended



I believe being a firefighter is rewarding in many ways; conversely, it will be challenging on several levels with the exposure to traumas, time away from our loved ones, and the frequent physical and emotional strain this career has on the firefighter and their family. The topic of behavioral health and wellness, which are generally overlooked and under-discussed by so many in this admirable career, is critical and necessary.

– Dan DeGryse

to be confidential, and help can be requested by any member of the organization or family. EAP can connect individuals to resources like counseling, intervention programs, suicide hotlines, etc.

- **Mentoring Programs** – These are typically department-operated and are an excellent way to “take care of our own.” While many of these programs may be geared towards getting better at the job, they also provide a seasoned contact for newer members to reach out to when problems arise or advice is needed.
- **Chaplaincy Program** – Most organizations will have some contact with a chaplain who can provide support. They will likely be familiar to the first responders as they come to aid community members when tragic incidents occur. It’s important for families to know this resource exists and for first responders to know the chaplain is not just there for the citizens.
- **Treatment Programs** – There are a growing number of vetted programs that can help first responders with recovery and healing from things like addiction, PTSD, and other mental wellness issues. These recovery programs typically involve longer stays at dedicated facilities.
- **Counseling** – Your local fire service organization will likely have contacts with trained professionals who can help with more difficult situations or ones requiring specific levels of expertise. The NVFC also offers a directory of behavioral health professionals vetted by the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance. www.nvfc.org/provider-directory/
- **Fitness Programs** – Some fire service organizations have well-developed plans to assist with overall fitness. These may include access to department exercise equipment or reduced costs for gym memberships. The NVFC also offers the Heart-Healthy Firefighter Program, which promotes fitness, nutrition, and health awareness for all members. Resources are designed to help individuals take control of their health as well as help departments implement a health and wellness program. www.healthy-firefighter.org
- **Mindfulness Programs** – These are newer opportunities that center around things like meditation, yoga, and sources of positive affirmation.
- **Post-traumatic Growth** – Some fire service organizations have implemented and/or make available post-traumatic growth programs for members and their families through programs like Boulder Crest that are free of charge. <https://bouldercrest.org>

This is just a snapshot of the possibilities for addressing the health and wellness needs of the first responder family. You may even be part of the solution by bringing new ideas or skills from your regular job to aid your new fire family.



Keep Your Relationship Strong

All relationships require maintenance – even the good ones – and the logistics of fire service life can add challenges. Being part of the fire service is an amazing calling. It's incredibly exciting and deeply rewarding. Being part of the fire service is an identity and a mindset that remains even when off duty.

With these positives in mind, it is also important to remember that volunteering with the fire service is not like other volunteer types of work, and it is not a relaxing hobby. It comes with stressors. Loved ones of first responders, partners in particular, must be reminded of this from time to time, as it is easy to become somewhat detached from what their loved one is actually doing.

Many fire service activities seem fun, and much of it can be. But as discussed previously, the stresses and strains of emergency response are extreme and can take a physical and emotional toll on the first responder and their loved ones.

Exposure to danger or life-threatening situations impacts the body. Exposure to trauma, or simply witnessing human suffering, impacts the mind. Add to that lack of sleep while on call through the night, and the result can be exhaustion, irritability, and emotional withdrawal. As a result, a high-energy, well-meaning volunteer may be tough to live with at times, to say the least. The effects of these stressors can be reduced with effective communication.

Relationship Communication

Healthy communication is at the heart of all strong relationships. Having the ability to speak and listen openly to one another fosters closeness, builds trust and respect, and increases happiness. A breakdown in communication can lead to loved ones feeling isolated, misunderstood, and resentful.

Communication in Committed Relationships

Communicating well is one of the most important skills any couple can have. It is a key component of lasting and loving relationships. Communication is a skill, which means first responder families can work together to learn and practice basic communication techniques that can help build trust and intimacy.

Establishing good communication within any relationship can take a lot of patience and hard work. The following tips can help you improve communication skills at home:

- **Schedule a time to talk.** Schedule at least 15 minutes a day talking with each other. If making time becomes a challenge, this may require you to schedule an actual appointment or time on the calendar to commit to a conversation.
- **Openly share your thoughts and feelings.** Make an extra effort to share your feelings and thoughts about the things that matter to you most.

- **Be an active listener.** Commit to giving one another full attention for the 15 minutes, free of interruptions. Turn off the pager/alerts, turn off the television, silence text messages, and let phone calls go to voicemail.
- **Show that you are actively listening.** Repeat back what you heard through phrases such as, “What I hear you saying is ...” or “If I understand you correctly, you feel ...”
- **Offer frequent encouragement.** Use words that show support, express praise, and are encouraging. Studies show that couples who stay together use positive comments instead of negative ones.
- **Strengthen your relationship through daily texts of love.** Commit to sending one text a day that expresses your appreciation and love for the other.
- **Pay attention to body language.** Make eye contact and keep your focus on your partner when they are speaking.

Every first responder family will need to talk about difficult and tough topics at some point in their relationship. The following tips can help you navigate those conversations:

- **Communicate in a stress-free zone.** Avoid bringing up complex or sensitive topics when either person is pressed for time, tired, or hungry.
- **Maintain a sense of humor.** Humor can break tensions and help you connect during times of stress.
- **Prioritize conversations.** Focus on one difficult topic at a time. Bringing up multiple issues in the same conversation can lead to confusion and for the other person to become defensive.
- **Use “I” statements.** Express your feelings using “I” statements, such as:
 - I feel....
 - I’m concerned....
 - I’m worried....
- **Focus on the issue, not who is wrong.** Work towards finding a solution instead of trying to find who is to blame.
- **Provide a sense of understanding.** Make an effort to acknowledge the other person’s feelings and point of view, and show that you are listening.
- **Call a timeout.** If a conversation starts to become heated, call a timeout to avoid saying things that can’t be taken back. Calm down and then revisit the topics when emotions are in check.

Volunteer first responders, or their loved ones, may struggle to open up and engage in conversations. The following tips can help

you deal with situations when your partner is not engaging in effective communication:

- **Avoid assumptions.** Don’t assume the reason your partner is not talking is because they are upset with you. This could result from something they were exposed to on a call, and they are not ready to share the details.
- **Examine history.** We all were raised differently, and how we communicate can directly result from our experiences and the behaviors modeled for us as children. Some individuals were taught effective communication, some were rooted in anger, and others were taught to shut down.
- **Fear of rejection.** Sharing fears and weaknesses can be difficult for some. Your partner could worry about you viewing them differently or feeling rejected if they honestly share.

Five Essential Conversations for Fire Service Couples

There are *five essential conversations every firefighter couple should have*. These conversations should be considered a tool to help keep your relationship strong. They were designed to help first-responder families get on the same side – to see both perspectives and meet in the middle; to give and take, reciprocate, and understand. The fire service is a unique calling that presents unique challenges at home, but with awareness and work, a first responder can have both an amazing fire service career and a happy home life.

Conversation #1: Re-entry Time

Re-entry is when you come back together as a couple at the end of the workday or after a call. This re-connecting can be awkward for any relationship, but it can be especially difficult for the fire service couple as two very different worlds collide. If not addressed, the impact can cause tension and drama that may last for days. The needs of home often crash into a physically exhausted, sleep-deprived, and emotionally drained first responder who is not yet ready to deal with them. If not handled thoughtfully, the well-intended joy of reconnecting can be met with silence, distance, and even aggravation. Frustration on the part of family members that a key event or commitment was interrupted collides with a first responder who was just at a terrible incident, and arguments can ensue.

Enter the gift of re-entry time. This allows the first responder time to decompress without expecting in-depth conversation or needing to fulfill the ‘honey-do’ list immediately. Deeper communication and other needs will be better met when the returning first responder is more rested and better suited to engage. Re-entry time sets the tone for a loving, peaceful day together.

First responders can utilize the following re-entry activities to cope positively with the transition from call to home:

- Naps
- Exercise
- Music
- Journaling
- Reading
- Meditation/prayer

Support from home, such as letting the first responder know that you are eager to see them but understand they need some time to transition, is important. This attentiveness from loved ones demonstrates that though the firehouse is compelling, exciting, and a thrilling place to be, it still does not compare to home.

Conversation #2: Harshness & Gallows Humor

As mentioned many times before, first responders are exposed to the extremes of danger and trauma. To cope, they often develop thick skin and what is known as dark humor or gallows humor. Dark humor is often described as a form of humor that makes light of a subject the general public considers taboo and is usually considered too painful to discuss. Both are needed at times to survive.

Gallows humor is a safe and effective way of releasing emotional tension during and after challenging calls. To be able to laugh at death not only helps some cope emotionally, but it also provides much needed courage and strength to keep going.

Most industries have an inside form of humor to handle the stresses and strains of the daily grind. The fire service's humor can be as extreme as the pressures they face. Laughter releases chemical endorphins into the brain that activate the same receptors as drugs like heroin, creating a pain-killing, euphoria-producing effect. This leads to higher pain tolerance and combats stress hormones. In other words, laughter is good medicine.

The ability to laugh in bleak situations may be helpful, but how does this dark humor sound at home? Not always good. Tenderness can get lost in the harsh world of life and death, yet tenderness is vital for intimacy. Redirecting dark humor includes being equipped with key phrases like, "Remember, I am not a firefighter." This type of phrase reminds the first responder that they are, in fact, starting to treat others outside of their profession like one, and it provides an opportunity for the first responder to explain inside stories/jokes so the humor shared is not lost on the partner.

Journaling is the best companion for all seasons of life. It is a place to express gratitude and happiness. It is a place to release feelings about difficult changes. It provides a safe space to share fears and the things you have not been willing to speak about. There is no right or wrong way to do it. It merely starts with putting your pen on the paper and letting the words flow freely.

– Dr. Candice McDonald

Having a conversation about what is "too much" fire service at home is important. If a first responder feels they must be on guard and protective of what they share, the closeness you both cherish can deteriorate. Trust and open sharing are essential to a good relationship. Home must be a soft place to land, for both of you.

Remembering what your first responder is dealing with may help you find patience if they accidentally slip into harsh mode. First responders also need to be cautious not to accuse their loved ones of being too sensitive to brusque replies. The loved ones at home are not to blame because the first responder had a long night or a tough call. Apologies during times of misunderstandings and failed communication can go a long way. Remember, intimacy means "inmost," to share your deepest feelings and always support each other.

Conversation #3: Handling the Tough Runs

Most first responders will never say, "I have been traumatized." Instead, they will say something like, "I had a tough run." This means that, for whatever reason, this one got to them. This is what it means to be traumatized – to be wounded. First responders consistently report that the two most traumatizing runs are anything involving a child and calls that involve injury/death to a fellow first responder. But any run can be particularly tough for any reason, at any time.

What is a loved one to do when their first responder experiences that 'tough run' where they've been deeply and emotionally impacted? This can be a two-step process.

- **Step One: Speak Up.** First responders need to speak up and share then they had a “bad one,” as their loved ones are not mind readers. If they don’t speak up, their mannerisms and irritability can be misconstrued by their loved ones as something they did.
- **Step Two: Offer Support.** The fire service family needs to be aware of what resources they have to offer support to their first responder. What type of support is needed will vary. Everyone is different. Some need to talk, but many will not. Some need space, while most just need time, affection, and patience. Others will need peer support and/or counseling to help them cope.

The right actions applied by a loving family member are the best medicine for a wounded heart. There are no cookie-cutter answers. A conversation needs to occur to identify the best methods of support. Physical touch is another method of support, such as a gesture of affection or a massage. Touch releases feel-good chemicals, such as oxytocin and serotonin, which counter stress. Touch reinforces the bond you share and breaks down walls traumatic stress may build.

Conversation #4: The Fix-It Mentality

First responders are often fixers on steroids, as they must be. They must bring order to chaos as rapidly as possible to prevent death and destruction. The need to “fix” is engrained in their DNA. They overcome, adapt, and improvise, as every situation seems slightly different. This line of work becomes exciting and intense, as you never know what the next call will bring. This full-speed-ahead, in overdrive, sirens blaring mentality serves the first responder well in the workplace.

The question for the responder becomes, how does that intense, quick-fix nature work on your loved ones when they need you? It often backfires, erupting into a full-on meltdown. Why is that? Lots of reasons, including:

- Interpersonal relationships are based on conversation, not orders, delegating, or 5-point plans on a dry-erase board.
- “Fixing” can be misconstrued as impatience, criticism, or even condescension.
- Fixers must learn to tone it down and just listen, as “home life” is not a ‘quick fix’ situation. This can be hard to do for the “fixer on steroids.”

Fixers must remember that listening conveys patience, concern, and a deep desire to be there for your loved ones. This is often all their loved ones need, as opposed to your solutions or advice. Non-fixers must remember that this “fixing” is their language of

love, and a little patience and redirection may be needed when they slip up.

First responder families need to know and remember that their issues are more important to the first responder than the needs of the community they serve. It is important that families don’t suppress their needs because of an imagined sense of guilt or sacrifice. This does not help the first responder in their calling or with your relationship. Present your needs as needed, when needed. Have the fix-it talk before the relationship becomes “unfixable.”

Conversation #5: First Family First

First responders are in a unique position to enjoy the benefits of two families. The fire ‘house’ can become a second home with shared meals, shared holidays, large amounts of time spent together for training, duty crews, and calls, and some volunteer fire departments even have sleeping rooms. Like-minded fire service crews form very tight bonds as their lives depend on each other. This is a good thing, in fact an essential thing, as it increases their chances of survival. Most first responders are type-A achievers, going above and beyond to pursue excellence in a field that demands it. Both on and off duty, they seek training opportunities to enhance their skills because they need to, and they want to.



The volunteer fire service is a calling. First responders do it for the love of service. This act of service is all good until it isn't. If not balanced carefully, there's a point at which the first family can start to feel "second," tipping the scales so that a once supportive family at home begins to resent the fire service. Jealousy and resentment from the first responder's time away and the focus being shifted to the "second family" can lead to bitterness at home.

If this occurs, it is time to examine what must happen to allow for the "first family" to reconnect. This can start with asking the loved ones at home, "What do you need to feel first again?" Eliminate something from your schedule weekly to make room for weekly date nights/family time. During family or date time, put the phone down and focus on one another.

Creating a "family first" mentality should include family being welcome at the fire department and finding methods for engaging families together, such as family movie nights, pizza parties, game nights, breakfasts, etc.

Your marriage, relationship, and/or family at home should be the cornerstone of your life. Work to keep your family first and build from there. This will ensure a healthy balance between the first and second families while reducing the risk of losing either.

First responders should assure their first family that they are the top priority and that nothing is worth the price of losing them – not even the amazing calling of being a volunteer first responder. These words being said, and knowing that the first responder is willing to sacrifice the fire service for their family, may sometimes be all that needs to be heard.





Kids & the Fire Service

The volunteer fire service can be a wonderful addition to any child's life. It represents honor, service, and courage – all principles that build a rich character that will serve them all of their days. To have this demonstrated at home by a volunteer parent, even more so. Serving as a volunteer first responder can be an amazing opportunity to introduce your child to positive role models – a demonstration of neighbors helping neighbors. Children of volunteer first responders can learn valuable life lessons that will carry them into the future with a clear moral compass.

Orientating Children to the Fire Service

The following methods can help your child(ren) value and enjoy the volunteer fire service as much as their first responder parent:

- Bring them to the firehouse often and introduce them to the crew, so as they hear the names at home in conversation, they know who they are.
- Allow your children to explore and be comfortable with the apparatus and equipment. If permitted, let them go for a ride.
- Find opportunities to serve as a guest speaker in their classroom, 4-H group, extra-curricular activity, youth group, etc.
- Share positive stories with them about the people you helped and the thank yous you receive.

- Introduce them to fire service books, such as *Sprinkles the Fire Dog 1 & 2*, written/illustrated by firefighters Frank Viscuso and Paul Combs.

Balancing Parent-Volunteer Life

Being a family member of a volunteer first responder comes with a lot of cool benefits, but also some unique work-life-volunteer balance challenges. This can be extremely difficult when kids are involved. Some challenges include the chaotic schedule, interruptions to family activities, the worry tied to the danger of the job, and stress from an absent parent during storms, power outages, and disasters. The following can help the children of first responder families have a more positive experience.

Maintain a Regular Home Schedule for the Kids

Keeping kids on a regular schedule, despite the first responder being away, is important. Even during times of deployment, stay consistent, if at all possible, with mealtimes and bedtimes. Keeping a routine with meals and bedtimes are two things that you can control when your first responder is away. Having consistency by sitting down and eating together, with or without the first responder, may help the family feel sane and connected during irregularities related to the fire department. Sharing a meal is a perfect time to bond and talk about any feelings tied to the first responder being deployed. Maintaining bedtime routines,

regardless of whether the first responder is there to tuck them in, ensures your children are getting adequate sleep and don't get in the habit of "waiting up" for the first responder to come home.

Commit to Routine Family Time

Family time should not just occur during holidays and vacations, it should be part of the weekly family routine. Because of the erratic first responder schedule, quality family time can be lost, especially if you're waiting for big chunks of free time to overlap for all. If not careful, this can cause busy families to push meaningful interaction aside, missing out on golden opportunities each day to connect, hoping instead to get caught up during expensive vacations or holidays.

Life is better when a little time, even just a few focused minutes, is treasured daily. Family life is made up of our simple routines as well as our grander traditions. Every day can be special with your kids, no matter what the age — from simple play, to conversations of daily life, a discussion about a recently read book or watched show, or to the bigger conversations of hopes and dreams for the future. Family time comes in many forms, and the most precious memories are often made when least planned.

Schedule the time to have these focused family moments. Share with your kids that importance of scheduling "family time" and engage them in helping to pick out quality engagement activities. Remember, these activities can be no cost and as simple taking a walk together, playing a game, or cooking a meal together.

Engage Kids in Fire Department Events

Find opportunities for and allow your kids to engage in fire department events, such as fundraising and community events. Volunteer fire departments often raise their own funds for equipment they need to do their job. This is a wonderful



opportunity for families to get involved while also teaching children the act of service and the value of a dollar. Many children take pride in being a "volunteer" during fundraiser and community events. These events are not only positive and fun, but they are a great way for the whole family to connect and bond.

The Powerful Impact of Pets

Animals have a way of helping kids become caring people with a keener respect for life. First responders face death regularly – the deaths of others, and even the threat of death for themselves. Death and dying is something most parents strive to shield children from, and rightfully so. Too much exposure into traumas of the fire service may lead children to experience panic attacks every time their first responder parent leaves the house. Yet at the same time, it is important for kids to know a little of death so they cannot only be a bit better prepared if the worst should happen, but also to appreciate the value of life.

Pets are a good, safe place to start on this topic. We love our pets, and while truly special, they're not human. So, it's a gradual steppingstone along this path of coping with death. For many children, the first creatures to enter the home are bugs and frogs brought in from the outside. This a great place to start when learning of life and death as they don't live long, yet they can still be appreciated while they last.

More permanent pets, such as a family dog or cat, became important members of the family. The cycle of life with these pets teaches a great life lesson, that is often heartbreaking. We love them, we lose them, we bury them, we mourn them, and life goes on. When our pets become sick or injured, we seek emergency care for them. Much like the same care that community members seek when they fall ill or become injured. The attachment,



affection, and care for our furry family members can help us explain to our children what their first responder parent does when they are trying to preserve a life. A child who loses a pet understands the sadness and emotion one feels during loss, which can be beneficial in explaining why their first responder loved one is sad or upset after a call.

Family Time is NOT Negotiable

If family time is nonnegotiable, that means it is the top priority. With this as a stake in the ground, it becomes easier to make choices. Consider it a guidepost to keeping your family strong. With the unusual schedules of first responders, making family time may require creativity and the elimination of other things. It may also mean requesting certain days off from the department or turning down a shift or department event that conflicts with a pre-planned family activity. It is critical for the first responder and their family to work together to develop a plan for quality family engagement. Family time with teenage and adult children is still just as important as it is with young children.

Teenagers and the Volunteer Fire Service

Special consideration and support should be given to the teenagers of volunteer first responders. For one thing, teenagers are at an age where they may know families or victims of calls their parents respond to. At the same time, they are approaching an age where they are thinking about what the future holds for them, or perhaps demonstrating interest in joining a fire department or pursuing a career or education in the fire and emergency services. This can be a time of great challenge and great bonding.

Teens notice when their loved ones miss sporting events, school activities, recitals, or family celebrations. If their parent or loved one recently became a first responder, this absence could be a new experience for the teen. Communication is important – talk to your teen about what you are doing as a responder, the training you go through, and the people you help. Explain to them why you sometimes have to miss life events and why what you do is so important for the community.

While volunteer first responders are on the frontlines during emergencies including large-scale events like pandemics, storms, active threats, and major disasters, the teenagers are at home.



This can cause anxiety as they worry about their parent in the field. Teens are at an age where they understand the risks involved with service as a volunteer first responder and worry about their parent's safety. The difficulties caused by unpredictable schedules also make it difficult for the youth to spend time with their parent, which can cause feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Again, communication is key. Also making sure they know who to reach out to if their parent or loved one isn't available – whether it's for a ride to and from an activity, or someone to talk to about a rough day at school – will go a long way in helping teens feel safe and secure.

On the other hand, many teens are exploring their interests and many even need community service hours for school. This can be a great opportunity to let them explore the fire and emergency services. Maybe they can help with a department open house or fundraising event, come to the station for a ride-along, or even join the department's junior firefighter program. This can be a great opportunity to bond with your teen over similar interests and volunteer together.



The Gifts from Being a Volunteer First Responder

While there are challenges involved in this calling, the gifts from serving as a volunteer first responder are immense. This section looks at three gifts first responders and their families will experience.

The Gift of Passion

First responders are passionate about their service. The love and passion volunteers first responders have for the job is no small thing. Many people simply trudge through their workday with grudging acquiescence, tolerating but not loving what they do. Sadly, lots of folks even hate their jobs and, as Henry David Thoreau describes in *Walden*, “lead lives of quiet desperation,” dreaming and wishing for a way out. They’re bored, tired, distracted, and disinterested in the drudgery of repetitive, meaningless tasks.

This is not true among volunteer first responders. They show up alive and alert, excited to face moments when literally anything can happen. It’s exhilarating, challenging, and never the same. It’s physical, athletic, invigorating. Adrenaline flows, hearts race, lungs expand – first responders know they’re alive.

This calling offers many avenues and the opportunity to work with a variety of people and crews. First responders can ride an engine to extinguish a fire or utilize lifesaving equipment in an

ambulance to help a neighbor in need. The volunteer fire service has opportunities to serve as an educator, investigator, instructor, inspector, or administrator. The opportunities are nearly endless with something to offer for everyone. And remember, when you live with someone who loves what they do, you grow to love it too. Enthusiasm is contagious.

We do the job for the community and not the pay!

– Paul Acosta

The Gift of a Second Family

Volunteer first responders get the gift of a second family when they become a volunteer. Yes, the fire service can be dangerous, but first responders don’t work alone. They work with a team of highly trained, effective, and capable people who, together, reduce the risks to manageable levels. The job is less dangerous for each individual because of the brothers and sisters who volunteer alongside them.

Deep trust forms when you can put your life in another’s hands and know it will be safe there. First responders get to experience

teamwork on levels most will never comprehend. At the firehouse, first responders become more than just fellow volunteers. They become family. They train, eat, raise funds, and engage in fun together. They find humor together during dark moments. They make each other laugh with their infamous banter. They cheer each other up. They are truly sad to see each other go when someone moves away or retires.

The volunteer's First Family often also becomes close to those within the Fire Service Family. The crew and families of first responders come together to support one another and to support the community. They celebrate monumental life events together and are often the first ones present for another first responder's child's graduation or wedding.

It takes a special kind of person to become a first responder and an even more special family to support their loved one as a volunteer. But with volunteering comes the pleasure of being surrounded by amazing people. These are extraordinary, caring,

strong, fun, and enthusiastic people with a desire to serve their community. Who wouldn't want to serve with the best of the best? And what family couldn't get behind a team of this caliber for their loved one to enjoy?

The Gift of Giving

Being a volunteer first responder has meaning. First responders give time to save the lives of others, and it doesn't get any better than that. They show up on people's worst days and make them better. They restore order to chaos. They return the dead to the living. They get to see positive results from their actions. They are respected and appreciated by the public. At the end of a call, they can feel proud of what they've accomplished and glad for having shown up. And their families can feel proud knowing that their loved one is making a significant contribution to their community.

Conclusion

Being part of a volunteer service family can be an incredible and rewarding experience. Joining the fire service is a noble calling. It is the gift of giving one's time to help a neighbor in need. This gift to humanity, this service to the community, is heroic. This act of service is something a family can be proud of. When community members are having the single worst day of their lives, they call

upon their local volunteer first responder. For it all to work and for the first responder to be able to give, it starts with a loving and supportive family.

Remember the power you have as a team, and believe in the impact you can have together as a fire service family.

Together, as a family, you make the world a better place!

Helpful Resources and Links for the Volunteer Fire Service Family

There are a number of resources available for volunteer first responders and their families to help them navigate the fire service life. From first responder health and safety to support for families and relationships, we encourage you to tap into these resources to help your volunteer and your family stay safe and strong.

Family Support Resources

National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC)

www.nvfc.org

The NVFC provides tools, resources, education, advocacy, and programs to support the volunteer fire and emergency services. Membership in the NVFC comes with a variety of benefits for responders and their families, including free training in the Virtual Classroom, the Volunteer Voices member forum, an AD&D policy, the NVFC First Responder Helpline and more.

Fire Corps

www.firecorps.org

Fire Corps allows community members to serve their local fire/EMS department in non-emergency roles, such as fire prevention education, fundraising, administration, public relations, and more. It is a great way for family members of firefighters and EMS providers to get involved with the department without becoming a first responder themselves.

National Junior Firefighter Program

www.nvfc.org/juniors

Junior firefighter programs provide youth, including children of first responders, an opportunity to learn about the fire service and be involved in a safe and educational way. Youth gain valuable life skills such as teamwork, leadership, responsibility, commitment, and community service. At the same time, they assist the department through non-operational activities such as training, providing fire and life safety education in the community, fundraising, and more.

Volunteer Voices

<https://volunteervoices.nvfc.org>

The NVFC offers an online forum to connect and network with NVFC members from across the country to seek advice, share resources and best practices, and have friendly conversations.

Challenges of the Firefighter Marriage

<https://fireengineeringbooks.com/books/challenges-of-the-firefighter-marriage/>

This book by Anne and Mike Gagliano shares their 30-plus years of personal experience on how marriage can thrive in the chaotic world of firefighting. In addition, they have called upon well-known and respected couples who share their stories of comfort and guidance for firefighter families everywhere.

1st Tix

www.1sttix.org

1st Tix provides, at no cost to the first responder, tickets to concerts and sporting events to reduce stress, strengthen family bonds, create positive memories, and encourage first responders to stay engaged with local communities and American life.

Health & Safety Resources

National Volunteer Fire Council First Responder Helpline

www.nvfc.org/helpline/

The NVFC First Responder Helpline provides assistance to members and their families for a variety of behavioral health issues and work-life stresses. This includes immediate assistance in a crisis moment as well as confidential counseling, resources, and referrals to assistance for a range of issues.

Share the Load™

www.nvfc.org/help

This support program from the NVFC provides firefighters, EMS providers, and their families with tools and resources for behavioral health. This includes online resources and training.

Directory of Behavioral Health Professionals

www.nvfc.org/provider-directory

First responders and their families face unique challenges that can have a significant impact on behavioral health, and it is important to have access to providers that understand this. The NVFC offers a directory of behavioral health professionals vetted by the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance that are ready and equipped to help first responders and their families.

Federation of Fire Chaplains

www.firechaplains.org

The Federation of Fire Chaplains assists fire departments, fire service families, communities, and/or victims of crises by offering an effective chaplain service with the goal of providing aid and comfort.

Developing a Successful Fire Chaplain Service in Your Fire Department

www.iafc.org/docs/default-source/1vcos/vcoschiefsguidechaplainprogram.pdf?sfvrsn=5c4e630c_6

This guide from the International Association of Fire Chiefs' Volunteer and Combination Officers Section provides information for building a chaplain program and/or improving an existing program.

National Center for PTSD

www.ptsd.va.gov

Part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the National Center for PTSD is dedicated to research and education on trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder. The web site provides information and resources for those experiencing PTSD and stress reactions as well as for their family and friends.

Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance

www.ffbha.org

This nonprofit organization aims to educate senior fire officers, firefighters, EMS, and supporting personnel about behavioral health, the mental stressors that this type of job can have, and the consequences of not recognizing them.

Boulder Crest

<https://bouldercrest.org/>

Boulder Crest offers Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) programs that are research-backed and offered at no cost to participants. These programs train first responders to experience growth and thrive in the aftermath of traumatic events.

Firefighter Cancer Support Network

www.FirefighterCancerSupport.org

The objective of the Firefighter Cancer Support Network is to provide timely assistance and support to all fire service members and their families in the event of cancer diagnosis.

Lavender Ribbon Report

www.nvfc.org/lrr/

The Lavender Ribbon Report and the Lavender Ribbon Report Update present 11 specific actions firefighters need to take to lessen their risk of occupational cancer along with personal stories and examples of how departments are implementing the best practices.

Heart-Healthy Firefighter Program

www.healthy-firefighter.org

With heart attack being the leading cause of line-of-duty firefighter deaths, this NVFC program provides resources and tools for getting and staying heart healthy.

Smoking Cessation Resources

www.nvfc.org/tobacco/

The NVFC has compiled a series of resources to help first responders quit smoking and stay quit. Families, departments, and state associations can also use these resources to inform and help first responders take the first step towards a smoke-free life and support them as they maintain their healthier lifestyle.

Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP)

www.nifa.usda.gov/grants/programs/capacity-grants/efnep/expanded-food-nutrition-education-program

Funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, EFNEP uses education to support participants' efforts toward self-sufficiency, nutritional health, and well-being. EFNEP combines hands-on learning, applied science, and program data to ensure program effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability.

Everyone Goes Home

www.everyonegoeshome.com

This program by the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation is designed to prevent firefighter line-of-duty deaths and injuries. It includes resources and training to help first responders and departments implement the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives.

Disaster and Line-of-Duty Injury/Death Resources

NVFC Volunteer Firefighter Support Fund

www.nvfc.org/nvfc-volunteer-firefighter-support-fund/

The NVFC Volunteer Firefighter Support Fund provides a stipend to eligible volunteer first responders whose homes have been impacted by a state- or federally-declared disaster or a home fire. The stipend helps these firefighters and emergency personnel meet their basic needs in the aftermath of a disaster or fire.

Funeral Procedures for Firefighters

www.nvfc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Funeral_Procedures_Guide.pdf

This NVFC resource manual provides information about how to properly conduct a funeral service for a firefighter.

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

www.firehero.org

The Foundation provides programs and resources to help departments and families deal with the tragedy of losing a firefighter in the line-of-duty. This includes Local Assistance State Teams (LAST), information on benefits available in each state for the families of fallen firefighters, a Fire Service Survivor Network, and more.

[illegible]

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

WE'RE ALL
IN THIS
TOGETHER.



National Volunteer Fire Council

712 H Street, NE, Ste. 1478

Washington, DC 20002

202.887.5700

www.nvfc.org