

The Department Chaplain

Is yours an active agent of spiritual support to your Fire/Rescue/EMS organization...or just the local minister to call because he always has been?

When we talk of things involving "religion" many do not want to hear, bristle at the thought of the discussion, or just flat out get up and leave the room. Many times people, particularly the officers responsible for the placement of these individuals, look at the requirements of a specific, or personal, denominational choice, rather than who would serve the Department best.

We hear so often about the various positions within the Fire & EMS Service for our local communities and of all the important requirements of each of these positions, but, by what standard do we rate our Fire Chaplains? Is it necessary for the Chaplain to be an active member of your service or just someone to call in the event of an LODD? Should there be standards that these individuals should have to meet just like their fellow Department members, as best as is possible, (considering there are always exceptions to every rule), or not? And, lastly, should the Chaplain be encouraged to fulfill their position with the full support from the members/personnel, or be just another "Sky Pilot" that people get nervous whenever they are around?

These, and many other questions, should certainly be addressed when considering the most qualified individual for this vital position. The intent of involvement is as varied as the qualifications, but it should be noted that if your Chaplain is only called when someone dies, how can they possibly fulfill their calling of spiritual support to your department...and your community?

Their role, when permitted to function in its ideal, is much broader than many know or understand. A properly utilized Chaplain should be an active and thriving position whether they double as a Firefighter or not. Their role is not just to support the Department but the community as well. The training and requirements should be held to the same high standards that are required within the ranks of the other personnel.

When you have a fire to respond to or a rescue to perform do you send Animal Control? Of course not. Trained and qualified personnel respond. But when a Chaplain is needed is the individual qualified to administer to the spiritual needs of the one suffering or grieving? Or, just the "same one we've always used". Do you permit the Chaplain to act as an agent of the Department alone, or to also help support the community on scene, as well?

These individuals, or families, that have just suffered a grave loss, whether in a death of a very dear friend or relative, or the tragic loss of everything they own, are suffering a great deal. Do we just mumble, "Sorry for your loss", load up the hoses and drive away... or do we offer this service to the general populace as well.

In order to offer this service to the community we must first recognize the service is even there! And, the Chaplain must be an able, qualified, and willing agent of the Department. There are certifying agencies such as the Federation of Fire Chaplains which require a standard for membership and offer training programs to enhance the Chaplains capabilities. They are trained in such things as PTSD recognition among the ranks, working with Incident Command Teams, how to deal with the grieving, and how to "minister to the troops", and the community.

A Chaplains job is, or should be, much more passionate than just "doing funerals". And, one of the most important things that must be understood by the Chaplain themselves is that a Chaplain's job is NOT to fill the pews of their own church! It is to provide spiritual support. It is NOT to evangelize to "save the lost". It is to provide spiritual support (I hope I haven't over-stressed this point!). Should these questions arise they should certainly feel that they may feel free to discuss these questions...but, they are not there to preach. They are there to provide spiritual support and ministerial counseling. Often, department members will gather once or twice a month (for those interested and not as a required "drill") for a prayer breakfast, or lunch, for example. Personal, direct contact by visiting personnel should be built into every chaplaincy program. Visiting fire stations at least once a month on alternating shifts (if applicable) is a good practice in the emergency service chaplaincy.

The Chaplain should be involved in the Dept. members' needs as well. Whether it is for a sick family member, a death in the family or whatever the need, the Chaplain should be available. But, the Chaplain's job is not just for sadness and grief. They can perform weddings...celebrate with you in the birth of a child or grandchild and so many other functions.

Some of the responsibilities of a Chaplain are, or should be:

- Spiritual Guidance

Two important functions of the chaplain are to help firefighters, EMT's, and their families in times of crisis and to help them with their spiritual needs. Of all the many duties the chaplaincy may entail, these are the principal responsibilities.

- Assist in emergency situations

Dealing with families when a disabling injury or a death occurs is a primary function of the chaplain. To provide the best service at this type of incident, the chaplain should respond as often as possible to all major fire situations. At major incidents it is often the chaplain who is free to assist in handling unruly or hysterical people. This becomes a needed function at rescues, extrications, situations that draw a sizeable crowd, or incidents where children are involved.

- Liaison with hospitals and clinics
- Conducting/assisting at funerals
- Weddings
- Counseling
- Visitation
- Attending functions of the Department
- Conduct training classes

Classes can be taught on the resources and services available through the chaplaincy program, critical incident stress management, family life, ethics, and many other areas.

- Member of Critical Incident Response Team
- Availability

The chaplain must be available seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. When the chaplain cannot be available, it should be made known and someone else made available to fill in. In order for the chaplain to be available at all times, it is necessary for the department headquarters or dispatcher to be able to contact him or her by telephone, pager, or radio at all times.

The chaplain of the fire and/or EMS department(s) is one of the most vital positions in the emergency service. It is a job that is demanding, confidential, trusting, and absolutely fundamental for the spiritual welfare of the firefighters, rescue personnel and their families. The Fire or EMS Department administrator can be assured that it is one of the finest and most needed programs that can be enhanced, or started.

To the chaplain reviewing these notes, accept the chaplaincy with pride but serve in it with humility, constantly calling on God for strength and wisdom.