

An Introduction to Fire Chaplaincy

Massachusetts Corps of Fire Chaplains

Introduction

The purpose of this publication is to provide a brief introduction to fire department chaplaincy. It will provide basic information, but certainly does not cover every issue in detail. We recognize that all of us continue learning as we do this important work.

All fire departments have their own culture and sometimes their own language. The information presented here applies to fire departments in many locations, but your fire department may do things a bit differently. For example, in some places a rescue truck is a big truck that carries lots of equipment for making rescues, including some very specialized gear. In other places if the officer in charge calls for “a rescue” it’s an ambulance that is required.

There is no substitute for time the chaplain spends with his or her department, getting to know the personnel and the culture of the department. Dropping in to have a cup of coffee with the duty crew may be the most valuable work a chaplain can do on a day to day basis.

What you need to know about firefighting

No one expects the chaplain to be an expert in firefighting. But you do need to know something about this business for your own safety. You may also have the opportunity to explain the actions of the fire department to bewildered onlookers or homeowners. One example will serve to illustrate. The fire department arrived at a two story home with smoke seeping from every crack and crevice. They put a ladder up and even before there was water being applied to the fire they were cutting a hole in the roof. Smoke billowed out of the hole in the roof and then ignited. A bright column of flame shot from the hole. A neighbor asked the chaplain, “Do these guys know what they are doing? The fire didn’t look too bad until they cut a hole in the roof. Now look at it!” What the neighbor did not understand, and what hopefully you could explain, is that the house was charged with smoke and heat. Rushing in through the front door would add oxygen to the mix, possibly igniting it in an explosive manner. The house would have been completely destroyed and it could have been deadly for the firefighters. The vent hole in the roof allowed some of the smoke and heat to escape. The fact that it ignited at the vent is acceptable. The roof will have to be replaced, but the house can be saved.

Protective gear

Fire is dangerous. The heat of a house fire can be hot enough to melt glass. The smoke is poisonous and has become more and more poisonous as we have introduced more plastics into our homes. Firefighters wear protective gear (and you should too) to protect themselves from the effects of heat, smoke, fumes and other hazards of the fireground. Standard firefighting personal protective equipment (PPE) is often called turnout gear or bunker gear. This includes protective pants and coat. Both have insulation against heat and a vapor barrier against steam and gases. The firefighter also wears a fire resistant hood and a helmet. Proper gloves and boots are important in this work. Most firefighters

have a PASS device (Personal Alert Safety System), which sounds an alarm if they remain still too long. This helps locate fallen firefighters. Rounding out the gear is the Self Contained Breathing Apparatus or SCBA. This provides air for the firefighter to breathe in the fire situation. And no, those aren't oxygen tanks on the firefighter's backs. It's compressed breathing air. All of this is heavy. And it can be very hot. This is one reason firefighters need to go to rehab after an extended period of work on the fireground.

The Big Red Trucks

Fire trucks are often painted red, but you may find yellow, greenish yellow, or white, along with a few other color schemes. There is debate about which color is best, but the paint is not the most important part of a fire truck. It's what's inside that counts. Some fire trucks, called pumpers or engines, carry water, hose and a host of other items needed to "put the wet stuff on the red stuff." Their primary function is to pump water and since many of them can put out one thousand gallons of water a minute, the water they carry to the fire can be quickly used up. Larger hoses are used to connect the engine to a fire hydrant for a sustained water supply. In other cases the pumper may be used to pump water out of a pond in an operation called drafting. In places where hydrants are not available another type of fire truck called a tanker helps to provide water. As the name implies, the most important aspect of this truck is a large water tank. There are a variety of trucks used for aerial operations, when height is needed to accomplish a rescue, open a vent hole in the roof or to pour water on a fire from above. Sometimes these are simply called "trucks". These include ladder trucks, tower ladders and snorkels.

A Division of Labor

Many fire departments divide equipment and personnel into different functional groups. An engine company uses an engine or pumper and their primary task is to provide the water that snuffs out the fire. A ladder company uses an aerial truck. Their primary tasks are to make entry to the building, search for anyone who might be trapped and open the building to vent smoke and heat. Some communities also have rescue companies. They have specialized training and equipment that allows them to perform tasks such as automobile extrication, searching for victims, and other rescue from difficult situations. RIT teams are becoming more and more common at structure fires. The Rapid Intervention Team stands by, ready to act immediately in the event of firefighters in need of help inside the fire building.

Attacking the Fire

A structure fire is a battle waged between the heat, fire and smoke, and the firefighters who are there first to protect the lives of anyone who might still be in the structure and second to protect property. There are really only two ways to attack a fire. The protective gear firefighters use has enabled them to make aggressive interior attacks. They take the hose into the building, find the fire and extinguish it, hopefully with a minimum of damage to the structure. When the fire gets larger it is no longer feasible or safe to attack from the inside. So an exterior or defensive attack is made from the outside of the building. This can be done with hoses, sometimes called hand lines, but often is done with deck guns mounted on the apparatus or from ladder trucks.

Venting

We already mentioned the process of venting, but a little more detail is helpful. Venting reduces the possibility of a sudden flare up in the fire, called a flashover, or even an explosion of smoke called a backdraft. Both of these can be deadly to firefighters working in the building. Venting clears some smoke and heat from the building, making it easier to work inside. There are three types of venting. Vertical venting is done by opening the building at the top, often at the roof, to release the hot gases. Horizontal venting is done by taking out windows. While it may not be as efficient as vertical venting, it can be done quickly by breaking the glass. Power venting employs fans to push air into the building, forcing the smoke out through other openings. Another form of power venting uses water from a hose, directed out a window, to remove smoke. Power venting usually takes place after the fire is knocked down, but onlookers often wonder why the fire department is shooting water out the window.

Tools of the Trade

There are many tools used in the work of the firefighter. In fact, firefighters have been quite inventive over the years, creating new tools to meet their needs. Everyone knows that firefighters use hoses. But there are different kinds. Hoses that are used to supply water are larger and can be three, four or five inches in diameter. Many fire engines carry one thousand feet of supply line. The hoses that are used to attack the fire are most commonly one and three quarter inches in diameter. This hose can pack quite a punch while being maneuvered into place by a few firefighters. Big fires require more water to extinguish, so sometimes a two and one half inch attack line will be used. You will see several firefighters struggling to get that into place and use. That reel with rubberized hose on the engine is called a booster line. You won't see that used much anymore.

Sometimes the fire department arrives as people are streaming out of the building. In that case the firefighters don't have to force their way in. But there are times when the fire is in a building that is locked up tight. That's when other tools come into play. The Halligan Bar combines a claw like end with a pike and pry bar on the other end for a multipurpose tool. Pair the Halligan with a flat head ax and you have what is known as "The Irons", which can get through most any door – one way or another. Firefighters also use axes to break through roofs and walls, although saws are being used more often in those jobs.

A fairly new tool in firefighting is the thermal imaging camera. These precious items (which have thankfully come down in price in recent years) help a firefighter see through smoke and darkness to find warm objects. That object might be a victim waiting to be rescued or the seat of an unseen fire.

Firefighters depend on radios. An old timer (who began his firefighting experience in the early 1900's) was asked how they managed without radios on the fireground. He said "There was a lot of yelling". The "bugles" or "trumpets" you see on an officer's insignia were really megaphones used to shout orders. Thankfully today radio technology helps us at every turn. Radio pagers summon off duty firefighters when their help is needed.

Radios in the apparatus help direct and update firefighters on the way to the scene. And portable radios relay commands instantly. There is a caution. Always assume that people are listening, because they are. Radio scanners that tune fire and police frequencies are quite popular and people like to listen to the action.

Most fire apparatus carry fire extinguishers. There are different types for different purposes. Pressurized water extinguishers, sometimes called “cans” can be used to put out small fires, such as a wastebasket fire. Extinguishers filled with carbon dioxide provide a cold blast that smothers fire. Dry chemical extinguishers use chemical powders that interrupt the fire’s chemical reaction. The dry chemical extinguishers are useful in situations where water would only add to the danger, such as an electrical fire.

When the fire is knocked down the work has only just begun. The process called overhaul includes searching for hidden heat and fire that might flare up again later. Often walls and ceiling must be opened to search for fire in the hidden spaces or voids in a building. Long pike poles are useful for pulling ceilings and axes and plaster hooks are other tools that might be used in this process. Overhaul may also include trying to protect belongings not already damaged by the fire.

Rehab

When an incident lasts for a long period of time, or occurs in times of heat or cold, there is a need for firefighters to take a break from their work on the fireground. A rehab area may be established for this purpose, and this can be a good area for the chaplain to be present. In rehab firefighters have an opportunity to take a breather, rehydrate and get ready to go back to work.

The Incident Command System

The emergency services have adopted the incident command system (ICS) to coordinate response to emergencies. This is especially important in large scale events. ICS puts one person in charge, with a chain of command to coordinate response. The chaplain will be a part of this system, reporting to the incident commander or the person the commander designates. When the chaplain arrives on the scene she or he must report into the commander, asking if there is anything the chaplain needs to do. Often the chaplain will remain close to the incident commander. It is also important to report to the commander before leaving the scene.

MVCs

Responding to motor vehicle collisions (MVCs) is an all too common part of the firefighter’s work. Many of these incidents are routine. However, a bad accident may require lengthy extrication efforts, produce serious bodily injury or cause death. Hydraulic extrication tools, often called “the jaws” are used to cut through metal car parts, spread crumpled metal and clear the way for removing the victims. Sometimes a medical helicopter will be called to transport severely injured people directly to a trauma center. Some of these situations may require the chaplain to be present at the scene or become a reason for follow up at a later time.

EMS

Some fire departments provide Emergency Medical Services or EMS for their community. In other places EMS is provided by a separate branch of local government or a private company. EMS requires a great deal of specialized training and equipment, including ambulances. Some cities and towns are finding that the EMS side of the business takes up an increasing amount of fire department labor. The most common question related to EMS occurs when the patient is loaded into the ambulance, but the ambulance remains on scene for several minutes. What is the reason for the delay in transport? Departments with Advanced Life Support (ALS) can provide some of the care normally done at the hospital right on scene. Intravenous lines are started to provide fluids and life saving drugs can be administered. Patients can be intubated to allow oxygen to flow to the lungs. A monitor will allow the paramedics to check a patient's heart beat and oxygen levels.

Fatal Fires

Despite the best efforts of firefighters, fires still claim many lives each year. A fatal fire is a time of sadness and sometimes a test of patience. The investigation needs to be painstaking and complete. Hours may pass before the body can be removed from the scene. The presence of a fire chaplain on the scene until the body is removed can add dignity to the situation and becomes a source of comfort. A short, inclusive prayer over the body when it is removed offers a blessing to a bad situation. Families that become aware of this prayer are often comforted to know that a chaplain was present.

Crime Scenes

The fire department is frequently involved at crime scenes. Sometimes this is obvious, such as when the ambulance is called to assist the victim of an assault. Other times it is not as obvious. A building fire may be considered suspicious until proven otherwise. All fire personnel, including the chaplain, must be careful around potential evidence, disturbing it as little as possible.

The work of the fire chaplain

Fire chaplaincy is an opportunity to do the work of God, but not an opportunity for proselytizing. It is not a time for winning converts, but a time to express the love that God has shown to us in practical ways. We are also called to minister to firefighters from a wide variety of faith traditions, including those of no faith.

Although you may be the greatest preacher in the last hundred years, your firefighters don't want to hear you preach. But they want you to be present, especially when the going is rough. We know that there are no magic words that can take away the pain of a failed rescue, the death of a child or the death of a brother or sister firefighter. But your presence will speak in ways you may never fully appreciate or understand.

The most important work of chaplaincy may be to provide a non-anxious supportive presence in times of trouble. A chaplain had been at the scene of a terrible event, saying few words, and later was thanked for all she or he did. "I didn't do much," the chaplain said. And the reply was, "You were there, and that made all the difference."

This presence is especially important in the case of a death. A short prayer may be said over the body, but it is the chaplain's presence that helps to provide dignity in that terrible moment. Families are often comforted to know that a chaplain was there to pray over their loved one's remains.

It sometimes seems that the words most used by a chaplain are, "How are you doing?" The answer is usually, "OK" even if that is not quite the truth. Occasionally, in a bad situation, an honest answer is given, which probably involves one or more profanities. The important thing is that the chaplain is there and the chaplain cares. You will find that the language of firefighters is not the language you would use in the pulpit. Often firefighters will apologize to the chaplain for swearing in his or her presence. One chaplain responded that he wished the firefighters knew some other words and the firefighter offered to swear in Portuguese instead.

In his book Band of Brothers Stephen Ambrose noted the soldier's "inalienable right to grouse." (Ambrose, Stephen E., Band of Brothers : E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest, Simon & Schuster, 1993, page 118). Firefighters seem to have inherited this right as they carry on the fight to protect lives and property. The chaplain is certain to hear complaints about the leadership of the department, other firefighters, the equipment they have to work with, the conditions of the station and the support (or lack thereof) they receive from the municipality. Sometimes these complaints are just blowing off steam. Other times there are serious issues involved. Either way, it pays to listen intently.

The first focus of a fire chaplain must be the men and women of the fire service. We exist to serve them. In fact, the motto of the Massachusetts Corps of Fire Chaplains is "Serving those who serve." However, there are times when fire chaplains are also called to minister to those who have been affected by fires, disasters, accidents and other events. The support given at the time of tragedy is usually short term. Often a fire chaplain might assist a family in making connections with their own faith community.

Naturally, the first step in fire chaplaincy is being appointed by the Chief of the Department. Before that happens, you need to sit down with the Chief and discuss expectations – what will the department expect from you and what do you expect from the department. Go over the sample "Standard Operating Guidelines" or SOGs in Appendix II, but remember that the Chief will want to adapt this for the department.

Once you have been appointed by the Chief of the Department, the best way to get started in fire chaplaincy is to meet the men and women of the fire department. Drop in to the station now and then for a cup of coffee and to shoot the breeze. Remember that most fire departments have four groups, while some departments have multiple stations. So it might take several visits before you have had a chance to meet every firefighter. Even if you don't remember all their names, it is worthwhile that they have met you before they need you.

There are official events that call for the chaplain's presence. You may be asked to offer a prayer on Fire Fighter's Memorial Sunday (regrettably often held on Sunday mornings when many of us are otherwise occupied). There are also retirement dinners and other gatherings where you may be invited. Some chaplains see their only function in these events. We sometimes call them "Banquet Chaplains" and this is not to be considered a compliment.

The chaplain is not needed at every incident. In fact, there is no way that you can respond to every medical call, every fire and every rescue. Remember that the department has four groups to cover twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. And you cannot keep up. However, there are times when your presence would be helpful at the scene. That's why it is important for you and the Chief to work out when and how you would be called. The sample SOGs attached at the end of this document provide a list of incidents which could need attention from the chaplain. However, remember that even when your presence may be helpful, you might be the last thing on the mind of a very busy incident commander. That's why many of us keep an ear open to the fire department radio frequency whenever we can.

What you need to know about CISM

A critical incident can be defined as any event that provokes a strong emotional reaction which has the potential to interfere with normal life. Firefighters, by the nature of their work, are exposed to critical incidents on a regular basis. In the past young firefighters were advised by their elders, "It's part of the job, toughen up, get used to it." We now recognize that these events take a toll on firefighters and that effect is cumulative over time. Naturally, some events have a greater effect than others. The death or serious injury of a child, the death or serious injury of another firefighter and any event causing a large number of deaths are examples of critical incidents that will have a lasting effect on firefighters. Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) is a system that provides help in dealing with these effects. The goal is to limit the effects of critical incidents. The system takes key concepts from lessons learned by the military from traumatic events and has been developed in the emergency response community over the years. CISM cannot take away the pain, but it helps firefighters to understand, anticipate and cope with the effects of traumatic situations. There are several aspects of the CISM system. Fire chaplains will commonly encounter the following interventions:

- Defusing – takes place very soon after a traumatic event and provides a brief exploration of the event with information about how it may affect those who experienced it.
- Debriefing – a more detailed examination of the traumatic event, with examination of how the participants are being affected, along with suggested coping techniques. This typically takes place a few days after the event.
- Individual Crisis Intervention – a one on one meeting to discuss difficulties being experienced related to traumatic events.
- Pre-incident Education – Helping our firefighters understand critical incident response as part of an on-going educational effort.

- Crisis Management Briefing – a meeting with group of people to explain what is happening in a particular situation, how it may be affecting people and giving ideas on how to handle these effects.

The chaplain must remember that these interventions, with the exception of the individual crisis intervention, are conducted by a team. The team should include a chaplain, but also includes peers, who are trained emergency responders and trained mental health professionals.

One of the key concepts of CISM is that the reactions people experience to a critical incident may seem troubling, even abnormal. There may be flashbacks and nightmares, to name a few of many possible reactions. We assure our people that these are “normal reactions to an abnormal event.”

Confidentiality is a vital part of any CISM intervention. Nothing said in an intervention should be repeated. No reports are given to department command staff, except to say that an intervention was held. In fact, confidentiality is vital to all of the work done by a fire chaplain. However, if there is a threat of harm to others or self, then the chaplain is required to seek help for that individual, even if it means breaking confidence.

Line of Duty Death

No one wants to think about the pain and suffering caused by the death of a firefighter in the line of duty. But given the danger of firefighting, such deaths happen all too often. It is important that the department and especially the chaplain prepare for such tragic events. The chaplain will be involved from the time of notification to follow up after the funeral. It is important to note that while the chaplain may be present when notification is given to family members, it is not the chaplain’s job to make the notification. The chaplain is there for support. Line of duty deaths require assistance from CISM teams and other chaplains to care for the other firefighters and the families.

Caring for ourselves

We encourage firefighters to take advantage of CISM and other means of taking care of themselves as they deal with the stress of their jobs. It is vital that fire chaplains do the same. There is a need for chaplains to take care of themselves physically, psychologically and spiritually. This requires an intentional program of self care. It also requires us to remember that at times we are the ones who need to be debriefed and we are sometimes the ones who need the support of others.

The Massachusetts Corps of Fire Chaplains

The Massachusetts Corps of Fire Chaplains was organized in 1999. Naturally, fire chaplains served for many years before this time. The intention in forming this group was to provide support necessary for this work. Today the importance of the Corps of Chaplains can be seen in several areas:

- Support – The work of the fire chaplain is not always easy. In fact, at times it is quite painful. Chaplains of the Corps support one another in difficult times.
- Setting standards – The Corps sets standards and expectations for chaplains that involve training, qualifications and practice.

- Training – The Corps provides, along with the Department of Fire Services, training opportunities for chaplains to enhance their knowledge and skills. The training of fire chaplains must be an on-going process.
- Mutual Aid – Just as neighboring fire departments assist each other in dealing with larger incidents, so fire chaplains assist each other when coverage and help is needed. The Corps provides a framework for this to happen, based on the fire district system used by the Department of Fire Services. The Corps also has the ability to mobilize large numbers of chaplains for large events, and has done so in the past for the Worcester Fire in 1999, Ground Zero in 2001, and the Station Night Club Fire in 2003.

Appendix I – Suggestions For Further Reading

Massachusetts Corps of Fire Chaplains website
www.massfirechaplains.com

Federation of Fire Chaplains website
www.firechaplains.org

International Critical Incident Stress Foundation
www.icisf.org

A good starting point:

[www.icisf.us/images/pdfs/rar/Crisis Intervention A Review.pdf](http://www.icisf.us/images/pdfs/rar/Crisis%20Intervention%20A%20Review.pdf)

Line of Duty Death information
 Resources from the Fallen Firefighters Foundation
www.firehero.org/

Incident Command System
 There are various levels of training in ICS, but IS100 is the introduction
<http://training.fema.gov/emiweb/is/is100a.asp>

Information about spiritual care in times of disaster can be found in a Southern Baptist training manual:
<http://www.namb.net/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=8589979047>

Appendix II - Sample SOGs

Your Fire Department

STANDARD OPERATING GUIDLINES

FIRE DEPARTMENT CHAPLAIN

PURPOSE

The Fire Department Chaplain provides spiritual guidance and emotional support to firefighters and their family members whenever necessary. This guidance and support will also be offered to the citizens who become victims of fire or natural disaster.

SCOPE

The Chaplain should be able to respond to emergencies on a 24 hour basis. The Chaplain will provide counseling, tend to the sick and injured or care for any other spiritual need which may arise either within the ranks of the Weymouth fire department or to any citizen during an emergency.

PROCEDURE

The Chaplain will be appointed by the Chief of Department and will serve until further notice. If, for any reason, the Chaplain is unable to perform the duties of Chaplain, the Chief of Department shall be notified so that a search for a replacement can be initiated.

The Chaplains shall be notified of the following circumstances:

- 1) Working fires,
- 2) Multiple alarm fires,
- 3) Fire fatalities - Fire Fighters,
- 4) Fire fatalities - Civilian,
- 5) Hospitalization of Fire Fighters due to injury or illness,
- 6) Death of a Retired Fire Fighter,
- 7) Death of a Fire Fighters' family member
- 8) Official functions of the Fire Department (ie.. Fire Fighters Memorial Sunday, Installation of Officers, etc.)
- 9) Prolonged extrication
- 10) Any Sudden death to include traumatic death
- 11) Severe injury to child
- 12) Emotionally challenging scene
- 13) Scenes requiring extended periods of time, including prolonged rescue or recovery operations
- 14) Instances calling for mutual aid
- 15) Any other event that the duty officer or command deems stress provoking for any member of the department.
- 16) Any instances where the aid of a Chaplain would be valuable.

Whenever possible, the Chaplain shall respond to:

- 1) working fires,
- 2) multiple alarm fires,
- 3) fires involving injuries to firefighters or civilians, and,
- 4) fires involving fatalities to firefighters or civilians.

If a member of the Fire Department is injured in the line of duty, the Chaplain may be designated by the Incident Commander or by the Chief of Department as the hospital liaison for that incident. The Chaplain shall respond to the hospital to which the member was transported, ascertain the condition and prognosis of the member, and update the Chief of Department as to the member's condition as soon as possible.

Members of the Fire Department are encouraged to utilize the services offered by the Chaplain. Also, the Chaplain is encouraged to make regular visits to each station in an effort to become familiar with the members and the workings of the Department.

While providing for the emotional and spiritual support of firefighters, the Chaplain may suggest Critical Incident Stress Management interventions when appropriate.

The Chaplain will be issued the following uniform clothing: Dress blouse, double-breasted, gold buttons and braid; Dress hat, white, gold trim; Uniform hardware: badge, collar insignia, hat insignia.

The Chaplain will be issued the following protective clothing: Helmet, turnout coat, boots, and gloves.

When responding to working fires, the Chaplain shall report directly to the Incident Commander at the Command Post and will wear full protective clothing (except self contained breathing apparatus).

When attending official functions of the Fire Department or funeral ceremonies for deceased members, retirees, or their family members, the Chaplain shall wear the Class A dress uniform.

The Chaplain shall maintain membership in the Massachusetts Corps of Fire Chaplains and take advantage of training offered by that organization.