

# *Serving Those Who Serve*

## *Beginning A Fire Department Chaplaincy Program*



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## *The Beginning Of A Fire Department Chaplain Program*

The first major step has been accomplished, that is the fact that your department wants to start a chaplaincy program. The rest of this document will be directed toward providing the information needed to make your fire department chaplain as effective as possible.

Fire departments by tradition have had someone in the role of chaplain since the beginning of the organized fire service. In many departments, a local clergy person has been appointed chaplain to handle emergency situations within the department, such as serious injury to fire department members, line-of-duty deaths, including notification of family members, and suicides involving fire department members and their families. Chaplains have fulfilled a traditional ceremonial role by giving the invocation at fire department functions and conducting weddings and funerals for fire department members and their families.

All too often, the functions normally handled by a chaplain have been taken over by members of the administrative staff and firefighters within the department. When needs arose and no one was available to handle them, the staff and members of the department would do their best to handle the crisis. In the modern fire service, numerous factors have made it very desirable to establish a formal position of chaplain. With all the pressures present today, the need for this position is found in all fire departments—paid or volunteer, large or small, private or public.

As our world becomes more complex, facing the problems of life becomes dramatically more difficult. What used to be a straightforward, clear path to follow becomes cluttered with, increasing crime, escalating levels of violence, crowded living conditions, financial difficulties, COVID, social issues, and extremely intrusive challenges to our personal values and beliefs. The pressures of living in a complicated world affect us all. Many become emotionally and spiritually crippled when they find that what used to “work” is no longer effective in coping with the pressures.

People under stress tend to look to public agencies and institutions for answers and services that will solve society’s problems. When programs and services fail to improve and simplify living conditions, the providers are subject to the outrage of a frustrated public. As a result, individual public servants, such as a firefighter, are confronted with stress-producing accusations of ineffectiveness, inefficiency, and ulterior motives when they attempt to help. The emergency service worker is confronted with making a living in a

complex world, and with having to deal with disenchanted recipients of their services. At the same time, society seems to expect public servants to be immune to the effects of such stress. The emergency worker faces some very real risks if they even hint that the stress is too much or is getting to them. It is as if the firefighter is expected to be the “perfect” person. They are expected to solve problems, make the complex simple, and perform emergency responses without experiencing any emotional turmoil in the process.

Emergency service workers, such as firefighters, who respond to life-threatening situations have additional stresses surrounding their lives that most professions do not have.

1. **LEVEL OF UNCERTAINTY** – It is a fact that when the alarm sounds, firefighters are going to respond. *This is their profession*. There is no such thing as a routine call until after the incident is safely over. When the alarm hits, the firefighter faces the unknown and, all too often, becomes the victim of a service-related injury or even death. The family of the emergency worker is under the stress of not knowing what is going to happen at any given incident.
2. **INTERPERSONAL TENSIONS** -- Interpersonal tensions are constant within the emergency services simply because of the very nature of the profession. The fire service organization creates a rigid working environment with a strong, competitive mentality on the part of the emergency worker.

Most promotions are made from within the department. Firefighters compete against their fellow firefighters for advancement. Shift work often leads to tensions. Long periods of time are spent with coworkers in training, station and equipment maintenance, fire prevention inspections, and in highly intense emergency incidents. The adrenaline is often flowing just because they are on duty. This factor alone increases tensions as firefighters try to deal with each other and the public while the body is in a continual state of alarm.

Often tensions are heightened by the long hours spent in the fire station away from their families. The fire service becomes the second family for the firefighter. This also adds stressors to the life of the emergency responder.

3. **EXTREME PHYSICAL CONDITIONS** -- The difference between the tremendous physical pressures on the emergency worker, and a person in a profession that requires physical labor, is the manner in which the firefighters are called on to perform their duties. Average workers plan out their day to complete a particular task. Rest periods are planned to space out the use of their energy over a length of time. They can also plan around weather or other problems if the need arises.

Emergency responders are called upon to perform their task regardless of the climactic or environmental conditions. In a very short period of time, they can be

completely physically and mentally exhausted, yet they must still keep going until the task is completed. Many times, they complete one exhausting response only to be called to another crisis without having time to fully recuperate. The body and the mind of a firefighter is frequently drained after a tour of duty far more than the average person in a physical occupation.

4. ***HUMAN TRAGEDY AND CARNAGE*** -- When something bad happens, the firefighter is going to be called upon to respond. Depending on the type, the intensity, the duration of the incident, and many other factors, this response can have some far-reaching effects on the emergency worker. The continued response to tragic situations must be dealt with properly. This specific problem in the firefighting/rescue profession demands the input of a chaplain or other qualified person able to identify the problems associated with response to human tragedy.
5. ***FEAR*** -- Fear of the incident or fear of danger does not usually have a negative impact on emergency workers. “Fear” of the incident and what could happen normally translates into being cautious and having respect for the type of procedures needed to perform the task with the utmost safety. It is the fear of making a mistake that could cost a coworker or victim their life or cause further injury that produces the highest level of stress. Emergency workers tend to be perfectionists. When things go wrong, they start asking questions like, “What if I had only...?” Often feelings of guilt have to be dealt with after a particularly sad event. The uniqueness of the stressors mentioned here is that they face the emergency responder at all times. There is no time while they are on duty that these pressures are not present. When selecting a chaplain, or starting a chaplaincy program, these stresses need to be thoroughly understood. The chaplain must be able to recognize the signs of stress within department personnel and have methods to effectively help firefighters cope with the pressures they face daily.

## ***STARTING A CHAPLAINCY PROGRAM***

The first two steps in starting a chaplaincy program are confirming that your department wants the program, and then selecting the individual to be the chaplain. Assuming you have decided there is a need for a chaplain in your department, the problem of selecting the right person for the job is your next hurdle. Before making any selection, put into writing what your department expects to do or accomplish through the chaplaincy. Also decide what qualities you are looking for in the person that will serve as your fire department chaplain. These expectations need to be discussed with prospective chaplains during the selection process.

## ***FINDING POTENTIAL CANDIDATES***

There are a number of methods that can be employed to assist you in finding the right person to be chaplain for your department.

1. Contact other fire departments, fire department chaplains, or the Federation of Fire Chaplains.
2. Look within your own department for a member who may also be a minister.
3. Check with your local ministerial alliance.
4. Look for persons who can provide ministry to department members of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish beliefs. Or look for a person who is able to deal, without reservation, with all denominations and beliefs.
5. Consider your own personal knowledge of a clergy person who has shown an interest in, or would be good for, your department. Ask for suggestions from members of your fire department.
6. Appoint a committee to seek out candidates. Set times to meet and periodically review how the selection process is going.
7. Do not overlook those clergy persons that members of your department are most often calling for assistance.

Remember, just as all people are not cut out to be firefighters, not all clergy can meet the needs of the emergency service. Just because an individual offers to assist does not mean he or she would be your best choice. Interview and run a background check, listen to recommendations, have the candidate visit with firefighters and get feedback as to whether the person would be able to build a confidential relationship with department members.

**Note:** The chaplain should be chosen by a cooperative agreement between the Fire Chief and the members of the Department. The Chief will then appoint the chaplain.

## ***A CHAPLAIN HAS BEEN SELECTED***

Once the right person has been found, the chief of the department should meet with the chaplain to discuss what is expected from the standpoint of the fire department, and from the standpoint of the chaplain. Means of contacting the chaplain by telephone, pager, or radio must be decided upon. A mission statement might be addressed during this meeting, along with an orientation on fire department procedures.

For a period of time, the new chaplain should plan on visiting all stations and all divisions of the department. Building rapport with the firefighters is essential from the beginning of the program. A time to visit with the union or association leaders is also very important.

The new chaplain should be introduced to the entire department through a formal process. This introduction should include a memo to the department announcing the appointment of the chaplain, and a formal meeting with department members. The meeting could be conducted at a supper or a training. This would be a good time to present the new chaplain with a badge and identification card.

The chief should schedule a second meeting about ninety days after the appointment to evaluate the progress of the program. This meeting can be used to discuss changes that may be needed and guidelines for the program. It may also be good to establish a timetable for the development of the chaplaincy program within the department.

The department should enroll the new chaplain in the Federation of Fire Chaplains as soon as possible. This will provide the new chaplain with valuable materials, resources, and a network of fellow chaplains who can be called upon for information and support.

The chaplain must be fully supported by the chief administrator of the department and the department members if he or she is to be fully effective. Full support by the department is essential for the promotion of the fire department chaplaincy program. It is also essential to provide this support while allowing the chaplain to maintain strict confidentiality in his or her dealings with fire department members.

## ***DUTIES OF THE FIRE DEPARTMENT CHAPLAIN***

The following is a list of duties that **may** be incorporated into a chaplaincy program. The list does not include all the responsibilities that a chaplain can undertake, nor should this list be considered as requirements of a chaplain program. This list can and should be taken into consideration as you develop your individual department program. Each Department should tailor their chaplain program to meet their needs. Further, to ensure the success of the program it may be wise to select a handful of duties and expand them as the program grows.

### **1. Assistance 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. If an injury to a firefighter occurs, the chaplain should meet the firefighter at the hospital, quickly determine the extent of the injury from the hospital staff, and then notify the family in a manner that will not cause undue panic or grief. At the time of the initial call or contact with the family, a decision should be made as to whether the family will need transportation to the hospital. When the family arrives, the chaplain should have an accurate report concerning the firefighter's condition.

At fire incidents, the chaplain, if not involved in the actual work of the emergency, should be alert to the needs of the firefighters. The chaplain should be especially mindful that the type of people making emergency responses are easily capable of overexerting themselves to the point of exhaustion. Knowing this, the chaplain can make command officers aware of potentially dangerous situations that need immediate attention and/or medical attention.

At major fire 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, nursing homes, or incidents where children are involved. The importance of keeping a cool, calm demeanor during these times, along with the ability to explain to the public what is actually taking place, is a service the chaplain can perform. Comforting the bereaved and offering positive direction to the victim's family are priorities at these types of incidents. The chaplain can explain the types of assistance available to victims through the Red Cross, the Ladies Auxiliary, or other community service and benevolent organizations. When these interventions are used at the scene of an emergency, the results are generally successful in not only aiding the victims, but also in keeping distraught citizens from interfering with the performance of emergency operations.

## **2. Spiritual Guidance**

Two important functions of the fire department chaplain are to help firefighters 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 principle responsibilities. The chaplain may use different ways to bring about spiritual truths and assistance to an individual family. However, the most important ministry is to simply be available when called upon. Spiritual need is the greatest of all needs and the chaplain must be able to meet this need. It is also a hard area for many ministers to get a "handle on." The spiritual witness is more



often by action rather than by word. The example set by the chaplain in all phases of life has more bearing on the firefighter than “preaching” about it. Another important part of these functions is to understand the personal religious needs of each firefighter and to call their own minister or someone from the same faith group to assist as soon as possible (**only if the family so desires**). The chaplain can then assist their minister to understand the functions and the resources available through the fire department. This particular area of the chaplaincy is given intense coverage at all chaplain seminars and conferences sponsored by the **Federation of Fire Chaplains**.

### **3. Coaching/Counseling**

The daily pressures of the society in which we live has greatly contributed to the need for competent, caring advisors/counselors. It is imperative that the chaplain **should not** attempt to conduct counseling unless they have been trained and are credentialed to do so. If unable to provide counseling, the chaplain should be able to provide pastoral care, mental health coaching, or life coaching. The need for advice and information in the areas of marriage, profession, family, substance abuse, delinquency, children, finances, critical incident stress management, and a host of other problem areas can quickly overwhelm an overzealous chaplain. The chaplain should be aware of the basics in these areas and be knowledgeable of the type of help individuals may need. If the chaplain does not feel qualified, or for some reason is not able to counsel with a firefighter or family member, it is necessary to be able to direct them to a qualified counselor. Counselors may be available through members of an employee assistance program or other resources developed by the Fire Department and the chaplain.

### **4. Visitation**

A great deal of comfort, spiritual aid, friendship, and solid supportive help can be given to the sick, distraught, and injured through personal contact. Regular visitation at home, in the workplace, and in the hospital is an important function of the chaplain. It is an excellent time for the chaplain to represent the administration and let the firefighter know that the department is thinking about him or her and is concerned about his or her welfare.

## **5. A General Knowledge of Insurance and Benefits**

To assist firefighters who have been injured or need medical care, the chaplain should be knowledgeable of insurance and compensatory benefits available to the firefighters and to their families. These benefits come from many different sources such as insurance carried by the fire department, the municipality, the state, and the federal government. Many fire departments have their own relief associations, blood banks, and other benefits to aid their own sick and injured members.

## **6. Liaison With Hospitals and Clinics**

A chaplain should frequently visit local hospitals and medical clinics to build rapport with medical personnel. These visits help the chaplain to receive accurate and helpful reports from the hospital professionals who have confidence in the chaplain with whom they have become acquainted. This information aids the family of the firefighter in understanding what is taking place and to better understand the condition of their family member.

## **7. Conducting/Assisting at Funerals**

The chaplain can assist a family in funeral arrangements for both active and retired firefighters. They may even officiate at the service or assist the family minister. Assistance frequently is done in the form of organizing the details of the funeral service. Details to be considered include establishing an honor guard, preparing fire department apparatus for the funeral procession, organizing fire department members at the church or funeral home and at the cemetery, determining the location of the funeral, and arranging for procession escorts. The chaplain must develop a good working relationship with local funeral directors to help them understand the special rituals involved in a fire department funeral.

Support and consolation for the firefighter's family and children are responsibilities of the chaplain. The chaplain should always send condolences at the time of death of any member of a fire department and represent the department by offering any assistance needed. This is a responsibility of the fire department chaplain that should never be neglected.

## **8. Weddings**

The chaplain may be called upon to perform weddings for fire department personnel. Wedding etiquette, premarital counseling, and the actual

performance of the ceremony are areas of expertise that the chaplain should take special care to develop. Performing weddings fall under the guidelines of each state/province and the faith group that the chaplain represents. The chaplain should make known to department members any preferences or restrictions held toward the actual wedding ceremony. If a chaplain is unable to perform the ceremony, they should help find an alternate officiant.

## **9. Accessibility and Availability**

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

## **10. Communications With Firefighters**

Communications with firefighters has been mentioned in different ways throughout this document. Communication in one form or another is the most important service the chaplain provides and is greatly needed by fire service personnel. Personal, direct contact by visiting fire personnel should be built into every chaplaincy program. Visiting fire stations at least once a month on alternating shifts is a good practice in the fire service chaplaincy.

Communications also takes place through telephone calls, sending letters or cards on Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, and other special occasions.

Sympathy cards can be sent to those in need, as well as congratulations for marriages, births, promotions, special recognition for valor, etc. A monthly or quarterly prayer breakfast or meeting with interested personnel is an important phase of the chaplaincy. All of the foregoing methods of communication are recommended practices that will build relationships and keep lines of communication open between the chaplain and the firefighters that are served.

## **11. Attending Functions of the Fire Department**

The chaplain may be called upon to represent the fire department at official functions or public meetings to give an invocation, dedicatory prayer, or benediction. Many times the chief and other active members of the department or city administrators are tied up with important meetings or scheduled

activities. It may fall to the chaplain to represent these people at social functions, homes, hospitals, before civic groups, or to other fire departments. It is often the chaplain who carries expressions of sympathy, condolences, or congratulations to firefighters and their families. In today's fire service it is becoming more and more difficult for the fire chief to make all the required personal contacts with firefighters and their families. This can be a valuable function that the chaplain can perform for the chief to meet the needs of the rank and file department members and communicate messages from the administration.

## **12. Gaining Respect**

Gaining the respect of fire department members is a must for the effectiveness and credibility of the chaplain. It should be noted that respect cannot be demanded, it must be earned by the chaplain as he or she works to develop a relationship with the fire department administration and members. Respect comes as the chaplain demonstrates commitment, dedication, and care for firefighters and their families. The chaplain gains respect by showing respect for members of the department through his or her words and actions. The chaplain earns respect by continuing to participate in fire department activities, emergency and routine, regardless of how hard the going may get.

## **13. Teaching Training Classes**

The teaching of training classes by the fire department chaplain should not be overlooked by department administration. Classes can be taught on the resources and services available through the chaplaincy program, critical incident stress management, family life, chain of command, ethics, and many other areas. Frequently classes on integrity and moral responsibilities are taught by the chaplain. This area of service should be considered from the beginning stages of the chaplaincy program.

## **14. Retired Firefighters**

A major effort should be made by the chaplain to assist retired firefighters and their families. This can be done by keeping in touch with the leaders of the retired firefighters association and by being alert to notice the needs of retired personnel. Chaplains should be available to minister to the needs of retired personnel as they would for active duty firefighters.

## **15. Program Director**

The chaplain is often considered the personnel service officer or crisis management coordinator. The coordination of the critical incident response team can fall under the duties of the chaplain. In some departments the chaplain is a representative of the employee assistance program

### ***Conclusion***

The chaplain of the fire department is one of the most vital positions in the fire service. The chaplain is next to the pulse of the department. It is a job that is demanding, confidential, trusting, and needful for the lives of firefighters and their families. The fire department administrator considering a chaplaincy program can rest assured that it is one of the finest and most needed programs that can be started.

This has been a brief overview of beginning a fire service chaplaincy program. There are many areas that could be added, and many, you may not consider to be needs for your department. The next steps are to weigh, consider, investigate, and determine your needs and wants. Then institute the chaplaincy program in your department.

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

# XYZ Fire Department

## Fire Department Chaplain Position Description

**OBJECTIVE:** To provide for the full range of fire department personnel needs through the establishment of a comprehensive chaplaincy program within the XYZ Fire Department.

### APPOINTMENT

- A. Because of the major risks and constant stresses faced by fire service personnel in the line of duty, a chaplain will be appointed to function within the XYZ Fire Department.
- B. The Chaplain will be appointed by written order of the Fire Chief.

### QUALIFICATIONS AND TRAINING

- A. The individual appointed to the position of Fire Department Chaplain will be:
  - a. Should be physically able to perform their expected duties.
  - b. Interested in the fire service.
  - c. Prepared to serve in a crisis.
  - d. Willing to commit the time necessary to make the ministry effective.
  - e. Committed to learn the skills necessary to effectively relate to and minister to firefighters and EMS personnel.
  - f. It may be beneficial if the chaplain is ordained in accordance with their faith's traditions.
- B. To the extent possible, the Chaplain will be given the opportunity to meet with members and staff of the department, visit the stations and receive guidance in understanding fire department organizations and procedures. Training will also be provided to help him protect himself and to be able to render proper help to assist members on the emergency scene.
- C. After appointment the Chaplain will be issued the following equipment:
  - a. Standard turnout gear, including coat, pants, boots, gloves, and helmet with "Chaplain" markings.
  - b. Chaplain's badge, identification card, and carrying case.
  - c. Chaplain's business cards
  - d. A communication device (cell phone, pager, radio, etc.).

# XYZ Fire Department

## Fire Department Chaplain Position Description

### DUTIES OF THE CHAPLAIN

The below listed duties constitute only a brief summary of what may actually be required in any situation that may be encountered. The Chaplain must remain constantly alert and sensitive to needs and the means he must employ to meet those needs, and at all times operate under the direction of the Fire Chief.

A. Emergency Situations. The Chaplain will respond when contacted by dispatch or fire department personnel, or at his own discretion (according to pre-established guidelines) and will immediately report to the officer in charge at the scene. When at the scene, the Chaplain will be under the command authority of the officer in charge. The Chaplain will respond as follows:

a. To the scene when:

- i. A working fire of second alarm or greater is in progress.
- ii. A critical incident is in progress.
- iii. A critical injury or death to a firefighter is reported.
- iv. The incident involves a victim that is a member of a department members' family.
- v. Whenever the incident commander determines that the services of the Chaplain may be of value in the ongoing emergency operation. This may include situations where:
  1. The victim or family is highly emotional or unstable.
  2. Care is needed for the family of the victim while treatment is being performed.
  3. The victim or the family requests the services of a chaplain or clergy.
  4. The incident commander feels the presence of the Chaplain would be of benefit to the victim **or** to department personnel.

b. To the hospital when:

- i. The incident commander or paramedic providing treatment determines that the victim or family may need support or counsel.
- ii. A member of the fire department is the victim.
- iii. The victim's family needs to be located and notified.

B. Follow-Up Actions

a. On-the-Scene Duties:

# XYZ Fire Department

## Fire Department Chaplain Position Description

- i. Provide appropriate victim assistance to free operational personnel for firefighting duties.
  1. Comfort and counsel
  2. Referral to appropriate community agencies for assistance.
  3. Help contact persons, insurance agents, family members, etc. if it is appropriate, the Chaplain will find out a victim's church or religious preference and attempt to notify the pastor or church.
- ii. Provide appropriate assistance to fire fighters engaged in fire fighting activities..
  1. Watch for signs of physical or emotional stress.
  2. Assist in providing firefighting needs (water, rest, etc.)
  3. Advise command whenever it is felt that a firefighter or paramedic is in need of being relieved from emergency operations.
- iii. Post-Emergency Duties:
  1. Ensure firefighter's needs are met in the areas of on-the-job injuries, critical incident stress, etc.
  2. Conduct follow-up to ensure victims are receiving necessary assistance.

### C. Routine Duties

- a. Duties within the Fire Department:
  - i. Attend fire department functions.
  - ii. Visit all stations and shifts.
  - iii. Visit hospitalized department members and members of their families.
  - iv. Participate in recruit training as suggested by the Training Officer.
  - v. Be available to help members of the department in times of stress or difficulty.
  - vi. Assist when requested by any division of the department in their programs.
  - vii. Conduct funeral/memorial services as needed and requested.
  - viii. Be a member of the Critical Incident Stress Management team, Peer Support Program, etc..
  - ix. Be able to receive communications (phone call, texts, pages, etc.) on a twenty-four hour a day basis.
- b. Duties outside the Fire Department:



# XYZ Fire Department

## Fire Department Chaplain Position Description

- i. Assist when requested with public events or public information needs.
- ii. Represent and interpret fire department goals and concerns to the churches and religious institutions of the community.
- iii. As time permits, **and** as requested, conduct extended ministry to victims and their families.

### **GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR THE CHAPLAINCY**

- A. The Chaplain does not, attempt to proselytize, replace a member's clergy, but seeks to support the concern of every faith group for its members who may be in professions with special risks or needs. Moreover, the Chaplain must be for the advantage of every member of the department, regardless of his or her nationality, race, sex, or religion.
- B. Any communications a person makes to the Chaplain is on a strictly confidential basis and will not be released to department members or any other person. Any fire personnel may go to the Chaplain without having to notify his or her supervisor or anyone else.
- C. Any fire department officer or member (including administrative staff) who is made/becomes aware of any situation which may need the response of the Chaplain may contact the Chaplain directly. Fire department administration will keep current contact information for the Chaplain. The Chaplain may also be contacted through fire department administration if desirable. Examples of situations where the Chaplain may be contacted include, but are not limited to:
  - a. Death, injury to, or hospitalization of a fire department member.
  - b. Death, injury to, or hospitalization of a fire department member's spouse or child.
  - c. Death in a fire department member's close family (i.e. any family member covered under the department's death leave provisions).



## Fire Chaplain Training Institute

To complement and help implement the material in this booklet, “Serving Those Who Serve,” the Federation of Fire Chaplains has established the Chaplain Training Institute. The goal of the Institute is to provide training by experienced instructors in areas that are significant to the fire chaplaincy. Such training sessions may benefit both the new and experienced chaplain by presenting new materials and sharing experiences with each other. The Institute sponsors formal training sessions at different locations throughout the year.

**For specific information, please contact the  
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