July 28, 2015

Topic: An Open letter to Fire Department Safety Officers

by Sandy Davis,

(Ret. Chief Safety Officer, Shreveport, LA, Fire Dept.)

Brother and Sister Safety Officers,

I know many of you personally, as I spent 12 years on the Board of Directors for FDSOA and I have spoken at conferences throughout the U.S. and Canada for many years. I count several of you as close personal friends. Although I officially retired from the fire service several years ago I will never really retire from my passion for firefighter health and safety.

I was diagnosed with colorectal cancer just over two years ago. More likely than not my cancer is job related as my life style is not conducive to cancer and there is no history of cancer in my family. Over the past two years I have spent way more time in doctor’s offices, hospitals and cancer centers than you can imagine. I have been through radiation therapy, surgery and chemo therapy. I have a permanent colostomy and will be on some type of chemo therapy for the remainder of my life. But do not feel sorry for me; I have been and will continue to be significant with my life.

I would like to share with you what is on my heart in reference to the Heath and Occupational Safety of the firefighters that we are responsible for as Safety Officers. The concept of Safety Officers is about thirty years old in our chosen vocation, having come to the forefront in the mid 1980’s. As the Safety Officer matures into an adult, if you think of the Discipline as if it were a human, so must the way we approach the responsibility of the position in a more mature manner.

When the Safety Officer position was young we thought of the simple things that impacted the health and safety of our members; and in most cases we have been successful in reducing accident, injury and fatalities that come from that low hanging fruit. In fact I truly believe that we have seen a change in the fire service to where we now embrace a culture of safety for the most part.

So where do we go from here as the discipline matures? I believe the answer to that is that we must--I repeat must--start to think about the bigger picture. What is that bigger picture you ask? The bigger picture is the overall health and welfare of our firefighters. We have successfully gotten them to wear seatbelts, we have them using spotters to assist in backing apparatus up, we have them wearing P.P.E. (for the most part, I will address that later in this letter) so now is the time that we begin to look at that bigger picture.
Brothers and Sisters, this will not be an easy task as it will require a totally new look at our safety culture. We won’t be addressing those issues that bring instant gratification, but those that may not show rewards for decades to come. We live in a society that has made us think in terms of what can happen for me instantly; we can get a four course meal from the driver’s seat of our car in ninety seconds, we can chat with a friend half way around the world in real time and we can get information on any subject at our fingertips instantly. With that capability we have become less interested in things that may take time to show results. I challenge you to take a few minutes to think about what I am about to share with you and ask yourself, do I want to be “Successful” or do I want to be “Significant.” Success may only last a lifetime, significant can and will go on for generations.

So how do we make a significant impact? It will come when you embrace, as my good friend Janet Wilmoth calls it, a “whole-listic” approach to our responsibilities as Safety Officers. We must start to address those things that have a long term impact of Firefighter Health and Welfare. This will not be easy but it will be rewarding--no instant gratification here, but the satisfaction of knowing you have been significant.

These things include, but are not limited to:

**Tobacco Cessation** - Tobacco use is down in the fire service but still much too prevalent; many of the cases of Heart/Lung Diseases and Cancer can be attributed to tobacco use.

**Nutrition** - The fire service may have some of the worst eating habits known to man; large volumes consumed as if it were our last meal. A more healthy approach to the way we prepare and cook our meals needs to be addressed.

**Regular Physical Examinations** - Had I gone for a colonoscopy when my doctor recommended it I may have been able to catch my cancer early enough to have avoided the need for major intervention. Many of the diseases we experience in the fire service can be treated and controlled if we are able to catch them early; regular physical examinations are the answer.

**Exercise** - Even the slightest amount of exercise can make a huge difference in our firefighters’ health and welfare. You do not have to spend hours in the gym to get positive results from exercise.

**Wearing Personal Protective Equipment** - Every incident. EVERY INCIDENT. Eye protection, gloves and mask where appropriate on EMS calls. Full bunker gear and SCBA until the fire is completely out, including overhaul operations.

I truly believe that if I had worn my P.P.E., particularly my SCBA, more diligently that I might have avoided my colorectal cancer.

P.P.E. may be uncomfortable and hot, however you do not want to wear the P.P.E. that I now have. My P.P.E. now involves sitting in a chair at the Cancer Center for six hours at a stretch connected to a cocktail of medicines that takes your body and slams it to the point that you can’t even get out of bed some days.
My other P.P.E. is a colostomy bag that I will wear 24/7 for the rest of my life. My cancer required the removal of my lower digestive system from my descending colon to the “exit”; if you know what I mean.

Wear Your P.P.E.!!!!!!

Addressing and enforcing these won’t necessarily make you the most popular person on your department, however if you became a Safety Officer to win a popularity contest you might want to rethink your choice.

Do not feel sorry for me because of my cancer instead go out and make a difference; and think about me when you do.

In closing I want to encourage you to attend the FDSOA Annual Safety Forum, September 21-25, at the Double Tree Suites in Fort Lauderdale Florida. This Forum not only gives you the opportunity to hear from some of the most recognized fire service Health and Safety Subject Matter Experts, but just as importantly to have the chance to network with the practitioners that are making a difference daily in the Health and Safety of our Brothers and Sister.

Sincerely,

Sandy Davis, (Ret.) Chief Safety Officer,
Shreveport, LA, Fire Department