



WITH THE advent of today's 911 emergency reporting and response system in the USA, the majority of responding fire crews have two key public protection roles. Not only do they carry out firefighting and rescue duties, but they also act as emergency medical technicians (EMTs) or paramedics. However, there is evidence of a growing trend of violence against firefighters and emergency medical personnel that fire departments appear to be doing little to address.

Statistics indicate that there are 700,000 assaults annually on paramedics and EMTs in the USA<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, estimates from the Bureau of Labour Statistics suggest that assaults on healthcare workers occur at a rate of 8.3 attacks to every 10,000 workers<sup>2</sup>. In addition, a study by Vanderbilt University concluded that violent situations occurred in 5% of all emergency medical service calls<sup>3</sup>.

The 911 service, originally intended for handling only life-threatening emergencies, has undergone a paradigm shift and is now more of a government-funded home healthcare and trouble-shooting system. As a result, public opinion of firefighters and EMTs is shifting: such workers used to be

# VIOLENT TIMES

Research suggests that US fire departments are not doing enough to protect their workforce against violence.

**Howard Munding** reports

seen as 'heroic responders' and they would rarely be attacked at incidents because their neutrality was respected<sup>4</sup>. However, fire crews are increasingly being considered 'fair game' for attack because they are seen as just another extension of the government<sup>5</sup>.

This shift in attitude was evident during the Hurricane Katrina disaster (also see p.13) when rescuers were shot at and assaulted by a minority of disaffected local survivors. The shootings, which were broadcast on American television,



have been blamed on public frustration borne from a changing economic climate; a widening economic class system; and the rising cost of goods. A significant proportion of people in the US, for instance, are unable to afford health insurance or medication, so they call 911 for their medical needs. As such, their frustration manifests itself onto the closest symbol of authority, which is often the firefighter.

Another reason for the increase in violence towards first responders and other healthcare professionals is the increased use of illegal drugs, such as crystal methamphetamines, that result in paranoia and other psychotic behaviour<sup>6</sup>. The number of mentally-ill patients being released from institutions without follow-up care also has safety implications for responders. Patients have the right to refuse medication and cannot be involuntarily hospitalised unless they pose an immediate threat to themselves or others. But, if these patients are not compliant with their medication, they may become ill again, and possibly be involved in a violent attack against emergency service workers.

### Firefighter research

Given these social and economic developments in the USA, attacks on firefighters today are not considered as unusual as they would have been 20 years ago. Indeed, the problem has become so common that firefighters, EMTs and other healthcare workers now accept violence as part of their job<sup>7</sup>.

Reported incidents show a wide range of situations where these life-saving professionals are at risk<sup>5,8</sup>. At the same time, it appears that there is significant under-reporting of attacks.

As part of a research project for the US National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Programme, the author conducted a survey of firefighters and managers across the US on a range of issues relating to assaults of firefighters and EMTs. Issues covered ranged from management attitudes towards work-related violence, through to self-defence training among firefighters.

The survey showed that management teams in the emergency services sector were doing little to address the issue of violence towards their staff. It also confirmed that violence against firefighters is widespread and that there is potential for attacks to increase still further. For example, in Peoria, Arizona – as in the rest of the United States – the number of verbal threats against fire personnel was found to be nearly double the number of actual assaults. It is important that verbal threats are recorded because every threat has the potential to become a violent act.

Aside from physical injuries, firefighters were found to be experiencing emotional trauma following attacks. A firefighter's emotional state is critical to how they interact with a patient. It is possible that a firefighter's unresolved emotional trauma may lead to future violence. For instance, the care and treatment of patients could be compromised because the firefighter may have a reduced tolerance threshold due to prejudices, unresolved anger and fear stemming from a previous traumatic incident.

Interestingly, the research found that there was no correlation between threats or violence, and the number of years a firefighter had spent on the job, the staffing levels of the crew, or the population of the service area. In addition, the number of violent incidents and threats reported by line personnel did not correspond with management figures. However, this finding was not unexpected since it is consistent with previous studies<sup>2,5</sup>, which show that violence was accepted as part of the job and thus not officially reported.

### Changing attitudes

The attitude among fire departments of accepting violence as part of a firefighter's job serves to reinforce the belief that violence is not a safety issue that needs to be addressed. In order to change this attitude, fire departments in the US need to ensure that violent incidents against personnel are accurately reported and recorded. This data will enable departments to track and analyse trends, and to develop

## Training and awareness

PROTECTING firefighters from violent situations requires a combination of self-defence and defensive tactics, many of which are simple and easy to implement. Most of the tactics involve training and awareness, and some require changes to standard operating procedures.

Using previous studies and the results of the firefighter research survey, the author applied the findings into a Haddon Matrix (see Figure 1). Developed in 1970, the matrix is an analysis tool which helps to evaluate a range of issues over three 'event' phases to help establish areas where improvements can be made in certain circumstances.

In this instance, the matrix shows different areas in which interventions can be made to improve firefighter safety. For example, the 'pre-event' column identifies how modifications in firefighter behaviour can reduce the likelihood of a violent situation. This underlines the view that the fire service's 'macho' attitude/culture can predispose a firefighter to risk.

Significantly, the matrix illustrates that, to limit assaults and injuries to firefighters, they should be trained in the following:

- scene assessment
- awareness/management of weapons carried by the public
- approaching a scene and a vehicle
- entering a structure with an increased awareness of the potential for attack
- conflict management
- searching for and confiscating weapons
- self-defence techniques
- legal issues – for example, self-defence and the use of force, and excessive or inappropriate use of force
- in extreme cases, the use of bulletproof vests and defensive weapons, such as pepper spray or Tazer (stun) weapons, which can be provided to staff ■

**Figure 1: Haddon Matrix analysis of a firefighter assault**

Factors				
Phase	Firefighter attitudes	Organisational policies/culture	Physical environment	Socio-economic environment
<b>Pre-event</b>	Macho attitudes/culture – naive to problem	Lack of written policies, lack of self-defence and awareness training	Patients' homes, on the street, night clubs	Department management and line personnel do not see the problem, lack of funding for training
<b>Event</b>	'Tunnel vision', lack of awareness of surroundings	Rushing into scene, lack of information from dispatch	Low-level lighting, lack of egress, confined spaces/rooms, vulnerability to attack in open areas	Low income customers, language barriers
<b>Post-event</b>	Physical injury, emotional trauma, prejudices, legal liabilities, disciplinary action, infectious disease exposure	Lack of written policies, lack of training, blood and/or airborne diseases	Counselling, treatment for injuries, increased overtime payments for firefighters due to others taking sick leave, hospitalisation, contraction of diseases	Increases in health insurance premiums, financial impact on firefighters due to lost work time

education, prevention and intervention programmes, as well as to assess the effectiveness of such initiatives. It will also help fire departments and EMTs to gain a better understanding of violence and recognise that personnel are at risk.

The culture of the fire service is one of action, one of a 'can do' attitude, regardless of the level of training a firefighter has received in a particular area. Firefighters will use their best judgment in given circumstances. At such times, the department itself has little or no control over the event or the outcome.

The question: 'Should firefighters be disciplined if we do not like the way they handle violent patients?'<sup>26</sup> is an interesting line of enquiry. However, the better tack would be to question whether or not fire and emergency medical departments should be provided with self-defence training.

Deputy chief of New York City Emergency Medical Services, Paul Maniscalco, believes that, given the trend of violence towards medical personnel, employers should provide guidance or training to address the issue of personal safety<sup>9</sup>. James Cross, an attorney and instructor at George Washington University School of Medicine, recommends that emergency medical service providers need to know what the policy is for dealing with out-of-control individuals. A properly trained responder would act in a reasonable manner with an out-of-control individual, whereas a responder with inadequate training or guidance may have to make their own judgments about the type of response.

Similarly, chief deputy director for the California Emergency Medical Service Authority, Daniel Smiley, believes that the liability of well-trained individuals (and thus of the authority),



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- **Do you have a policy addressing the management of aggression in the workplace?**
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- **Are your staff fully aware of their responsibilities and rights in protecting firefighters, colleagues, themselves and property?**
- **Are your systems robust enough that they can protect your staff from increasing levels of spurious allegations and litigation in relation to allegations?**
- **Are you equipped to defend firefighters and staff in unwarranted investigations, suspensions and court appearances?**
- **Are there clearly defined and understood codes of conduct in your organisation?**
- **Are your staff equipped with a range of crisis management skills that enable them to confidently defuse potentially problematic incidences of violence and disorder?**

The above issues are very thought-provoking, and they can be addressed by sending staff on a 5-day **DCRT** Train the Trainers Course in Conflict Resolution, approved for 12 months by the Institution of Fire Engineers. Staff will become trained trainers who can then cascade training down to colleagues, be they firefighters or other personnel, ensuring they feel safe and protected in the workplace.

In these times of increasing work-related stress, bullying, vandalism and violence, it is increasingly important that organisations can answer 'yes' to all of the questions above.

**DCRT** is a company with an extensive history of training with fire and rescue services, ambulance services, educational establishments and many other professionals both in the UK and abroad, in the legal context and methodology of crisis management and physical intervention.

Most recently, **DCRT** completed a full risk assessment for Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service over 5 days, visiting fire crews, enforcements officers, Prince's Trust staff who deal with children/adolescents, and advocates. It is work like this which ensures that **DCRT** has valuable information to ensure that our training methods meet the requirements of your organisation and is tailored accordingly. Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue now has 6 **DCRT**-approved trainers who are implementing the training to ensure that they, as an organisation, meet the requirements and guidance of the Health and Safety Executive.

As a training company, we have worked closely with the fire service for over 7 years and trained staff to deal with potential aggression, beginning with Tyne and Wear and its successful Phoenix Project for young people.

**DCRT** values its partnership with the fire and rescue service and wishes to ensure that their training managers choose an appropriate method of training that is specific to firefighters.

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**DCRT** can also train staff for your organisation at a cost of £80 per person, should you wish to train certain members of staff.

in terms of any legal claim made against a firefighter for inappropriate behaviour towards a civilian, is significantly less, compared to those who set their own guidelines<sup>9</sup> and who have not received appropriate training.

The General Duty Clause of the US Occupational Safety and Health Act 1970 states that, in addition to compliance with hazard-specific standards, all employers have a general duty to provide their staff with a workplace free from recognised hazards which are likely to cause death or serious injury. With the trend of violence against firefighters and EMTs, fire departments need to take proactive measures to address this issue. Indeed, employers can be prosecuted for violating the clause if there is a recognised hazard of workplace violence and nothing is done to prevent or abate it.

It is apparent that violence towards firefighters is increasing and the problem is not likely to go away any time soon. There is no overnight solution to addressing the wider social problems that lead to violence against firefighters. However, the fire service can, and must, address this issue and start recognising that violence against personnel demands the same emphasis as any other hazard that may be encountered on the fire ground ■

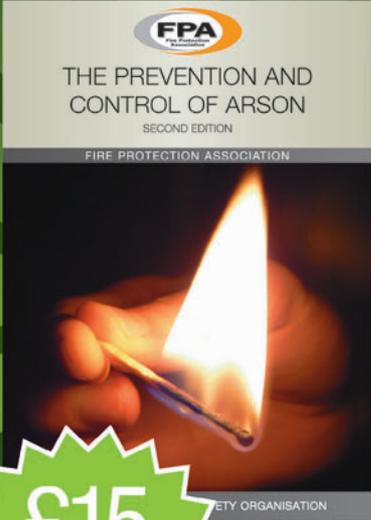
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