



The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs and the International Association of Fire Fighters launch mental wellness initiative

October 13, 2015

Ottawa – That firefighting is a physically demanding occupation is widely accepted, but greater attention to the mental and emotional stresses of the role is needed. Research shows that a single incident can lead to post-traumatic injury. In Canada between 10 and 35 per cent of first responders will develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Studies completed in the 1990's have demonstrated that occupational stress outcomes for firefighters include high levels of alcoholism and substance abuse, a suicide rate that is 30% higher and marital problems that are 50% higher than that of comparison groups. According to the Tema Conter Memorial Trust, 44 first responders and military members died by suicide in the past year.

Part of the problem is the nature of mental illness. More than half of the people with mental health problems won't seek treatment. Among firefighters the main barriers to using mental health services is the stigma of mental illness, the fear it will have a negative impact on careers, and lack of knowledge on how to access existing services.

On September 24, 2015, the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC) and the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) convened the inaugural meeting of the Firefighter Mental Wellness Advisory Group to discuss the need for an alignment initiative to address the mental health of Canadian firefighters. In attendance were representatives of the CAFC Board of Directors and National Advisory Council, the IAFF, the Council of Canadian Fire Marshals and Fire Commissioners (CCFMFC), and the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC).

"CAFC recognizes that fire personnel are our greatest assets and, as such, we need to devote time and resources to addressing their mental wellness needs. Leading research in this area is one of our Association's top policy priorities," said CAFC President Chief Paul Boissonneault.

In this meeting, the participants expressed their strong commitment to working collaboratively and to sharing resources to build the Mental Wellness Roadmap initiative. With strong stakeholder partnerships, as CAFC president Boissonneault explained, "this initiative will identify the tools required to support the fire service in the recognition, intervention, prevention, and treatment of mental health issues facing firefighters in Canada."

"Post-traumatic stress has taken a large toll on the men and women of the fire service across North America. It's time to bring PTSD out of the shadows of our profession and into a new era of awareness, acceptance and treatment. Any initiative that accomplishes these goals is one that will save lives and has the full support of the IAFF," said IAFF General President Harold Schaitberger

The expected outcome of this initiative is a well-mapped action plan that will identify: (a) the gap in firefighter focused mental health research; (b) potential content of a national firefighter

mental wellness educational campaign; (c) training programs in existence and gaps; and (d) provincial and territorial mental health and work compensation policies.

The CAFC and the IAFF strongly believe that working together on a sustained long-term mental wellness strategy will lead to the:

- o Improvement of the capacity of the fire service and health professionals to quantify the prevalence and type of mental health issues affecting the fire service and properly guide education, diagnosis and treatment efforts.
- o Improvement of firefighters' mental health resilience and literacy.
- o Development of skills and knowledge that help firefighters better manage potential or developing mental health problems in themselves or a colleague.
- o Reduction of treatment barriers.
- o The standard provision of mental health services for firefighters and work compensation policies across the country.

About the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs

Founded in 1909, the CAFC is an independent, non-profit organization representing approximately 3,500 fire departments across Canada. As the voice of fire services in Canada, the CAFC promotes the highest standard of public safety in an ever changing and increasingly complex world. CAFC acts as the national public service association dedicated to reducing the loss of life and property from fire. For more information on the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs, visit our website: www.cafc.ca

About the International Association of Fire Fighters:

The International Association of Fire Fighters, AFL-CIO, CLC, represents 300,000 professional fire fighters across North America, including 22,400 in Canada. Headquartered in Washington, DC with a Canadian Office in Ottawa Ontario, the IAFF is a leading authority on public and fire fighter safety and the official voice of Canada's most trusted profession.

General Information & Media Inquiries:

Erika Adams

Director of Policy and Research

Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs

(613) 220-6182

eadams@cafc.ca

Scott Marks

Assistant to the General President for Canadian Operations

International Association of Fire Fighters

613-567-8988

smarks@iaff.org