

Minnesota Firefighter Training Part of Comprehensive Health & Wellness Resource Program Funded by State Legislature.

PROVIDED BY MINNESOTA FIREFIGHTER INITIATIVE (MNFIRE)

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We've all heard the sobering statistics: Cardiovascular disease is a leading cause of line-of-duty deaths in the fire service, and cancer is now the leading cause of death among firefighters nationwide. Mental illness, particularly sleep disorders, depression, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress injury and suicidal ideation/action, impacts firefighters at rates much higher than the general population.

But now, thanks to the most comprehensive firefighter wellness legislation in the nation, Minnesota's firefighters are being armed with resources and information to deal with these potentially deadly issues.

Since the Minnesota legislature passed the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program (HHAP) in 2021, the landscape of the state's firefighter health and wellness has shifted in countless positive and significant ways. Today, all of Minnesota's 20,000 firefighters now have access to the education, prevention and care needed to handle a cardiac, emotional trauma or cancer diagnosis. In many cases, these are literally life-changing resources.

The Minnesota Firefighter Initiative, or MnFIRE, is the nonprofit organization that administers the HHAP program, managing the \$4 million annual

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funding to provide no-cost resources to all active volunteer, paid-on-call, part-time and full-time Minnesota firefighters. The HHAP provides:

- › The MnFIRE Assistance Program, with expanded emotional trauma resources
- › An up-to-\$20,000 Critical Illness insurance policy
- › Ongoing health and wellness training

To date, more than 75% of fire departments across Minnesota have already taken advantage of this potentially life-saving training, reaching thousands of firefighters statewide.



MnFIRE trainings are taught by fellow current and former firefighters and medical experts and are scheduled throughout the year, whenever it's most convenient for the department. The two-hour classes are tailored to both department leadership and firefighters themselves.

"[MnFIRE training] is one thing we can do for us," adds Austin (Minn.) Fire Chief Jim McCoy. "Our other training focuses on helping others, but we need this to make sure we are healthy, too."

"[Cardiac disease, cancer and emotional trauma] are real problems in the fire service. Real problems that can be addressed with some simple changes in the way we live our lives and the way departments operate," says MnFIRE training instructor Andy Willenbring. "I think it's important for departments to all learn the same things to improve firefighters' quality of life. No matter the size, location or function, all firefighters in Minnesota are in this together. No matter how different each department is, we all should have the same goal: the health and wellness of all firefighters."

Willenbring has taught nearly 60 sessions to his fellow firefighters. "I've had several firefighters reach out to me from all across the state after a training session and tell me that they have been having emotional trauma

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problems, and after listening to my presentation, they decided now is time to get help. It's very surprising how widespread the need for help across the state is. We are so fortunate in Minnesota to have the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program. It's a one-of-a-kind program," he says.

"MnFIRE firmly believes improving firefighter health and health outcomes starts with education," says former Eden Prairie (Minn.) fire chief and MnFIRE co-founder George Esbensen, who serves as the organization's volunteer board president. "Just as MnFIRE has evolved to deliver the essential components of the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program, our training offerings have evolved, too."

What began with general MnFIRE Awareness Training covering occupational health risks soon expanded to deep-dive sessions into cardiac, emotional wellness and cancer awareness and prevention. New this past year, fire departments in Minnesota can now learn about even more crucial health and wellness topics through MnFIRE, including sleep, fitness and nutrition. Training topics include:

Cardiac Deep Dive

With cardiovascular disease being the leading cause of line-of-duty deaths in the fire service, every firefighter needs to know how to protect their cardiovascular health. This class looks at heightened risk factors, the types of cardiovascular diseases that most commonly impact firefighters and prevention strategies to help firefighters lessen their risk.

Emotional Wellness Deep Dive

It's important to recognize how the stresses of firefighting can negatively impact a person's mental health. This class helps destigmatize talking about mental health in fire departments, as well as provides practical information around how to properly debrief after a difficult call, ways to maintain emotional well-being and what resources are available for those who need help.

MnFIRE Provides Resources for Firefighter Partners & Families

Being the spouse, partner or family member of a firefighter is no easy thing. From unpredictable schedules, emotional trauma, increased health risks and more, firefighter families are put through a lot, and a new training session from MnFIRE is available to help ease that burden.

As part of the free ongoing health and wellness training for all Minnesota firefighters through the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program, MnFIRE has rolled out a new training session designed specifically to give fire service spouses, partners and family members the tools and perspective needed to support the mental and physical health of their firefighter loved ones – and their families. The training helps spouses and significant others navigate potential challenges that can arise when they have a firefighter in their family and give them more insight into what their firefighter loved one faces on the job.

"As the spouse and supporter of a firefighter, I have wanted to play a more active role in ensuring he is healthy both mentally and physically while he serves our community," said a firefighter spouse. "This [training] was exactly what I was looking for."

The MnFIRE spouse and significant other training is currently being offered at regional sessions throughout Minnesota.

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Cancer Deep Dive

Firefighters have a 9% higher risk of being diagnosed with cancer and a 14% higher risk of dying from cancer than the general U.S. population¹. This tragic reality underscores the critical need for more Minnesota firefighters to be aware of their higher risks for cancer – and what they can do to help prevent it. The cancer deep-dive class educates firefighters on activities that put them at higher risk for developing cancer, proper PPE strategies for mitigating cancer risks, and what types of screenings can be done to catch cancer early.

Sleep

Sleep is the necessary foundation and the single most important health behavior for optimizing physical and mental health, productivity, performance, resilience and more. This class looks at the unique struggles firefighters face when it comes to sleep and what tactics can be used to address them.

Fitness & Nutrition

Despite the demanding physical strains of the job, many firefighters fail to maintain the needed levels of fitness to function safely and efficiently while on duty. In this class, departments learn about the health risks associated with poor physical fitness, how nutrition plays a vital role and ways to develop better behaviors to become “functionally fit.”

“MnFIRE training is more important than you think it is,” trainer Willenbring says. “It’s important for firefighters to learn about how to better help themselves and help each other. We all want to go home at the end of a shift or call, and these trainings will help you and your fellow firefighters do that.”

For more information about MnFIRE and the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program, visit www.mnfireinitiative.com. Minnesota firefighters and their families can call MnFIRE’s 24-hour hotline at 888.784.6634 for confidential support, guidance and information about health resources and benefits. **BS**

Reference

1. “Firefighter Cancer Rates: The Facts from NIOSH Research | Blogs | CDC,” May 18, 2018. <https://blogs.cdc.gov/niosh-science-blog/2017/05/10/ff-cancer-facts/>.