Suicide prevention - We must do something
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As chief officers, we are pulled in many directions, and often everything is on the front burner. One thing that is rarely discussed is suicide prevention. In fact, unless you have personally dealt with a suicide event, it can be difficult to comprehend that your firefighters could be at risk. However, suicide is on the rise in the general population and we are quietly seeing suicides in the fire service. This risk is for active, retired, career and volunteer members. Also, those members who are newly retired may be at higher risk.

Jeff Dill, from the Fire Fighter Behavioral Health Alliance, has been collecting data on fire fighter suicides. This valuable information is being gathered in more of an unofficial manner, and it is quite startling. Over the last five years, he has collected 170 fire fighter deaths related to suicides. Those numbers again are not from a required collection process but from people submitting the information to his database. Almost every state is seeing fire fighter suicides, and yet most Chiefs may not realize the threat to their department.

According to the CDC, suicide rates among the general public with those aged 35 to 64 increased in all states with statistically significant increases occurring in 39 states.

The suicide rate for men ages 35 to 64 years old increased more than 27 percent, from 21.5 suicides per 100,000 people in 1999 to 27.3 in 2010. Among men, the greatest increases were among those aged 50-54 years and 55-59 years, (49.4 percent and nearly 48 percent, respectively).

The suicide rate for women rose more than 31 percent from 6.2 per 100,000 in 1999 to 8.1 in 2010.

Among women, suicide rates increased with age, and the largest rate increase was observed among women aged 60-64 years -- nearly a 60 percent rise from 4.4 per 100,000 to 7.0 suicides per 100,000 people.

I can only write on my experiences and education. In my department, we have had one newer member as well as some of our retired members commit suicide. All were unexpected and have caused speculation for years. These events have caused arguments on how the department handled the funerals, questions if honor guards should be used, and even if the department should be involved in the funeral. These events took the focus away from the mission causing members to question each other and the organizational leadership.
As Chief, you must bring up the topic of suicide awareness and prevention to your department. It is not a comfortable discussion, but to prevent suicides the leader must lead the discussion. If you don't, no one else will bring up the issue. Talking about suicide does not increase the rate of suicide, and in fact may prevent one from occurring.

Begin your discussion with your officers concerning suicides from national level and those trends. Ask if any of them have known someone who has committed suicide, the response may surprise you. One important goal is to also get the message to the entire department. Keep in mind that everyone needs to know what to do and what to say.

It is common for someone to have a concern about a person, but not know how to start the conversation, what to say, and more importantly what to do. Unfortunately, this may result in no action being taken which may lead to tragic results. To help the process, there are some simple things one can do which will begin the discussion and awareness process.

One easy thing is to print out the steps of what to do if there is a concern someone may hurt themselves. A simple ACE guideline on a one page laminated piece of paper posted in every station may save a life. The information is simple, easy to remember, and has been developed by the military to help with suicide prevention. The following is in all of our fire stations and facilities:

*If someone says they are thinking of suicide or hurting themselves*

*think of “A. C. E.”—*  
*Ask - Care - Escort*

**Ask them**

- Have the courage to ask the questions, but stay calm.  
- Ask the question directly, “Are you thinking of hurting yourself?”  
- Look for any outward sign that shows a deviation from their usual self.  
- When the warning signs are present, it is imperative to ask then directly: “Are you thinking about killing yourself?”  
- Talk openly about suicide. Be willing to listen and allow them to express their feelings.

**Care for them**

- Remove any means that could be used for self-injury such as weapons, knives, or pills.  
- Calmly control the situation; do not use force.  
- Actively listen to produce relief.
• Important to understand with what, where, and when they plan to kill themselves. The fact that they acknowledge their plans generally suggests that they are accepting help.

**Escort them**

• Never leave them alone.
• Escort to the chain of command, a behavioral health professional, or suicide prevention.
• **Call 800-273-8255 Sioux Falls Suicide Prevention**
• Don’t keep their suicidal behavior a secret. Adopting an attitude that you are going to help them will save their life.
• Stay with them until they receive appropriate help. Don’t leave them alone.
• Being there will make the difference.

There are other simple things that you can also do to raise awareness and decrease stress to your fire fighters.

• Ensure your department has the following meetings after traumatic incidents.
  • An initial defusing immediately following the incident
  • A more formal debriefing 24-72 hours post incident
  • And a post incident analysis 2 weeks of traumatic incidents
• Your department computer screen savers can a slide related to helping others on the department if there is a concern for their welfare.
• Work with your union in a cooperative manner to address the issue on various perspectives. The more people that are discussing the issue from both leadership teams will further the awareness to get people talking about the issue.
• Report any known fire fighter (active and retired) deaths related to suicide to the Fire Fighter Behavioral Health Alliance website at [FFBHA.org](http://FFBHA.org)

Chief officers must be a forefront of this issue. The trend concerning suicide rates is on a raise across the country. Our fire fighters are not immune to suicide and it is our responsibility to decrease that risk. A suicide will impact families, the department, question the ability of the leadership team, and raise issues that will persist for years. We must do something now as leaders of our organizations.

If you would like electronic formats of anything mentioned to use for your department, please contact me. If there is anything I can do to help with the issue, please do not hesitate to contact me at jsideras@siouxfalls.org, sideras@post.harvard.edu, or 605-201-0798.