



Chaplain's Corner

By Karl Lusk

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WHAT'S A CHAPLAIN DO???

No doubt, somebody in your department has asked that question, silently, if not aloud. Maybe your department doesn't have a chaplain, so you don't really have an answer. Maybe you've considered the need for a chaplain, but like a chief I spoke with at a recent regional fire school, your answer is "We call another department for that," or "Well, I ask my pastor to come and pray at the annual dinner." We can give him better answers.

Perhaps if we all know what chaplains do, and how they can be vital to our departments, we could achieve the goal of having a properly trained, certified chaplain in every county, if not every department, regardless of size, career, combination, or volunteer status.

Chaplains are responsible for the spiritual, emotional, and often physical well-being of the members of your department. Our role goes beyond asking the blessing at a department function; hopefully, regardless of your religious persuasion, you can communicate through prayer with whatever form the Creator of all we are and have takes for you. Yes, we visit people who are ill or injured, and we have a major function in case of a serious line-of-duty injury or death, but our role is more than pastoral.

Foremost, chaplains are listeners, trusted by all members of the department to keep confidences and maintain healthy boundaries. Special training is vital to be an emergency services chaplain. It is different from that gained in seminary or theological school for ordained ministry. In fact, most of our trained chaplains are lay people. State Fire/Rescue Training recognizes a training curriculum that follows closely that of the International Federation of Fire Chaplains. The basic course is sixteen hours long; there is also an advanced course which deals with specific subjects and problems.

Kentucky has a certification program through the Kentucky Federation of Fire Chaplains that requires appointment and approval by the head of the emergency services agency in which that chaplain will be serving, approval by the chaplain's denominational or congregational unit, the basic class, and at least one course in Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM). As with all volunteer firefighters, trained,

certified chaplains are required to have twenty hours of annual continuing education. Many of our certified chaplains are also members of Kentucky Community Crisis Response Teams, available to assist departments and communities when a serious incident overwhelms local coping mechanisms.

Chaplains, then, are also first responder crisis intervention specialists. We are there to listen when the stress of emergency service pushes us beyond everyday coping. We are there to assist chiefs and administrators with employee assistance program activities and make appropriate referrals when something affects our ability to perform our regular tasks on the job. Because we receive special training in survivor benefit programs available in case of a line of duty death, we are there to help fill out the required paperwork and insure all steps are followed to provide maximum benefits to a fallen comrade's survivors. We are there to know when to bring in objective, trained professionals to work with a department devastated by a major critical incident. We are there to provide one-on-one support to someone who struggles with the demands of our mission. We must, then, have an understanding of the rigors of emergency service.

We are here to encourage our comrades to seek professional counseling, with appropriate referral, when emotional problems make doing our jobs or caring for our families difficult. And yes, we are the first line of defenses to help care for spirit, mind, and body. In some departments, an employee wellness program is administered jointly by training officers and chaplains, because keeping fit in every way keeps you at your best to do your job.

We do all this without regard for denominational or faith practices. We are non-denominational, non-sectarian, here for people of any faith or no faith. We are not here to "convert" or evangelize anyone to a particular belief system. Rather, we are here to encourage respect for all such systems and respect for each other, regardless of our differences.

Interested in starting a chaplain's program in your department? Want to become a trained certified chaplain? Have questions or need more information? Email or call me, karllusk@bellsouth.net; (270) 789-8888, or contact the KY Federation of Fire Chaplains' President Chaplain Dan Ennis, danchaplain@aol.com, (502) 494-5262. We're here to help. Blessings to you, your department, and your community!