



“Chief, I Have Cancer ...”

How to support our colleagues diagnosed with cancer



By Battalion Chief
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Discussions about leadership in the fire service usually revolve around fireground management, labor relations, EMS or some new specialized training. Although valuable in their own right, none of these discussions addresses what to do when an employee tells you that they've been diagnosed with cancer.

Your first reaction to the news, as well as the subsequent decisions you'll make, will likely have the most significant impact on this person—a person who is preparing to engage in a fight for their life. We as supervisors and managers must be prepared for these conversations.

MEETING MIKE

I met Mike Dubron at the funeral for my engineer, Gary Sauls. Gary was diagnosed with melanoma in June 2005 and succumbed to the disease 3 months later. I was telling Mike how difficult it was for me, as both a supervisor and a friend, to deal with this loss. Mike shared his story about being diagnosed with cancer at age 39 and not knowing where to turn for help. He told me that as a result of his own experience, he started an organization called the Firefighter Cancer Support Network (FCSN), which helps fire service personnel who have been diagnosed with cancer (and their immediate families).

This conversation helped me realize how prevalent cancer is in the fire service. I also realized the importance of our department's reaction to Gary's devastating news and how this reaction had shaped his entire attitude and prepared him for his fight.

Having a conversation with an employee who has just been diagnosed with cancer will require you to use every concept of leadership you've ever read about. It will force you to assume a role that hasn't been taught in any training exercise or leadership symposium.

GET THE FACTS

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has launched a comprehensive study (supported by the U.S. Fire Administration,

IAFF, IAFC and FCSN) of cancer incidents among firefighters. But one thing to remember about cancer is that it does *not* discriminate. Cancer is killing us at an alarming rate, and we need to STOP IT before it's too late!

There are a few other things that are important to know about cancer. First, very few cancers are exactly the same, and although two people may have the same type of cancer, the level of spread and the organs involved may be very different, leading to an entirely different set of symptoms and/or treatment options. Second, some people would rather keep their diagnosis and ensuing treatment a private matter. I say this because without the individual's consent, we have no right to intrude. Understanding the needs of the individual and the assistance they desire is an important first step in their road to recovery. Being supportive, not intrusive, creates the atmosphere necessary for positive interaction.

Part of these support efforts should include a referral to the FCSN. Once a person registers on the FCSN website, they're paired with another firefighter who has had a similar cancer diagnosis, so they can provide them with valuable information about their particular type of cancer, their personal experience with the testing and treatments, and some insight into their recovery process. If you're a cancer survivor, you know how valuable this kind of information can be!

REMEMBER RESPECT

I've spent a great deal of time talking with frontline supervisors and chiefs about what to do if someone in their organization is diagnosed with cancer. Although there isn't a chapter in the fire chief's handbook on how to handle this, what I have come to understand is that reacting with a horrific facial gesture or rattling off a bunch of standard clichés only makes a difficult situation worse. A supportive reaction that uses positive dialogue and genuine concern can make all the difference in the world. A good friend of mine who's a firefighter and also a cancer survivor told me that his diagnosis was like getting a one-way ticket to “Cancer Island,” and that the isolation, fear and relative lack of information were almost unbearable. But having someone to talk to who had a similar diagnosis, coupled with a supportive management team behind him, made his recovery a much more palatable experience.

Steps to consider when a member tells you they have cancer

1. Be supportive, offer your presence and be a good listener.
2. Offer to assist with rides to and from appointments and to be a note taker.
3. Encourage them to maintain copies of all reports and scans if needed for further opinions.
4. Refer them to the Firefighter Cancer Support Network (FCSN) website, www.FirefighterCancerSupport.org
5. Communicate updates through FCSN Carepages found on the homepage.
6. Encourage others to send cards and letters in the mail supporting the individual.

The fire service is famous for launching an all-out attack on a problem, especially if it involves one of our own. But when it comes to cancer, we must remain focused on the individual and *their* needs—not our own. As supervisors and managers, we must be conscious of our demeanor and make sure that the first interaction offers hope and solidarity. We must be diligent in organizing a plan that meets the person's needs while maintaining their dignity and honoring their wishes.

KEEP HOPE ALIVE

So how do we stop the devastating effects of cancer in the fire service? Simple. Through prevention by early detection, better protection through the use of PPE, and annual wellness exams. The IAFF/IAFC Firefighter Fitness and Wellness Initiative has brought with it an excellent sense of awareness for both heart disease and cancer, and yielded many success stories by utilizing the early screening methodology.

Additionally, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the remarkable efforts of people like Billy Goldfeder and Rich Duffy. Their dedication to firefighter wellness and safety and their unyielding support of the FCSN have enabled us to reach out to firefighters all over the world who have been diagnosed with cancer. It has allowed us to bring hope to our brothers and sisters who are in their hour of need, and provide an expeditious return ticket from "Cancer Island."

I encourage all fire service members to register on the FCSN website, www.FirefighterCancerSupport.org, or to call toll free 866/994-FCSN (3276). Even if you're not diagnosed with cancer, registering will allow the FCSN to communicate with you about program updates, blood/marrow drives, fundraisers, etc. 🌟

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