

SUPPORT FOR DEPARTMENT MEMBERS WITH CANCER



This factsheet was developed by the International Association of Fire Fighters and the Firefighter Cancer Support Network.

A cancer diagnosis in the firehouse doesn't just affect the individual diagnosed — it impacts the entire team. The unique camaraderie in fire departments often means colleagues feel a personal connection to the situation. Behavioral health support is essential for fostering resilience, maintaining a supportive culture, and ensuring that all members, including the diagnosed individual, receive the care they need.

HOW PEERS CAN PROVIDE SUPPORT

When someone from your department is diagnosed with cancer, it is important to understand that as fire fighters we are used to being the people who are called to help others, and not the ones asking for help.

When we receive a cancer diagnosis, it is uncomfortable for us to accept help since that is not the role we are accustomed to. Every fire fighter's battle will be different, including the ways they choose to handle it. The following information can provide some ways to offer assistance. However, it is important to always remember to respect the wishes of the diagnosed and their family.



- **PRACTICAL ASSISTANCE.** Fire fighters thrive in environments of action and purpose. Providing tangible, actionable support can ease the logistical burdens of a cancer diagnosis. Some ways a department can help a member going through a cancer diagnosis include:
 - **Meal Trains and Errands.** Organize a rotating schedule for meal deliveries, grocery shopping, and other errands. Use platforms like Meal Train or sign-up sheets for coordination.
 - **Transportation and Childcare.** Arrange carpooling for medical appointments or assist with before and after-school care for children.
 - **Shift Adjustments.** Adjust duty schedules to accommodate treatment appointments or recovery needs.
 - **Action Steps:** *Assign a team liaison to communicate with the diagnosed member to identify needs and coordinate support. This ensures consistency and avoids overwhelming the individual with offers of help.*
- **EMOTIONAL SUPPORT.** The emotional impact of a cancer diagnosis can extend to the team. Creating a culture of openness and empathy helps maintain team cohesion. While not all individuals are comfortable sharing their feelings, providing opportunities for them to open up can facilitate needed support:
 - **Check-Ins.** Encourage colleagues to express concern and offer support but respect privacy and boundaries.
 - **Peer Discussions.** While a diagnosis is hard on the diagnosed individual, it may also take a toll on their brothers and sisters on their shift. Organize informal group check-ins to allow team members to share their feelings and process the situation collectively.
 - **Remembrance and Milestones.** Recognize key milestones, such as the end of treatment or remission anniversaries, to celebrate and show support.
 - **Action Steps:** *Introduce peer support training or designate team members as peer supporters to facilitate these conversations effectively.*

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- **DEPARTMENT-WIDE RESOURCES AND TOOLS.** Provide accessible and comprehensive resources at the department level ensure every team member feels supported and knows how to provide or direct someone to necessary support. Generate awareness and utilize programs, such as the Fire Fighter Cancer Support Network (FCSN), which offers peer mentorship and post-diagnosis resources. In addition, reaching out to the IAFF for union support can also be a good way to support your team.
 - **Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs).** Ensure all team members are aware of and can access confidential counseling services.
 - **Group Counseling or Resilience Training.** Offer department-wide sessions focused on grief management, coping with stress, and building resilience.
 - **Action Steps:** *Hold a departmental briefing on available resources to normalize their use and encourage participation.*



HOW LEADERSHIP CAN PROVIDE SUPPORT

- **CREATE A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT.** Leadership plays a critical role in fostering a culture where behavioral health is prioritized:
 - Promote mental health resources and make participation in programs voluntary but encouraged.
 - Model empathetic communication by checking in with the diagnosed member and their family regularly.
 - Maintain transparency while respecting the diagnosed individual's privacy by providing appropriate updates to the team. Get input and approval from the diagnosed about what can be shared.
 - **Action Steps:** *Provide training for leaders on navigating cancer diagnoses within the team, emphasizing emotional intelligence and proactive problem-solving.*
- **ADDRESS POTENTIAL CHALLENGES.** Cancer diagnoses can affect operational readiness, creating tension if team members feel overburdened. Leadership must proactively address these concerns:
 - Schedule coverage equitably to prevent burnout.
 - Foster open communication about challenges and solutions.
 - Recognize and validate the emotions of all team members, balancing empathy with operational needs.

ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUPPORT

- **BUILD LONG-TERM SUPPORT PLANS.** Cancer treatment and recovery often span months or years. Departments should develop sustained support plans that evolve with the needs of the diagnosed individual:
 - Establish regular check-ins to adapt assistance as needs change.
 - Offer flexibility for ongoing medical appointments, even after treatment ends.
- **ENCOURAGE AWARENESS AND PREVENTION.**
 - Educate team members on cancer risks, early detection, and prevention strategies through things like the IAFF materials and Fire Fighter Cancer Awareness Month initiatives.
 - Promote participation in the National Firefighter Registry (NFR) to contribute to research on fire fighter cancer risks.

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- **Fire Fighter Cancer Support Network (FCSN):** Peer-to-peer mentorship, resources for diagnosed members and families, and educational materials. firefightercancersupport.org
- **IAFF Behavioral Health:** Comprehensive mental health support and assistance with resources tailored to fire fighters. They will be able to provide support and/or recommendations. iaff.org/behavioral-health
- **Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs):** Confidential counseling and support services.
- **National Firefighter Registry (NFR):** Participation contributes to understanding cancer risks in the fire service. cdc.gov/niosh/firefighters/registry.html