

# **NFPA...Standards We Can Live With**

**By**

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"If you were to die today, would you be ready"? That is a sign I saw while driving down the road this afternoon. My initial thought was that I was nowhere ready to die. I know I some point in time, I will need to concentrate on the thought of dying. However for today, I would rather concentrate on how to live. There is no question that firefighters and EMTs have chosen extremely dangerous occupations. What we all must be willing to focus on is how to do our jobs effectively and safely at the same time. The good news is that we do not need to reinvent effective safety measures. NFPA standards have been around for many years. These guidelines were drawn up by our brothers and sisters in the service. They did not come from politicians, rulers or other people that know nothing about what we do. They were developed by people just like you and me that have a genuine interest in doing our jobs more effectively and safely. All we have to do is read them, understand them, and follow the rules.

As I travel the country teaching, I hear all kinds of excuses as to why organizations do not follow the NFPA standards. Some of my favorites include "they are only for the big departments", "they are only guidelines", "there is no way we could ever follow all of these". Unfortunately or fortunately depending on how you look at it, the standards are no longer viewed as just guidelines in the eyes of the law. In 2001 a young recruit in upstate New York was killed in the line of duty while participating in a training exercise. The assistant chief of the department who was in charge of the training was tried and convicted of second-degree criminally negligent homicide. NFPA 1403 was used in this trial by the district attorney to prove the case. This is the first time that I am aware of an NFPA standard being used to convict an officer in a department. This national precedent has now been used in court cases across the United States to convict both first responders and officers for failure to recognize and adopt these national consensus standards. Just this month in Kansas City, Kansas a jury awarded \$1.8 million to the family of a driver that was hit and killed in an intersection when the emergency vehicle failed to stop in compliance with NFPA standards. Again, the NFPA standards were cited as the acceptable way of emergency responders to do business. We are only

seeing the tip of the iceberg in cases where emergency responders and officers will be held accountable for their actions both criminally and civilly using NFPA standards.

The sad truth is that the volume of information available can be very intimidating to most of us. My suggestion to people is that they break the standards down and concentrate on a manageable group to start. Organizations should consider standards that deal with emergency vehicle operations, incident command, and firefighter fitness as these are three areas that affect members each and every day on each and every call. After an organization has a firm grasp on the standards that relate to these fields they should look at the index of standards and find the areas that they deal with a regular basis and select the next group to tackle. By working in small segments the standards become much more palatable and easier for most organizations to understand. Care should also be given to ensure that organizational bylaws and policies are in harmony with the NFPA standards. The standards should also be considered minimum guidelines for your organization. There are areas where your organization will need to formulate and adopt much stricter standards for the safety of your membership. It is also a good idea to have a third party audit your policies and procedures to be sure that they are clear, understood and in harmony with the nationally recognized standards.

Access to the standards has been a challenge to many departments. I often ask my students if they know what NFPA even stands for. At least one student in each class would raise their hand and offer the correct answer of National Fire Protection Association. In one class a student responded "No Free Publications Allowed". While this answer got a big chuckle from the class it was also true that many of us did not have regular access to the standards when we were preparing training or writing policies and procedures. The standards are available through NFPA in several formats. Individual standards may be purchased in a written format. Or the entire set of standards may be purchased in a written, online, or CD format. I strongly encourage each organization to purchase at least one complete set of the standards for their organization. The challenge for many organizations is to make this copy available to everyone that needs it with only a single copy. At a recent training the instructor shared a way to access a complete version of each standard with an internet connection. The standards cannot be printed, cut, or copied from this format but the entire standard may be viewed online. This is extremely helpful to officers and members that need to view a standard while not having access to the purchased volume.

To access the online version, start by pointing your browser to:  
[http://www.nfpa.org/aboutthecodes/list\\_of\\_codes\\_and\\_standards.asp](http://www.nfpa.org/aboutthecodes/list_of_codes_and_standards.asp) . Now search for and click on the standard you want to view. Next, scroll to the bottom of the page and click on the link that reads "view the 200? edition of his document". Near the bottom of that page click on "I Agree". Follow the onscreen directions and then click on "Open NFPA....." .

Ignorance of the standards is no excuse. This is being proven in courtrooms across the country at an alarming rate. There is also a bill in congress, H.R. 5686, that directs Homeland Security to determine the national level of compliance with these standards and then to develop ways to bring fire departments into compliance. Each firefighter, and more importantly each officer, must begin to read, understand, and follow the NFPA standards. To answer the question at the beginning of this article "no" I am not ready to die today. What I am ready to do is commit to a safer and more effective job in the profession of emergency services. The NFPA standards have been proven as an accepted and reliable roadmap to get to that destination; all we need to do is follow the map. We now have a serious choice to make. We can learn and follow the standards because it is the right thing to do or we can wait for the proposed legislation to tell us what to do. I hope you will join me in a commitment to making the fire service a safer place for our members simply because it is the right thing to do.