

Safety Rules are Useless.....Without Training and Enforcement

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I was visiting a fire station recently and while meeting with the Chief, he told me about his safety initiatives and how well they were working. We went over the department's policies and procedures and I was duly impressed with what I saw. Then, the tones went off and he quickly left saying that he would like to take me on the call with him, but the safety rules prohibited civilians to ride in vehicles using lights and sirens.

I walked out the front of the station and saw the members responding in their personal cars. Two of them ran the red light on the corner, in violation of department policies as well as state law. I stood there as the crew entered the first engine looking for signs of seat belts being buckled, but it was apparent that was not being done. As a matter of fact, as the engine left quarters, one member was still standing in the crew cab donning his turnout coat while being held steady by two other members. The driver hurried into the front seat and never checked around the vehicle for obstructions or open compartment doors as I had just read they were required to do. It became apparent that this great safety program never left the pages of the policy manual.

Emergency service organizations need policies to provide members with tools and guidelines to operate efficiently and safely. They give the organization consistency of operations. They also streamline the administrative process and provide accountability all of which reduce risk and make everyone safer. Another plus for policies is that they provide a basis for liability defense.

First, let's distinguish the difference between a policy and a procedure because they are different. A policy is a philosophical statement about a particular subject. It explains the desired result or expectation. A procedure involves specific steps which will be completed in order to implement the policy.

Establishing a safety program is not easy and writing it is not the most difficult part. There are three distinct parts to developing effective policies and procedures. Writing the policy, training and then the dreaded "e" word, enforcement.

The first step is writing the policy. The place to start is with your existing policies. Look for gaps which may have been caused by new equipment, changes in codes or standards, or changes within response areas such as new types of businesses

or response challenges such as the introduction of a new major roadway or construction of a school or busy shopping center. Also seek out policies which are verbal, exist only as memos, or have become irrelevant, outdated, inaccurate or difficult to understand. This part takes a good deal of research including laws, codes, and standards which affect the way you must operate. Next determine who will write the policy. This could differ from one policy to another.

For instance a policy on driving should be done by people who have experienced vehicle operations in your area while administrative policies should be the product of members with a background in that particular area.

Next is training. Every new or amended policy must be transmitted to the membership through a process of training. A good friend who is a Chief recently told me that he had instituted a seat belt policy, but no one seemed to be following it and enforcement had become an issue. I asked how he had trained the members and got back "Trained? What do you mean train? I gave a policy to wear seat belts. No training involved here." After thinking it over, he re-instituted the policy and provided training which included statistics of deaths and injuries to firefighters who were not belted. He used basic driver training videos to show the importance of seat belt use and discussed the danger that an unbelted firefighter posed to everyone else onboard. He recently called to tell me that seat belt usage was nearly 100%. Training must be completed for all policies.

Finally, the third part of developing policies is enforcement. When we hear about a fire truck which was involved in an intersection accident after going through a red traffic light at 30 miles per hour we can be pretty certain of two things. First, this was not the first red light this driver had run at 30 MPH. It probably was his or her habit to do so and their luck just ran out. The second thing which is fairly certain is that this was not the first time that Captain or Lieutenant was sitting next to that driver as the vehicle ran the a red light and said nothing. Enforcement starts with the line officer and if enforcement is not handled at this level, then no safety policy is worth the paper on which it is written.

So remember, without all three areas covered, writing, training, and enforcement, your safety program really doesn't exist.