

Airlines and Emergency Services...We Can Learn a Thing or Two

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I often think that I have one of the best jobs in the world. I get to travel across the United States to meet and work with Firefighters and EMS folks on a regular basis. I'll admit just like any job it isn't perfect, but it sure is tough to beat. One of the downsides of the job is the long hours as well as the constant travel. I joke that I know more people at the US Airways counter in Syracuse than I do at the home office. A firefighter approached me at a recent class I was teaching and asked if the thought of flying so much ever made me nervous. I replied that I really never gave it much thought, but to be honest I was more nervous every time my fire pager went off at home than I was of flying. He asked me to explain my logic and the conversation went something like this.

Flying has its dangers, no doubt about it. But Fire and EMS responders can learn a lot if they study the airline industry. First is Risk Management. The airlines look at weather conditions and decide when it is not safe to fly. Can planes take off and land in rain, snow, fog and wind? Sure they can, when they have to. But sometimes the risks far out way the benefits and they ground the flights. The same is true of firefighting. Can we enter a fully involved building and fight a fire? Sure we can, but sometimes the conditions warrant that we don't and we need to be ready to ground our crews before they get in trouble.

The next item I have noticed is maintenance. Before each plane takes off it is checked by ground personnel, the pilot does a complete walk around and then the pilot and copilot do another series of checks before they start the engines. If you watch this process it is redundant on purpose. Do we take the same amount of care of our equipment? Or do we assume if it worked last time it will work again when we need it?

The next area is Training. I fly on average of once a week and have heard the seatbelt message over and over. I know the nearest exit may be behind me and I know my seat cushion may be used for flotation device and oh yes, the bag on the oxygen mask may not inflate but oxygen is indeed flowing. While

this message is being given I am probably checking out the latest edition of Skymall magazine and not paying attention, but I still hear it as does the person on the plane that may have never flown before. Don't assume your members already know the message of safety in your organization, repeat it over and over, it just may save their life.

The next area is compliance. After we hear the seatbelt message not one, but two flight attendants walk the aisle to ensure each seatbelt is buckled before the plane moves. Who is checking for compliance in your organization? Is someone else checking to make sure that the person checking is doing their job as well? The airlines also check that everything in the plane is securely fastened before takeoff. Have you checked to see that all helmets, oxygen bottles, defibrillators, axes and clipboards have been secured on your vehicle before it moves?

The plane never leaves the gate without a spotter. It doesn't matter if they are backing two feet or twenty feet. The spotter is visible with bright orange marshalling wands, has communications with the pilot and the tow operator, and uses two hands with clear signals and every spotter in every airport across the United States uses the same signals. When is the last time you heard or read about a backing accident at an airport? These airports are just as crowded and dangerous as our emergency scenes and backing accidents never seem to happen. Why then are backing accidents one of the most frequent accidents we have seen in the emergency services?

The final area where airlines have us beat is "near miss reporting." Each incident and near miss in aviation is reported, evaluated and communicated to other airlines. We have the ability to do the same in Fire and EMS services. The purpose to report near misses is so that trends can be identified, solutions can be discovered and together we can make emergency services safer for all. I encourage you to report all near misses so we can learn from others as well.

Maybe all this time I spend on airplanes hasn't been in vain after all. I have learned a great deal about safety from the airline industry and I'm sure I'll pick up even more as the years go by. The airlines are forced to start charging for baggage, charging for drinks and no longer offer free peanuts or pretzels. I am sure they could save even more money by cutting out some of their safety steps. You could buy a lot of pretzels for what they pay that person to stand there behind the plane with the big orange wands, but they seem to have their priorities in order. Perhaps if we did a better job getting our priorities in order we

could someday make responding to an emergency call as safe as flying in an airplane.

Well, we've just started our approach to Syracuse and all electronics must be stowed for landing. Here comes the flight attendant to make sure I have done so. What a novel concept, actually checking to be sure that everyone is doing what we have told them to do. Yes, we can learn a lot from others and make our jobs safer if we just follow their lead.