



## The History of Safety & Health Week

Beginning in 2005, Safety and Health Week has grown from an unprecedented call for immediate action on fire operations related deaths to an annual initiative contributing to larger fire and emergency service efforts to successfully reduce responder line-of-duty and job-related deaths, injuries and illness.

In 2005, IAFC, with the leadership of the Safety Health and Survival Section, called for a one-day, industry-wide Safety Stand Down, after a military method to address a specific problem across its ranks. The intent was to sharply highlight the importance of responder safety in such a way to have an immediate and significant impact across all ranks and all departments, in the growing face of the ever-increasing number of LODDs.

While not everyone embraced the idea of standing down all emergency operations for a day dedicated to safety, seventeen national organizations joined the IAFC calling for such action. In some cases, company officers led the charge in their department despite concern from their chiefs or elected officials. On June 21, 2005 it is estimated that more than 1,000 fire departments of all types and sizes participated in the event.

Building on the success of the first International Fire Fighter Safety Stand Down, the event continued in 2006, this time with the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) and the Volunteer and Combination Officers' Section of the IAFC as official event co-sponsors. In light of a specific uptick in vehicle-related deaths, specific resources were developed on the theme of vehicle safety. Due to feedback from the 2005 event concerning the ability to reach all personnel in a single day, the event started on Wednesday, June 21, 2006 and officially continued until all personnel and duty nights had been covered.

In 2007, the event officially became a week-long activity to ensure all personnel and shifts received the benefits of the program. Additionally, the name was changed to ensure the inclusivity of fire-based EMS personnel and their specific needs. The 2007 International Fire Fighter and EMS Safety Stand Down occurred from June 17-23 with the theme, *Ready to Respond*, having a focus on safety during training, training for safety and safety enroute to an incident scene. The number of supporting organizations and participating departments continued to grow.

Also in 2007, the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) launched National Firefighter Health Week, a week-long event held in August to specifically focus on health issues facing firefighters, emergency medical personnel and rescue workers. With heart attack continually the leading cause of on-duty firefighter deaths, the NVFC created the Heart-Healthy Firefighter Program in 2003 as the nation's first heart attack prevention and awareness campaign for all firefighters and EMS personnel, both volunteer and career. As part of this program, National Firefighter Health Week provided a concentrated opportunity to educate the fire and emergency services community about heart disease as well as other health and wellness issues that affect first responders and encourage first responders to take action.

In 2008, the evolution of the IAFC event continued. As heart attacks remained a leading cause of firefighter deaths, and with the growing body of data on firefighter cancer risks, the event adopted firefighter health as a key component. By this time, it was clear that the program's growing success no longer reflected the single focus, rapid-response model of the stand down. The name was changed to the International Fire/EMS Safety, Health and Survival Week and the event became part of the three-pronged Safety Support System. The Safety Support System was launched by the IAFC Safety Health and Survival Section to include Safety Week, five-minute health/safety-related training drills, and Stand Down Priority Survival Notifications (single-day events called for when specific and urgent trends were identified).

The model was solid by 2009, with a recurring 21 partnering organizations, an ever-increasing body of fire departments participating, and historic lows in firefighter LODDs. As departments struggled with the economic downturn, Safety Week continued to offer low/no-cost training that was perhaps even more important as departments struggled to meet increasing demand with constantly dwindling resources, including less staff.

The NVFC's successful National Firefighter Health Week also continued to grow and expand. New resources were added each year to provide first responders and their departments with the tools they need to focus on their health and be at their best for the job at hand. The first few years targeted specific health issues such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. The week then evolved to focus more on the steps first responders should take to get and stay healthy and implement a successful department health and wellness program. The NVFC's Health and Safety Committee and the Health and Safety Work Group provided oversight and guidance for Health Week, and the week was supported by a network of partnering organizations from both the fire and emergency services and the health sector.

In such an environment of efficiencies, it was natural that many departments took the opportunity to point out that there were many similarities between two programs they enjoyed: Safety Week in June and Health Week in August. Both the IAFC and NVFC supported each other's event and had the common goal of eliminating preventable cases of first responder injuries and fatalities. Uniting the two programs and the resources of the two organizations simply made sense.

In 2012, the IAFC and NVFC officially merged the two programs bringing together traditional and new resources and partners. Of course, the new program needed a new name and so International Fire/EMS Safety and Health Week was adopted. The name reflects the renewed commitment to demonstrating both the individual importance of, and the symbiotic relationship between, operational safety and personal health.

Since 2005, Safety and Health Week has come a long way from an initial single-day, narrow focus on firefighter safety. Today, national organizations, government agencies and the trade press join in promoting and supporting the event. A special thank you goes to the IAFC Safety, Health and Survival Section and the NVFC Health and Safety Work Group for their vision and leadership over the course of these years, and ensuring that the program and resources remain fresh and relevant to the men and women in the field, in a constantly changing environment.

The real heroes of this program, however, are the thousands of departments in the U.S., Canada and around the world who participate in Safety and Health Week and are committed to embracing its message year-round. We especially appreciate the chiefs, chief officers, company officers and firefighters/EMTs who take on the work of planning, programming, training and providing feedback.