



The  
**F** Volunteer  
**FIREFIGHTER**



The Official Publication of the Firemen's Association of the State of New York

**Governor Signed Bill  
Allowing Firefighters to Carry  
Out Official Duties Without  
Commercial Drivers Licenses**

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**Plus:**

**The Fire Service Women of New York State  
Eighth Annual Training Conference**

**Update on the 2009 FASNY Convention in Niagara Falls**

**The Museum of Firefighting  
New Family-Friendly Additions Make for Fun Day Trip Destination**

**Recruitment and Retention Toolkit  
With Tiger Schmittendorf, Who Will be Speaking at the 2009 FASNY Convention**

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# JUNE 2009



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# RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION TOOLKIT:

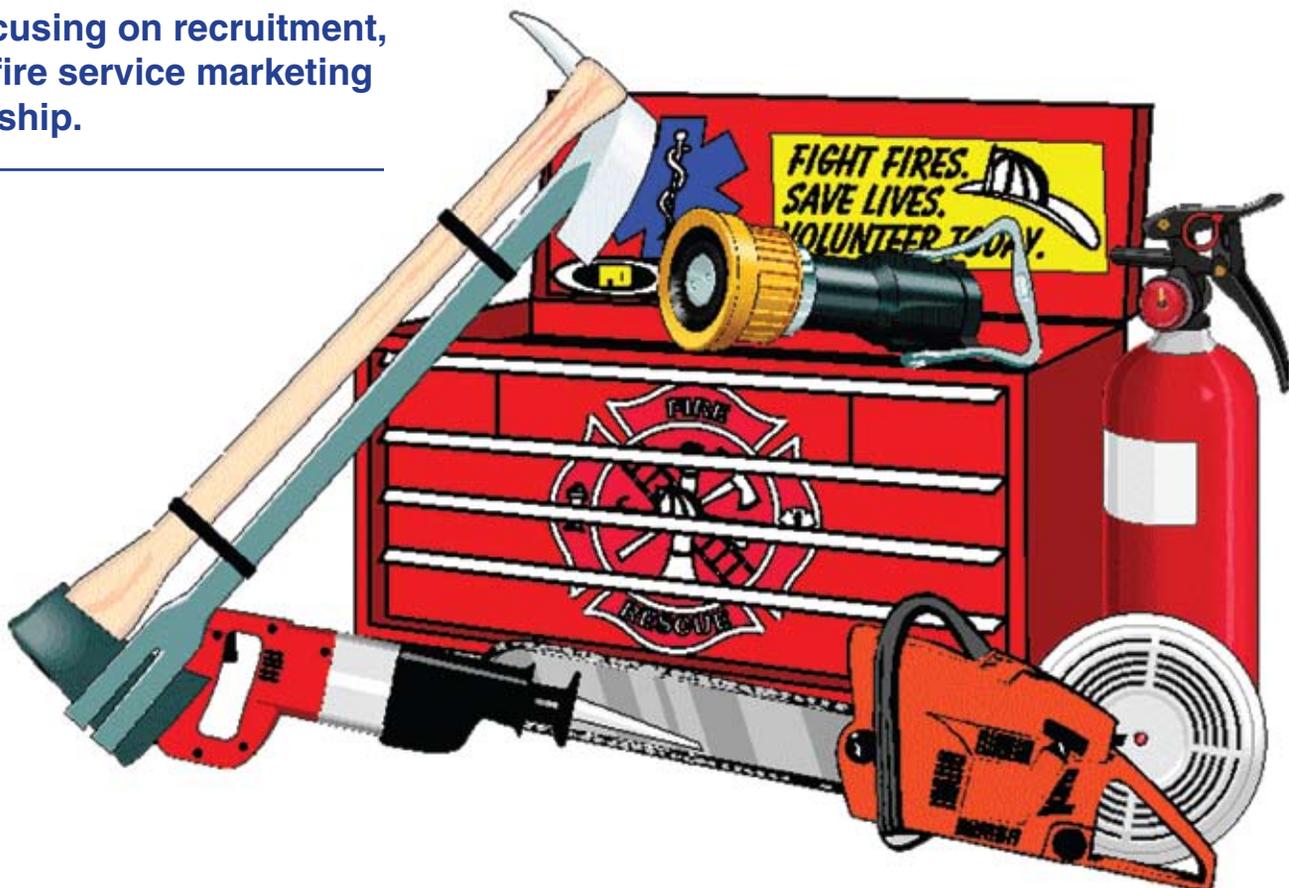
## Clean the Litterbox

by Tiger Schmittendorf

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This article is one in a series of toolkits focusing on recruitment, retention, fire service marketing and leadership.

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I was reading a not so tongue-in-cheek blog on FirefighterNation.com written by my good friend Art Goodrich titled: "Ordering From the Risk Menu" and it reminded me of a Saturday I spent recently, full of fire service activities.

I started the day by attending a heavy dose of an eight-hour seminar focusing on preparation for a Line of Duty Death. If you've ever read one of my blogs, you know I'm very passionate about fire service funerals and making sure that they're planned and executed appropriately, always considering the family's needs first.

In contrast to Art's blog, it's important to plan that stuff too, but if we really think about it, doesn't the need for proper funeral planning only further acknowledge our acceptance of failure in protecting our own from the risks we face?

Later that day I attended a benefit for four firefighters from Friendship and Cuba, NY who were critically injured in a wall collapse at a commercial structure fire. While at the benefit, three of the four firefighters who could walk without the aid of a walker took me across the street to the scene of the incident. We walked behind the large brick structure connected to businesses on both sides.

The pile of burned bricks still lay there just as they did on December 21, 2008, the day the wall fell on them. They showed me how the chaos played out. The 19-year old on the nozzle related how he looked down when a single brick hit the ground next to him. When he looked up, it was too late.

He had to turn his body in a very deliberate and mechanical fashion in order to demonstrate the self-defense maneuver he made when he saw the wall coming at him. That's because he is still in a neck brace and has no timeline for full recovery.

They talked about how they were buried briefly and no one knew exactly where they were until they dug down through the rubble. One talked about the burns he suffered through his turnout gear – from the heat of the bricks that fell on him.

Unintentionally, they received a big order off the risk menu that Art spoke about in his blog. Could building construction and situational awareness have played a factor in their injuries? We can only second-guess.

I finished off my day with the honor of being the guest speaker at the Langford-New Oregon Fire Company's annual dinner where I talked about the business we're in: the business of taking care of people.

The business of taking care of people starts with taking care of ourselves. Taking care of ourselves starts with identifying, acknowledging and minimizing risk.

I can think back on several instances in my 28-year fire service career when I could have made better choices for personal safety. That's putting it politely.

It took me a long time and several close calls to realize that everything I do in the fire service is not about me. It's about the people we serve and the people who allow us to serve: our spouses, our parents, our children and our families.

In his presentation aptly titled: "Firefighters Scared Straight," my good friend Billy Goldfeder asks the question: "Who is in your wallet?" The phrase plays off the popular credit card commercial that asks "what" is in your wallet.

To remind myself of who is in my wallet, I've taken Billy's concept one step further and hand-written a very simple risk management plan that even I can follow. Under the back lid of my leather fire helmet you will find the names of my wife

Laurie; my daughter Kathleen and my son Alex.

The last thing I see before I don my final piece of battle gear is those three reminders that everything I do is not about me – it's about them. It reminds me not to do stupid stuff that's going to make me dead.

My family is inspiration and motivation for most of what I do in the fire service. One of my most recent assignments was as part of the unified command team that managed the recovery of Continental Flight 3407 that crashed in Clarence Center, New York. Fifty people were killed on February 12, 2009 and a community was changed forever.

Two days later, Valentine's Day, my wife reluctantly got on a plane and flew from Buffalo to Wisconsin to visit her older sister for a few days. I was back in the emergency operations center by 5:00 a.m. and missed the opportunity to say goodbye, as she was still sleeping when I left home.

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the fire service.**

She wasn't leaving until mid-afternoon so I pulled some strings and made arrangements to meet her at the airport to kiss her goodbye. The plan was working flawlessly until I got to the gate and her plane had boarded five minutes early. Imagine my disappointment. Imagine how much trouble I was in! Being the hopeless romantic that I am, I apologized to her via text message.

When I got home late that evening, I found a note that she had left for Alex and me on the kitchen table. It now hangs in my office as it reads:

"Please remember to feed the cats, give them water, and clean the litter box."

But the best part was written in parentheses below:

"(and do the same for yourselves)"

I smiled out loud. Needless to say, it provided some much needed stress relief.

That note inspired me to lead my first command meeting at 6:00 a.m. the following morning. I shared the note as a reminder for all of us to do a status check of our mental, physical and emotional health after what we had endured in the last 55 hours. Furthermore, were we prepared for what we would deal with in the coming days

And, as it was 6:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning, I thought it appropriate to end the meeting with a silent prayer for all those lost – and all those who had suffered loss.

This leads me to the theme for the 2009 Fire/EMS Safety, Health and Survival Week (June 14-20, 2009): "Protect Yourself: Your Safety, Health and Survival Are Your Responsibility."

This program encourages responders of every rank to focus on what they personally can do to manage risk and enhance their health and safety. Like the 16 Life Safety Initiatives available at [www.everyonegoeshome.com](http://www.everyonegoeshome.com), this year's theme reflects the need for personal accountability within a strong safety culture.

I often joke that I'm just a dumb fireman, but even I can figure out that while the 16 Life Safety Initiatives hold us personally accountable for our actions, they too are not about us.

"Everyone Goes Home" is not about us. "Courage to be Safe" is not about us. It's about those who care about us.

These programs are about the people making the real sacrifices when we miss a meal or a family event, or just quiet time with those we love – to go do what we love.

We owe it to them to make effective incident decisions. We owe it to them to embrace a culture of safety through leadership. We owe it to them to train to be the best we can possibly be. We owe it to them to ensure that everyone does go home at the end of every call.

The reality is: When a death occurs in the line of duty, everyone sees the long parade of apparatus, uniforms and important traditions; but no one sees the slow death

march up the sidewalk that the chief and the chaplain make – right before they strike that fateful knock on the door that will change lives forever.

The 2009 Fire/EMS Safety, Health and Survival Week and the 16 Life Safety Initiatives are about

those who must endure in our absence if we don't follow these simple guidelines.

The next time and every time the tones drop, remind yourself that it's not about us.

It's always about: "Who is in your helmet?"

Stay safe. Train often.



*Tiger Schmittendorf is chairman of FASNY's Recruitment and Retention Committee and serves the County of Erie Department of Emergency Services (Buffalo NY) as Deputy Fire Coordinator. He created a recruitment effort that doubled his own fire department's membership and helped net 525+ new volunteers countywide. He is a Nationally Certified Fire Instructor and has been a firefighter since 1980. Visit his blog at [www.tigerschmittendorf.com](http://www.tigerschmittendorf.com).*

**See Tiger Schmittendorf with Ret. Phoenix Chief Al Brunacini and J. Gordon Routely in a fire service roundtable discussion at the FASNY Convention in Niagara Falls on Thursday, August 20th, 2009.**