



2009 OH&S Health & Safety Seminar

Good morning Brothers & Sisters and invited guests - welcome to the annual Ontario Professional Fire Fighters Association's Occupational Health and Safety Seminar.

I want to begin my address by thanking the OPFFA's Health and Safety Committee for their representation not only on our committee - but as well the time spent on the Ministry of Labour's Section 21 committee, the Municipal Health and Safety Association, and the IAFF's and Ontario Federation of Labour's Health & Safety Committees.

This broad range of exposure has allowed our Committee members to be highly educated in many areas. That education is only an advantage to all of us if we share that knowledge. I want to commend Brother Richard McCurdy and the Committee with their push for a new way of communicating to our membership.

As a result, we have launched the OPFFA Health & Safety Alert which will be used for issues that require attention at the local level. Our inaugural alert regarded the use of particleboard in flashover chambers.

That information along with the education gained at seminars such as these will arm you to better represent your members back home which makes us all safer.

I know everyone in this room understands the OPFFA represents our 10,000 members and their families in a variety of ways. Just like the emergency situations that we respond to every day - it takes a very dedicated team to be successful.

From the bargaining table to, grievances, health and safety, pensions, worker's compensation and government relations, I am very proud of the nature and level of representation the OPFFA provides our members and their families.

I would like to a minute to introduce and recognize the members responsible for delivering much of those services and setting the direction of our organization.

I am speaking of the OPFFA Executive Board and I would ask those members to please rise when I call their name.

- Executive Vice President Mark McKinnon
- Secretary/Treasurer Barry Quinn
- District 1 V/P Ernie Thorne
- District 2 V/P Chris Francescone
- District 3 V/P Mike Pauze
- District 4 V/P Terry Colburn
- District 5 V/P Warren Scott
- District 6 V/P Randy Richards
- District 7 V/P Eric Nordlund

Professional fire fighters across Ontario are also members of the International Association of Fire Fighters. From my perspective the IAFF is an organization that continues to be the lead advocate on the topic of fire fighter health and safety and for that we are grateful.

We are pleased to have our representatives from the IAFF with us this week. Jim Lee the Asst. to the General President for Canadian Operations who is with us today and Bruce Carpenter 13th District Vice President will be joining us tomorrow.

Ensuring and enhancing the health and safety of our members is one of the most important responsibilities that we can do within our fire service as a whole.

It is properly, a legislated and joint responsibility that must be proactively adopted throughout all levels of the fire service.

That is why we have opened the doors to this seminar to our Chiefs, Deputy Chiefs, and city officials charged with Health & Safety responsibilities. Because when it comes to our member's safety we should all be working from the same side.

I know we have several Fire Chiefs and Deputy Chiefs from around the province attending throughout the week and I want to congratulate you for your attendance. Your obvious concern and support for the health and safety of our members is recognized and it is appreciated.

I am pleased to report that the OPFFA and OAFCA have found ways to work together to find solutions to some of the concerns within the fire service.

An example of this is the pre-service practicum that is, or was offered through the community college program.

The utilization of co-op students on front run vehicles was dangerous for the students and introduced an environment where our Incident Commanders had to worry the most about the person who should be doing the least.

There is a safer way to educate these students and we believe the latest amendments to the program which removes the students from all front run vehicles and the onus of on duty fire fighters to be the student's supervisor (where many of our members did not relate to their responsibility as a supervisor in that context -to that under the Occupational Health & Safety Act) are major steps forward for this program.

Also the post course testing will help ensure that the fire service receives quality candidates as full-time recruits.

We also continue to jointly advance our agenda to enhance the utilization of the fire service in pre-hospital emergency response or EMS. When the focus is where it should be, that being on the person suffering from an emergency medical event, we should all champion the use of the fire service in this area.

It is a natural extension of our ability and our response capability. But I also caution that this is not a 'take-over' of paramedical services and the concerns of paramedics needs to be taken seriously.

I firmly believe that we can compliment what paramedics bring to the scene. However we need to understand what our reasonable training and response thresholds are, so as to not detrimentally affect the other areas of our service delivery.

When you consider the expansion of the fire service into a higher level of medical response it is yet another example of the evolution of the fire service.

However this continued progression has not dismissed the fact that our job is physically and mentally demanding.

The toll can be extreme, as witnessed not only with on scene line of duty deaths but with occupational disease and heart attacks that are so common within our industry.

It is this physical toll and prevalence for cardiac events that formed the basis of the recent Ontario Human Rights Tribunal decision with respect to the London fire fighter who challenged the mandatory retirement age of 60 within that service.

The tribunal, in a very well worded decision, supported the notion of mandatory retirement for all suppression fire fighters.

Not surprisingly the Commission has requested the Tribunal to reconsider this decision.

While we anxiously await this issue to wind its way through this process and possibly the courts I am confident that mandatory retirement is here to stay within Ontario's fire service.

I want to recognize and thank the London Professional Fire Fighters Association, the City of London, and the London Fire service for their perseverance on this issue.

As well I would like to acknowledge Howard Goldblatt and Charlene Wiseman from Sack Goldblatt Mitchell for their outstanding representation on this file.

For me the issue of mandatory retirement is a perfect example of where some of our members find it difficult to think outside of their own 3 foot circle and consider what is best for the public we serve and the fire service collectively.

And that is where all of you come in.

As health and safety representatives you must constantly look out for our interest as a whole.

While we all shoulder responsibilities as individuals – it is all about the team.

I realize moving the yardsticks through health and safety, sadly, may not be as popular locally as negotiating 3/6/9 - but attaining it is equally important to the well-being of our members.

I believe we are on our way to the day when our broader membership will knowingly place an equal value on these areas.

That is evident with the increasing popularity of this seminar and our emphasis on providing Certification opportunities, looking at fire fighter survival and RIT from a hands-on perspective, and focusing on preventing cancer progression rather than simply being reactive through claims processing.

Our Occupational Disease representatives continue their exhausting journey with the same tenacity they had with their first claim many years ago.

They continue to advocate for the expansion of cancers to be formally recognized and for you the membership to understand that it is your individual responsibility to take steps to prevent these cancers from taking hold.

Tomorrow in the workshops Colin and Paul will present what they use as an education tool for recruits and retirees regarding occupational disease and our progress in the area of prevention.

Following Colin and Paul we have Mr. Peter Brownrigg who will be presenting the latest in early screening techniques for bladder cancer.

As well Ms. Julianne McMullen, an oncology nurse, who has been working with us on a comprehensive fire fighter's health manual will be in attendance tomorrow to conduct a survey which will assist her research with this manual.

I encourage all of you to take the time to meet and speak with her as well, participating in this survey.

We have an exciting agenda this week I know you are anxious to get started and hear from our guest speakers but I want to take this opportunity to thank our Committee members and our Event Coordinator Julie Chambers for their hard work in pulling this event together.

As well I want to thank all of you. You have stepped forward to represent fire fighters in an area where - when you succeed - it increases our chances of completing our shifts and returning home.

When you consider all we do in that context – about completing the shift and going home – I ask that you stop and think about all of those who didn't make it home.

I want you to think about the senseless vandalism carried out on our memorial that was constructed as a tribute to the sacrifice of all of those Brothers and Sisters.

I want you to think about how the families of these members must have felt when they heard, that this tribute that was established to forever memorialize their spouse, father, mother, brother or sister was defaced in a lowly form of political protest.

I suspect - everyone will feel that same anger and disgust that I felt on the morning I learned this vandalism took place.

I ask that you focus those feelings in support of our initiative to restore that memorial and restore the respect our fallen members and their families deserve.

I have laid down my challenge to you the membership of the OPFFA to exceed the government's donation of \$100,000.

While many of you have answered the call we still have a long way to go to meet our fundraising goal. Please go to our website to learn about this initiative and how to donate.

I want to conclude my remarks this morning by recognizing one of our own. As members you will be familiar with our highly professional newsletter called Intrepid. We are very proud of this production and the person behind the magazine.

Today I am honoured to be able present an award to our hard working Editor. Many of you may be aware that the IAFF hosts annual media awards which recognize excellence in various forms of media and local, provincial and state publications.

The IAFF receives hundreds of Entries each year and we were very proud that the OPFFA captured first place in two categories for 2007.

One was for our political action campaign conducted during the last provincial election and the other was for our Intrepid magazine.

I would ask that you join me in congratulating our Editor Brother James Coones as he comes forward to accept this plaque recognizing his efforts.

Thank you have a great week and stay safe.