



Since the Minnesota Legislature passed the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program (HHAP) in 2021, the landscape of our state's firefighter health and wellness has shifted in countless positive and significant ways. The program continues to prove its value time and time again. One very recent example: In the month following the February fatal shooting of the Burnsville firefighter/paramedic and police officers, we saw a 60% increase in call volume to the MnFIRE helpline.

Today, all of Minnesota's 20,000 firefighters – including those in your community – now have access to the education, prevention and care needed to handle a cardiac, emotional trauma or cancer diagnosis. In many cases, these are literally life-changing resources.

We urge you to encourage your department's leadership to fully embrace the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program. Mental health, educational and financial support is available simply by calling MnFIRE's 24-hour hotline at 888-784-6634. This confidential, free service is available for all active volunteer, paid-on-call, part-time and full-time Minnesota firefighters.

As of December 2023:

- 177 critical illness claims have been paid (totaling \$2,277,500) to firefighters with a cardiac, emotional trauma, cancer or other critical illness diagnosis.
- There have been 1,800 counseling visits to MnFIRE Assistance Program providers for emotional trauma support, with more than 1,015 providers well-versed in firefighter mental health available across the state.
- MnFIRE has fielded 717 Peer Support calls.
- More than 1,160 occupational health trainings have been facilitated at 70% of Minnesota's fire departments.

As we share more stories of firefighters who have benefitted from the program and make it as easy as possible for the state's fire departments to embrace these resources, the momentum continues to build. We've featured several of these success stories in the enclosed Taking the Lead impact report. We invite you to take a look and see how our collective work is making an impact on Minnesota's firefighters and their families, including the men and women serving your community.

Together, we can help more firefighters across the state take full advantage of these much-needed resources.

Sincerely,

George Esbensen
Board President, Minnesota Firefighter Initiative

Taking the Lead

The state of firefighter health in Minnesota





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“We’re proud ... that [the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program] comes at **no additional cost to fire departments, firefighters or their families.**”

— SENATOR JEFF HOWE
& REPRESENTATIVE CHERYL YOUAKIM
HOMETOWN HEROES ASSISTANCE PROGRAM BILL AUTHORS

A landmark year for firefighter health and wellness



As you're about to read, 2023 was another significant year for Minnesota firefighter health and wellness. The Hometown Heroes Assistance Program (HHAP) continues to demonstrate significant return on the legislature's investment in service to our state's 20,000 firefighters, their families and our communities. It is something we all should be proud of.

Since MnFIRE launched in 2016, its staff, volunteer board, partners and vendors have been diligent stewards of the funds provided by Minnesota to improve firefighter health and wellness. MnFIRE's fiduciary duty, commitment to transparency and responsibility for managing the life-saving Hometown Heroes Assistance Program are obligations we take extremely seriously.

Today, MnFIRE is leading the nation in how it supports Minnesota's firefighters. The Hometown Heroes Assistance Program is the first of its kind in the country, and our collaborative approach and streamlined program administration have helped us better understand firefighters' needs and get these resources directly in their hands. As we learn more about why firefighters are reaching out for peer support or what kinds of critical illnesses they are being diagnosed with, the better MnFIRE is at working upstream through our trainings and prevention efforts to prioritize and protect firefighter health.

We are reminded too often how vital our work together is, whether it's after a particularly challenging call, a lifetime of physical and emotional stress compounded over years in the fire service, or the loss of a fellow firefighter to a cardiac event, cancer or suicide. That's what makes the following stories, testimonies and data so compelling: When tools are needed, before or after a call, MnFIRE is here.

We're proud of what we've accomplished thus far, and we're honored to continue advocating for the health and well-being of firefighters across the state.

All of us in the fire service would like to offer our sincere thanks to the legislators who have made an unprecedented difference in the lives of our state's hometown heroes and our communities. Your support means everything to us.

As always, I'm happy to directly answer any questions you may have. You can reach me at (763) 242-1819 or gesbensen@mnfireinitiative.com.

Sincerely,

George Esbensen
BOARD PRESIDENT • MINNESOTA FIREFIGHTER INITIATIVE

DOWNLOAD the latest comprehensive guide to Hometown Heroes Assistance Program benefits here:



Hometown Heroes Assistance Program

YOUR **FREE BENEFITS** INSIDE

2024 EDITION

MnFIRE
Hometown Heroes
Assistance Program

Benefits for every kind of firefighter

Free Hometown Heroes Assistance Program resources are here to help Minnesota firefighters — and their families — stay healthy. Active volunteer, paid-on-call, part-time and full-time Minnesota firefighters are utilizing the following benefits:



Critical Illness Program

A Critical Illness insurance policy which covers diagnoses of critical illnesses such as cancer, heart attacks and post-traumatic stress injury (PTSI), and provides a lump-sum cash payment up to \$20,000 per diagnosis to assist with expenses.



MnFIRE Assistance Program

Confidential help and mental health resources available over the phone or online at any time. Along with unlimited peer support, this program provides up to five free counseling visits per issue per year with seasoned mental health professionals who have been trained to address the unique experiences of the fire service.



Free Training

Annual health and wellness training provided at no cost to fire departments. These trainings explore cancer, cardiac health, emotional trauma, sleep, fitness, nutrition and more so firefighters can learn about increased occupational health risks and best strategies for staying healthy and safe.

A message from the HHAP bill sponsors

As legislators, our job is to listen, to learn and to work together to solve our state's problems. And three years ago, we heard loud and clear — from fire chiefs, from firefighters, from their families and from MnFIRE — about the very serious health concerns plaguing our state's 20,000 firefighters.

Cardiac disease, emotional trauma and cancer rates among firefighters are nearly twice as high as the general public. Cardiovascular disease is a leading cause of line-of-duty deaths in the fire service, and cancer is now the leading cause of death among firefighters nationwide. Mental illness, particularly sleep disorders, depression, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress injury and suicidal ideation/action, impacts firefighters at rates much higher than the general population.

Despite these risks, we learned that Minnesota ranked 48th nationwide in per-household investments in the fire service. Something needed to be done. So we worked together, a Democrat and a Republican, with our colleagues in the Minnesota Legislature to create the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program (HHAP), the most comprehensive firefighter well-being legislation in the nation. And it passed with bipartisan support.

Today, we are so proud to see how this legislation is so quickly and profoundly delivering, as intended, for firefighters, their families and their communities in every corner of Minnesota.



Photo courtesy of Saint Paul Fire Department

The MnFIRE Assistance Program connects firefighter-focused mental health providers across the state to firefighters and their family members seeking confidential, no-cost counseling. Since the program began, 1,800 visits have been facilitated. In addition, a 24/7 peer support hotline has received 717 calls, which have been answered by MnFIRE's network of trained peer supporters.

The MnFIRE Critical Illness insurance policy now covers all Minnesota firefighters, providing financial support up to \$20,000 for a serious health diagnosis, such as cancer or a heart attack. This is particularly notable for the 93% of volunteer firefighters who don't qualify for the same health resources as full-time firefighters. So far \$2.2 million in claims have been covered for diagnoses ranging from cancer to ALS to sudden cardiac arrest to post-traumatic stress injury.

By funding MnFIRE's programming, the HHAP also works upstream through education and awareness of occupational health risks to reduce the incidences of serious health events and improve firefighter well-being. More than 1,160 of these health and wellness trainings have been conducted in fire departments across the state.

We're proud, too, that this state investment comes at no additional cost to fire departments, firefighters or their families.

“Today, we are so proud to see how this legislation is so quickly and profoundly delivering, as intended, for firefighters, their families and their communities in every corner of Minnesota.”

It's early days, yet the adoption and implementation of this program is a demonstration of sound policy and worthy investment. In addition to providing important and in some cases life-saving resources, the HHAP and MnFIRE are improving our reputation nationwide, with year-over-year improved ranking in per-household investment in the fire service, according to the Minnesota Center for Fiscal Excellence. We want to thank MnFIRE for standing up its administration of the HHAP, making it immediately available to firefighters and their families, and for steadily improving and enhancing to meet their needs.

We also need to thank our state's fire chiefs for helping usher in a culture shift that aims to reduce incidences of cancer, emotional trauma and cardiac issues. And most importantly, thank you to our state's 20,000 hometown heroes – our firefighters – for your work and contributions every day, and for taking advantage of these new resources available to you.

Together, let's continue making a difference for firefighters, their families and communities across the state.



Jeff Howe

Senator
Jeff Howe



Cheryl Youakim

Representative
Cheryl Youakim



Support when firefighters need it most

The relatively new benefits offered through the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program continue to resonate with firefighters and their families across Minnesota and, by the numbers, they're feeling empowered to use these valuable resources and taking action.



Critical Illness Program

177

claims paid totaling

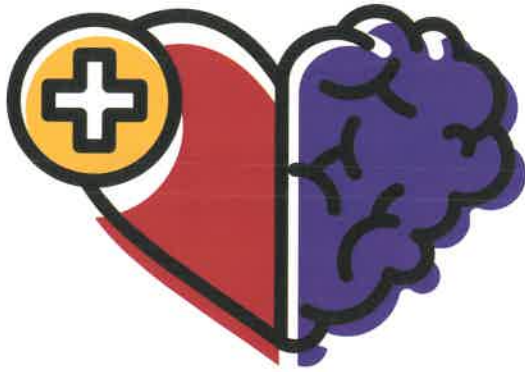
\$2,277,500

MOST FREQUENTLY COVERED CONDITIONS

CANCER
 POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS INJURY
HEART ATTACK

“I do not know how we would have financially survived during my time off for [cancer] treatments without the HHAP. **The Critical Illness benefit saved my home!**”

— MINNESOTA FIRE CHIEF



MnFIRE Assistance Program

1,015+

specialized providers



24%

FROM 2022 TO 2023



of individuals seeking help lived in **small/rural areas**

1,800

counseling visits



~50%

FROM 2022 TO 2023



completed **all five free sessions** for the presenting issue

TOP PRESENTING ISSUES

ANXIETY/WORRY

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS INJURY

MARITAL/PRIMARY RELATIONSHIP

1:19

there is one provider for every 19 of Minnesota's 20,000 firefighters

“When I felt like I was all alone and couldn’t talk to anybody, **I was welcomed in with both arms.** I was offered help and guidance for my issues. Now I can focus more on my family life.”

— MINNESOTA FIREFIGHTER



Peer Support

717

calls

Firefighters of all ranks and backgrounds – and their spouses and families – regularly rely on MnFIRE’s trained Peer Support network. Here are some of the top reasons people call MnFIRE’s peer support hotline:

CRITICAL INCIDENT/BAD CALL
RELATIONSHIP OR FAMILY ISSUES
POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS INJURY
DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY
WORK-RELATED STRESS
SLEEP ISSUES
SUBSTANCE ABUSE
SUICIDAL IDEATION



MnFIRE Training

1,160

trainings

541

departments trained

“The information I received will be **very helpful** as I navigate my career moving forward.”

— MnFIRE-TRAINED FIREFIGHTER



Includes data since the program began through December 2023

From answering the call to making the call

“We had an incident where a person lost their life in a grain bin. We all knew this farmer who lost his life. Once we left the scene, I knew it had touched all of us,” explained Jeff Leuer, Chief of the West Suburban Fire District, a paid on-call department of 50 firefighters covering 50 square miles including stations in Loretto and Hamel.

“When I left the scene and was driving back to the station, I called MnFIRE and I said, ‘We just had this incident. I am concerned that I am going to have some people who are going to have to deal with this. What do I do? How do I direct them?’”

Fortunately, Jeff knew that confidential help was available, 24/7, for any firefighter and their family through the MnFIRE Assistance Program, which targets emotional health and stress unique to the fire service through connection to mental health counseling and peer support.

The trained MnFIRE Peer Support specialist who answered Jeff’s call reassured him: We can help. Point them our way. What Jeff didn’t realize was that it wasn’t just his firefighters who stood to benefit from the program.

“That peer supporter from MnFIRE, they said, ‘How are you doing?’ They stopped me in my tracks,” said Jeff.

That simple question helped Jeff realize his bucket of stress and trauma was practically overflowing. After being in the fire service for 25 years, he could barely take it anymore. With the peer supporter’s reassurance and the offer to talk again, they hung up.



Jeff talked about the conversation with his wife and thought maybe that was it. But the next morning, he got a call from that same peer supporter, saying, "Good morning, Jeff. How are you doing today? It's a new day. The sun is shining."

From that day forward for about a month straight, the peer supporter would call or text him.

"While I didn't go get formal, professional help, that person helped bring me from the really tough place I was at," said Jeff. "We've got to get some of this stuff out of your bucket, they would say. I still get emotional."

"That peer supporter from MnFIRE, they said, 'How are you doing?' They stopped me in my tracks."

"MnFIRE, and the peer support, it means so much to me."

And those firefighters Jeff referred to MnFIRE? Two of them told him how glad they were that someone reached out, that they had an excellent experience. Jeff said, "Even if they don't get formal help, they are guided in the right direction."

This incident wasn't the first time Jeff or his team needed some help from MnFIRE, and it won't be the last. Two of his firefighters recently experienced cardiac events and sought help from the Critical Illness benefit. And others sought out MnFIRE Peer Support when a fellow firefighter died unexpectedly in 2021.

Jeff's department takes mental health very seriously. And talking about it, he believes, makes it easier for people to reach out when they need it.

"I have had struggles. Still today, if something comes up, I'm not afraid to give a call and talk to someone," Jeff said. "By firefighters hearing the chiefs say, 'I had a problem. I needed help. I reached out and it helped.' It makes it okay for them to give a call. It's for firefighters, and it's for chiefs, too."

Emotional wellness

Melinda Coscarelli, PhD, LADC, LPCC

Firefighters experience much higher rates of mental illness than the general population. And too many firefighters are suffering in silence. Most firefighters can recall at least three traumatic events, but the failure to talk about those memories creates a dangerous feedback loop. We must end the stigma around talking about mental health, and ensure firefighters have an outlet for processing traumatic experiences.

Firefighters face unique challenges, requiring tailored support with:

- Long shifts
- Fear and stigma about seeking care for mental health or substance use
- Trauma and PTSD
- Grief, loss, stress and burnout



DR. MELINDA COSCARELLI IS THE MNFIRE MEDICAL DIRECTOR, MENTAL HEALTH.

Meet MnFIRE peer supporters



Jen Elleraas
CAPTAIN/TRAINING OFFICER
GARRISON FIRE DEPARTMENT

Years in the fire service: 4.5



Kyle Bode
HEALTH & WELLNESS COORDINATOR/
CAPTAIN/PARAMEDIC
SAINT PAUL FIRE DEPARTMENT (SPFD)

Years in the fire service: 20

Tell us a little about yourself, your history with the fire service and who you are outside of your role as a firefighter.

JE: I have been a firefighter with Garrison Fire and Rescue since 2019. It's a rural, paid on-call fire department in Central Minnesota. I also serve as an EMT on the department and casually for an ambulance service. Serving my community as a first responder is one of my greatest honors and has quickly grown into one of my strongest passions. My full-time career has been working in the human services industry for over 20 years. In my free time, I love lake life and spending time with my family and friends.

KB: I was recruited by SPFD's current fire chief at the gym. I had completed active-duty military and I was going to college and working at the gym. I had no clue what I was going to do. Butch Inks, who was a Captain at the time, approached me and told me about the job. It sounded interesting so I applied for the upcoming Saint Paul test. I really didn't expect to get hired. I remember taking the written test with 3,500 people at the RiverCentre and feeling like I didn't have a chance. I was hired in the first class off of that list. While I waited for the academy, I was hired as a volunteer for the White Bear Lake

Fire Department, where I served for a little over a year. I also served as an Air Force Reserve firefighter for 16 years and retired from the military in 2022. I live in Blaine with my wife and four kids, ages 4, 8, 12 and 13. Outside of the fire department, most of my time is spent with my family. My wife owns a dance studio, so that also keeps me busy. I enjoy physical challenges and have competed in many marathons, a couple of Ironman Triathlons and also some long-distance rucking events. I prioritize my physical health because it helps me a lot with my mental health.

Why did you become a MnFIRE peer supporter?

JE: Firefighters are servant leaders in their communities answering the call to help others on their worst day. I'm humbled by the honor and privilege to be here to answer the call from a fellow firefighter. Being a peer supporter creates an instant connection because we speak the same language, experience similar things, and can relate on the same level. Trauma and grief need a witness and I'm honored to walk beside a fellow firefighter who is bravely traveling on their journey.

KB: I spent several years struggling with my mental health and substance abuse. In 2022, I checked into a first responder

“I am always in awe of the resilience, courage, compassion and commitment of firefighters, who answer the call and put their life on the line before others.”

treatment facility where I was treated for alcohol abuse and PTSD. I learned so much during that time including better ways to keep myself healthy both mentally and physically. It didn't take me long to realize that I wasn't alone. Once I was able to get myself in a healthier space, I realized many of my peers were having similar struggles. In my experience, it is tremendously helpful to be able to talk to another person who has gone through what you are going through, so I pursued becoming a MnFIRE peer supporter.

What is the most rewarding part of being a peer supporter?

JE: It's rewarding to support a fellow firefighter and I've learned so much from the amazing humans I've had the privilege to meet. I am always in awe of the resilience, courage, compassion

and commitment of firefighters, who answer the call and put their life on the line before others. It is true bravery when a firefighter answers their own call and reaches out to invest in their emotional well-being.

KB: I think just being there for another person, so they don't feel like they are going through it alone. It's also extremely rewarding to witness and be a part of someone's journey to feeling better and finding a healthier place in their life.

What is the most surprising part of being a peer supporter?

JE: It's surprising how much the timeline of connection can vary when supporting my fellow firefighters. Sometimes we connect for a few weeks to talk through a specific incident, and another time I supported

a peer for over a year. It is a person-centered approach to benefit the specific needs of that firefighter. There is no timeline or specific commitment. If I am not the right peer match for a firefighter, the firefighter can switch – no questions asked. If a firefighter needs a higher level of care, MnFIRE offers professional counseling sessions at no cost. This program is truly focused

on the firefighter to protect and prioritize their emotional health in alignment with MnFIRE's mission.

KB: Unfortunately, I think the most surprising part for me has been witnessing firsthand how many of my peers are struggling. There is a silver lining though, because I have been able to witness some pretty incredible change during that time.



What do you see as the most valuable component of the MnFIRE Hometown Heroes Assistance Program?

JE: The program provides vital resources to firefighters in the research-driven areas we need most including cardiac, cancer and emotional health. It provides resources to help fill the gaps for firefighters who experience one of these industry-proven hazards. The Peer Support program is unique, pairing Minnesota firefighters with someone who shares similar experiences, creating an instant connection and trust to be able to open up on the tough stuff we face on and off the fireground.

KB: The program helps remove a lot of barriers. It makes it much easier for those who need help to get the help. I have sat with peers who have called the hotline and have gotten set up with a therapist, for free, that same day. MnFIRE has done the work and vetted the mental health professionals, so you get connected with the right person. I have used the HHAP and I find it very helpful.

What two suggestions would you share with every Minnesota firefighter to improve their mental health?

JE: 1.) Health is all tied together. Firefighters are often sleep-deprived, trying to grab meals on the go while we balance our family, jobs and relationships. We have to be intentional

about our health. Exercise, healthy foods, hydration, laughter and sleep all play a critical role in our emotional well-being. 2.) If you see a fellow firefighter struggling, have the courage to have a conversation. The MnFIRE call line is a quick, easy way to connect someone with resources. The hardest part is making that initial call, so let's encourage each other to make it. I promise it gets easier from there. We should be spreading the word of MnFIRE like wildfire. It is free, confidential and safe for any firefighter in Minnesota. No one fights fire alone.

KB: I think the most important thing that I would share is that it's OK to ask for help. We all sign up to do this dangerous job, but the bravest individuals that I have seen are the ones who admit that they are not OK and need help. I also think it's important to make diet and exercise a priority. I can't stress enough how much it helps with our mental health. It's the number-one medicine for our well-being, and it's free!

Anything else you'd like to add?

KB: In the span of eight years, I tragically lost two of my brothers from the Saint Paul Fire Department to suicide. This heart-wrenching experience underscores the urgent need for anyone grappling with their mental health to reach out for help. Remember, you are not alone. Your loved ones and those around you genuinely care and want to support you. Don't hesitate to seek assistance.



Changing the culture and saving lives

The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation estimates that there are at least 100 firefighter deaths by suicide each year, far exceeding suicide rates of the general population.

Firefighters are first responders to fires, car accidents, cardiac arrests and most emergencies in between. The stress they experience can come at a critical cost to their mental well-being. Long shifts and tough calls can all add up to intense feelings of grief, loss, stress and burnout. And although it's lessening, there's still shame and stigma around seeking help for mental health or substance abuse for fear of being seen as weak or unfit for duty.

Prior to MnFIRE and the HHAP, volunteer and part-time firefighters across the state – the overwhelming majority of our state's fire service – did not have access to the behavioral health benefits traditionally reserved for full-time employees.

With these unique challenges facing firefighters, the MnFIRE Assistance Program (MAP) provides a solution specifically designed with them in mind.

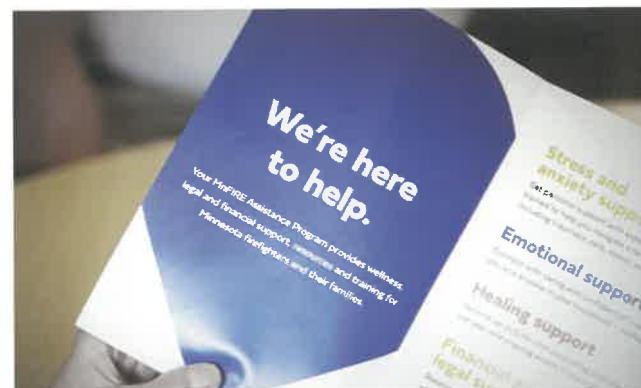
In partnership with Optum, MnFIRE has built:



A curated network of 1,015+ behavioral health providers and counselors, trained to understand firefighters' unique challenges and concerns, that provides emotional well-being services 24/7 to firefighters and their families.



A trained peer support network that integrates seamlessly with the MAP to provide emotional support outside of the traditional medical and behavioral health system, and reduce the culture of silence that has all too often resulted in worsening mental health and suicide in the fire service.



Hear more about how this program is meeting the unique needs of firefighters across Minnesota



[OPTUM.VIDEO.UHC.COM/MEDIA/T/1_DYLGJUNG](https://optum.video.uhc.com/media/T/1_DYLGJUNG)

Peace of mind for volunteer firefighter tackling lung cancer

Ellen Kling joined the fire department in Ceylon more than 20 years ago. Drawn to the comradery she had seen in the fire service, Ellen volunteers as a training officer and EMT for Ceylon Fire and manages an excavating and scrap iron business with her husband.

That all seemingly came screeching to a halt when her doctor saw a spot on her X-ray and she was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2022.

It's an experience that's unfortunately becoming more common in the fire service, as firefighters have a 9% higher risk of being diagnosed with cancer and a 14% higher risk of dying from cancer than the general U.S. population, according to the National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety.

Along with the mental and physical toll, it's certainly not cheap to have cancer. As a volunteer firefighter, Ellen doesn't have access to any career benefits through her department, even though she puts her body and mind on the line to serve her community. But she does have access to the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program.

Ellen was off work for six weeks to undergo surgery to remove the cancerous lung nodules — a significant



“As my husband and I are self-employed, the money I received allowed me to have some peace of mind knowing I could spend time healing after surgery and not have to stress about money or rushing back to work too soon.”

amount of time especially when you own your own business. Her treatment also required countless trips for testing and appointments, and like so many firefighters in Minnesota, Ellen lives in a rural area that makes it quite the hike just to access health care.

With the expenses adding up, Ellen turned to the HHAP critical illness benefit. Although she was skeptical about the process — she was excited to discover her claim was approved quickly and she was sent a check for the full benefit amount of \$20,000.

“To be honest, I wasn’t worried about the financial,” said Ellen. “I was thinking straightforward. Am I going to die? How bad is this? Having someone there to say, ‘Hey, you know there’s a program that’s going to take financial burden off and you’re going to need that,’ that’s great.”

Thankfully, Ellen is now in recovery and is cancer free.

“As my husband and I are self-employed,” said Ellen, “the money I received allowed me to have some peace of mind knowing I could spend time healing after surgery and not have to stress about money or rushing back to work too soon.”

Ellen was able to get the quality care and support she needed during such a scary time, the same kind of care and compassion she’s provided for her community as a firefighter time and time again.

Read more of
Ellen’s story on
the MnFIRE blog



mnfireinitiative.com/blog

Cancer

Zeke McKinney, MD, MHI, MPH

Beyond personal risk factors like age and family history, firefighters are exposed to hazardous substances — soot, complex chemicals and heavy metals — that are known or suspected to cause cancer. The more exposure one has to contaminated equipment, the more likely they are to develop cancer. It’s critical to decontaminate as soon as possible.

MnFIRE is working to promote a safety culture that emphasizes healthier lifestyles, regular cancer screenings and reduced exposure to potential hazards. Little by little, daily changes can make a difference.

It’s remarkable that half of the paid claims from the Critical Illness Program so far are related to cancer. As we look at this data further, there will likely be patterns around geography and the types of cancer that firefighters develop. The goal is to understand, reduce and prevent cancers moving forward.



DR. ZEKE MCKINNEY IS THE MNFIRE MEDICAL DIRECTOR, CANCER.

Tried and true training for firefighters — and their loved ones

Improving firefighter health and health outcomes starts with education, equipping firefighters with information to protect themselves and reduce incidences of cardiac, cancer and emotional trauma.

Just as MnFIRE has evolved to deliver the essential components of the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program, our training offerings have evolved, too. What began with general MnFIRE Awareness Training covering occupational health risks soon expanded to deep-dive sessions into cardiac, emotional wellness and cancer awareness and prevention. New this past year, fire departments in Minnesota can now learn about even more crucial health and wellness topics through MnFIRE, including sleep, fitness and nutrition. And their families, spouses and partners can turn to MnFIRE for support and guidance, too, with our new Firefighter Spouse & Significant Other Awareness training.

Fire service significant others, spouses and family members can participate in this training specifically designed to give them the tools and perspective needed to support the health and well-being of their firefighter loved one — and their family — through the unpredictable schedules, increased health risks and the stress of every call.



Several people who attended our first Spouse & Significant Other Awareness training at the 2023 Firefighter Health Forum, alongside their firefighter partners, shared how valuable the space and the information was to them and their relationship:

“Sitting in a room with a group of other spouses/significant others who **understand what it is like to live the fire family life was powerful**. The sessions were valuable and feeling I am not alone on this sometimes difficult but always rewarding path is priceless.”

“I learned more about how I could better support him. I’ve been wanting to attend something like this since he became a chief and **this was exactly what I was hoping for.**”

“The [training] has helped **realign my relationship with my spouse!** We together better understand our stressors, and that we’re not alone with our feelings and concerns!”

The Firefighter Spouse & Significant Other Awareness training is presented at the Firefighter Health Forum and other regional sessions. All MnFIRE trainings are available to all Minnesota fire departments, either in person or virtually, at no cost.

Explore our offerings
and register your
department here at
mnfiretraining.com



Cardiovascular health

Nick Blonien, DO and Paul J. Anderson II, MD

In 2022, 49 of the 96 on-duty fatalities among U.S. firefighters were due to overexertion, according to a recent report from the National Fire Protection Association. Of these, 73% were confirmed due to heart attack or stroke.

Firefighters are at increased risk for cardiovascular disease (CVD). Routine sleep interruption, suboptimal nutrition, physical inactivity, hazardous exposures and psychosocial stress all lead to chronic physiologic disruption that sets the stage for the development of CVD. Then, when stressed acutely during calls that require intense physical exertion and trigger sympathetic nervous system activation — the fight-or-flight response — the cardiovascular system is pushed to the limit. If baseline CVD is present, there is an increased risk of a sudden cardiac event.

We know that 80 to 90% of CVD is preventable. With change at both the organizational and individual level, we can reduce risk of CVD for all firefighters whether they are full-time, part-time or volunteer.



DR. NICK BLONIEN
IS A MNFIRE MEDICAL
EXPERT, LIFESTYLE
MEDICINE.



DR. PAUL J. ANDERSON II
IS THE MNFIRE MEDICAL
DIRECTOR, CARDIAC.

Building awareness, increasing impact

In 2023, MnFIRE expanded its communications and marketing outreach to increase awareness of benefits for and among firefighters. Initiatives included media relations, letters to the editor, social media, website and blog content, direct mail, collateral, videos, mobile app content, e-newsletters, annual report, paid advertising, sponsorships, events, speaking engagements, in-person meetings, and other tactics. All of these tactics are tracked, measured and archived to allow for ongoing improvements.

This year's strategy focused more than ever before on sharing personal stories of firefighters and their families who benefited from the MnFIRE Assistance Program, Critical Illness benefits and our trainings. Now that the program has reached a critical mass of beneficiaries, many of whom are willing to share their experiences, we've been able to emphasize those persuasive stories across all platforms.

69 stories

The HHAP reached communities across the state, in media from MPR to WCCO Radio, from Duluth to Rochester — and everywhere in between.





↑ ~8%
followers
 ACROSS SOCIAL
 PLATFORMS IN 2023



APRIL 11, 2023

Resources for firefighter partners & families

Being the spouse, partner or family member of a firefighter is no easy thing. We all know how...

[READ MORE](#)



MAY 17, 2023

Taatjes Staying Positive Despite Cancer Diagnosis

Critical illness insurance through Hometown Heroes Assistance Program has been a financial lifeline during difficult time While a...

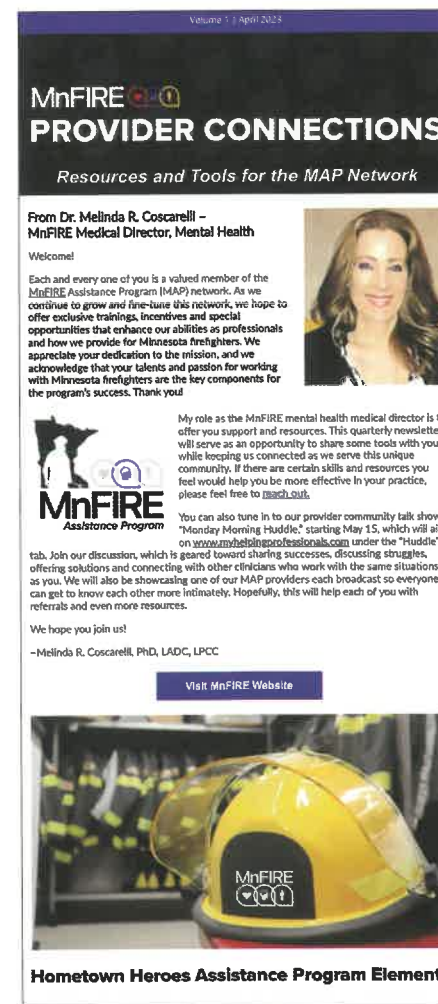
[READ MORE](#)

20+
 educational and inspiring blog posts
 and digital resources attracted

14,000
 distinct users to the website



Additionally, MnFIRE developed and distributed a monthly enewsletter targeted at firefighters, partners and other stakeholders, and a brand-new quarterly Provider Connections enewsletter to increase engagement with HHAP initiatives and further educate the MAP network of providers on what it means to be a firefighter.





MnFIRE Training Topics

HEALTHY LIFESTYLE
Deep is the necessary to maintain and the single most important health behavior for optimizing physical and mental health, productivity, performance, resilience and more. In the chair, with heat and the unique firefighter firefighters face when it comes to sleep and mental health can be used to address them.

FITNESS & NUTRITION
Despite the demanding physical demands of the job, many firefighters fail to maintain the needed levels of fitness to function safely and efficiently. This course, in this class, your department will learn about the health risks associated with your physical stress, how nutrition plays a vital role in ways to develop healthy habits to becoming "functionally fit."

RESOURCES
MnFIRE provides a comprehensive overview of occupational health and safety risks and the steps of every day and long-term challenges that can help you have a brighter future. Your family this can be significant stress, spouse and family members can participate in the training program designed to give them the tools and resources needed to support the health and well-being of their firefighter loved one and their family. This training is currently being offered at regional sessions - contact MnFIRE to learn more.

MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS
MnFIRE provides a comprehensive overview of occupational health and safety risks and the steps of every day and long-term challenges that can help you have a brighter future. Your family this can be significant stress, spouse and family members can participate in the training program designed to give them the tools and resources needed to support the health and well-being of their firefighter loved one and their family. This training is currently being offered at regional sessions - contact MnFIRE to learn more.

CARDIAC DEEP DIVE
Your occupational demands are the leading cause of heart-related issues in the fire service. Every firefighter needs to know how to protect their cardiovascular health. This course will focus on the latest research, the types of cardiovascular diseases that affect firefighters, signs and symptoms, and prevention strategies to help firefighters lower their risk.

ENVIRONMENTAL WELLNESS DEEP DIVE
It's important to recognize that the stresses of firefighting can negatively impact a person's overall health. The stress and high temperatures, along with smoke and heat, can lead to respiratory issues and other health conditions. This course will provide practical information about how firefighters can take a proactive approach to their health, ways to maintain emotional well-being, and how to recognize the signs of stress and when to seek help.

Calculus Health Care
Cancer is one of the leading causes of death among firefighters nationwide. It's a cancer that's being well understood. Firefighters are not immune to the risk of cancer, but there are ways to reduce your risk. This course will provide information about the types of cancers that firefighters are most at risk for, the signs and symptoms, and ways to reduce your risk.

There have been over 100,000 firefighters who have been members for your department.

Register your department for a free membership at www.mnfire.com.

Scan the QR code to register your department for a free membership at www.mnfire.com.



Checklist for Firefighters
These are the most common and preventable health risks that have already been identified. These are the most common and preventable health risks that have already been identified. These are the most common and preventable health risks that have already been identified.

- Cancer
- Respiratory Problems
- Diabetes
- High Blood Pressure
- Sleep Apnea
- Depression

To learn more or to register for a training, scan the QR code or visit www.mnfire.com.

Call the MnFIRE Assistance Program today for individual support 24/7 at 888-784-6634.

The National Fire Incident Investigation System (NFIRS)

MnFIRE

Firefighter Health Forum

2023

24-HOUR PEER SUPPORT

888-784-6634



MnFIRE and its partners continued to build out an extensive library of marketing materials for digital and print use to build awareness of the HHAP and educate firefighter families on the benefits available to them.

MnFIRE representatives and firefighter health thought leaders attended multiple fire service and municipal-leader events in 2023, connecting with thousands of people, and building relationships and awareness of HHAP benefits. We connected with decision-makers and influencers at the League of Minnesota Cities Annual Conference, Minnesota State Fire Department Association Annual Conference, Minnesota State Fire Chiefs Association Annual Conference, and the Minnesota Association of Townships Annual Conference, as well as MnFIRE's Firefighter Health Forum in early 2023.

MnFIRE also hit the road, sharing Minnesota's best practices and success stories with community and fire service leaders in Florida, Texas and more.

Remembering a dear friend — and champion of firefighter health



St. Paul Fire Captain Christopher Parsons, a 22-year-veteran of the St. Paul Fire Department, who saved lives while championing stronger health and safety protections for firefighters, suffered cardiac arrest and passed away following a shift at the fire station in June 2023.

As a founding board member of MnFIRE, president of the Minnesota Professional Fire Fighters and principal officer of IAFF Local 21, Chris was a fervent champion of firefighter well-being. Chris fiercely advocated for causes that had far-reaching impacts on public health and safety in Minnesota, including the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program and legislation that banned PFAS — cancer-causing chemical fire retardants — in firefighting foam and other household products.

Chris' untimely passing underscores the importance of our work to continue educating firefighters on the increased cardiovascular risks facing them, and doing everything we can to prevent these events that can occur as a result of our high-stress work.

He was a dedicated servant and has positively impacted the lives of every single Minnesota firefighter and their families. In partnership with the Parsons family, we've set up the Chris Parsons Memorial Fund for PFAS Research in his honor to raise funds for further research on PFAS and their impact on firefighters.



If you'd like to make a donation, please visit mnfireinitiative.com/chrisparsons.



Looking ahead

In 2024, MnFIRE is focused on a number of initiatives to increase our impact and improve our processes. Highlights for the year ahead include:



Providing MnFIRE training to at least 90% of Minnesota fire departments.



Strengthening and expanding our Peer Support network and the MnFIRE Assistance Program's network of trauma-informed mental health providers.



Reinvigorating the Firefighter Health Forum, tentatively scheduled for January 2025.

Thank you for your support. We hope you'll join us on this journey to a happier and healthier future for Minnesota's firefighters.



If you're in crisis, need help or need to file a claim,
please call our 24-hour hotline: **888-784-6634**

This confidential, free service is available for all active volunteer, paid-on-call, part-time and full-time Minnesota firefighters.

MnFIRE 
MNFIREINITIATIVE.COM



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