

## Initiative

# 5

Develop and implement national standards for training, qualifications, and certification (including regular recertification) that are equally applicable to all firefighters based on the duties they are expected to perform.

### Executive Summary

A great deal of training and education occurs in the fire service on a daily basis throughout the United States. How fire departments and training agencies measure, compare, and quantify this training is important to the profession and the safety of the individuals providing the service. If the training is accomplished in accordance with national standards, and the results are certified by an independent body or organization, then the system has substantial credibility. The public expects qualified, competent, and professional personnel, be they volunteer or career, to respond to emergencies. There must be a system to ensure this and provide standards that are recognized as being professional in terms of safety, competency, and responsibility.

It is very disturbing that between 2000 and 2005, an average of 14 firefighters a year died in training-related incidents. Reported training-related injuries totaled more than 7,100 in 2005. Given those statistics, it's no surprise the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) identifies firefighter recruits, firefighters participating in training and firefighters conducting training as especially vulnerable

to death and injury. Fire Service training programs that have been designed and conducted in concert with the appropriate NFPA Professional Qualification Standards will reduce these needless deaths and injuries. The 5<sup>th</sup> Initiative of the Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives is an attempt to tie training to a reduction in firefighter injuries and line-of-duty fatalities.

## **Certification Systems**

In the fire and rescue service the document that guides training and certification systems is the NFPA 1000 *Standard on Fire Service Professional Qualifications Accreditation and Certification Systems*. The minimum criteria for certification as well as the assessment and validation requirements of the certifying agencies are established in this standard. The professional standards that have been developed in this series of standards are widely used and acknowledged within North America. Many fire service training programs have been designed to meet the minimum requirements of the professional qualification standards. The NFPA professional qualification system standards that are eligible for certification in most states are as follows:

- NFPA 1001 Standard for Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications
- NFPA 1002 Standard for Fire Apparatus Driver/Operator Professional Qualifications
- NFPA 1003 Standard for Airport Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications
- NFPA 1006 Standard for Professional Qualifications for Rescue Technician
- NFPA 1021 Standard for Fire Officer Professional Qualifications
- NFPA 1031 Standard for Professional Qualifications for Fire Inspector
- NFPA 1033 Standard for Professional Qualifications for Fire Investigator
- NFPA 1035 Standard for Professional Qualifications for Public Educator
- NFPA 1041 Standard for Professional Qualifications for Fire Service Instructor

**Recommendation # 1:** *Determine which NFPA Professional Qualification Standards have been adopted for your fire department either through statute (by the authority having jurisdiction) or by departmental policies. Determine the degree to which these standards have been implemented.*

The professional qualification system of the NFPA has established national standards to which individual training programs and performance can be evaluated. The NFPA professional qualification standards are now in the job performance requirement (JPR) format, which makes evaluation of performance easier as it relates to the knowledge, skills, and abilities of a particular standard. In addition the standards are revised every five years so that they remain current and reflect the true status of the fire and rescue services. When individuals within the fire service have been certified as meeting the national standards, they may be recognized at the local, state, and national level for demonstrated proficiency within the standard to which they have been certified.

**Recommendation # 2:** *Fire Department Accreditation is available through a selfassessment model whose goal is to help fire departments ascertain current levels of organizational quality and to achieve continuous improvements. Departments wishing to begin the self –assessment should contact the Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI) at [www.publicsafetyexcellence.org](http://www.publicsafetyexcellence.org) .*

For this discussion it is important to understand the difference between certification and accreditation. Accreditation is given to entities that have been recognized or approved by a higher institution for meeting a set of standards. Therefore, agencies and entities are accredited. Firefighters and officers do not become accredited; they become certified. In general, training agencies receive accreditation and individuals are certified for having completed an accredited program.

**Recommendation # 3:** *Are the expectations for meeting NFPA Standards clearly and easily available to all firefighters and applicable civilian employees in your department so everyone recognizes the benefits of national certification? If they are not, work to change the culture of your organization to where supports the NFPA standards and certification processes.*

In 1972, a national firefighter certification system was created when a committee was established under the auspices of the Joint Council of National Fire Service Organizations called the National Professional Qualifications Board (commonly referred to as the “pro board”). This entity is now called the National Board of Fire Service Professional Qualifications (NBFSPQ) establishes the accreditation process for state and local certification systems. Generally, the NBFSPQ only accredits one entity in each state as the certifying body of that state. The NBFSPQ has a well-defined process for accreditation that includes an extensive site visit by the accreditation team, and then a recommendation is made to the board. Once a state is accredited, it must then meet requirements for reaccreditation at specific intervals.

The International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC) was established in 1991 as a national accrediting body for the certification of fire personnel and for the accreditation of college-level fire service educational programs. The IFSAC system consists of an Accreditation Congress, which is composed of one representative of each state or entity participating in the program and a Board of Governors consisting of seven members from the Accreditation Congress. The Accreditation Congress establishes the policy for the IFSAC system. In addition, a degree assembly coordinates the accreditation of collegelevel fire service degree programs. The IFSAC system uses the NFPA professional qualifications standards for certification purposes.

**Recommendation # 4:** *Determine if your state is ready for either a Pro Board or IFSAC visitation and pursue accreditation.*

## **Implementation**

The most difficult component of establishing a system of national standards has been accomplished – that is the development of the standards themselves. The fact that we in the fire/rescue service have such a developed and accepted system is a huge step forward toward full implementation.

The simple solution to this issue is for each local and/or state jurisdiction work to make the certification of firefighters a mandatory provision of state or local law. This is most likely unrealistic, although the National Incident Management System (NIMS) credentialing project represents movement in this direction even though that system is at this time voluntary. Some of the major obstacles that need to be overcome are:

1. Not all states have systems available that certify to all of the NFPA Professional Qualification Standards and levels.
2. Incentives for certification are minimal in most fire departments.
3. Historical reluctance of the fire service to be controlled at the local and/or state level.
4. Availability of training programs to meet the standards.
5. Transitional nature of the volunteer fire service.
6. Financial resources to fund the training and certification.

The opportunity for the greatest success of implementing certification systems lies in the area of increased value and increased incentives for individuals seeking certification. If certification means something beyond personal achievement, then the fire service will benefit in many ways. The opportunities for success and the wide-scale acceptance of certification programs will follow with positive incentive programs.

**Recommendation # 5:** *If your department has or is seeking to encourage individuals to gain certification, ensure that there are sufficient levels of incentive to do so such as linking certification to promotion or compensation.*

Strategies for implementing certification are certainly easier in allpaid departments where links between pay and advancement can be straightforward. In combination or all-volunteer systems, this is more difficult. One of the major obstacles that will need to be resolved in these departments is whether firefighters can currently participate in suppression activities or other duties without proper certification. In many areas, it is still possible to join a volunteer fire department and respond on an emergency incident all in the same night. This runs counter to other fire department-related duties, such as providing EMS which an individual cannot do without proper training and certification.

**Recommendation # 6:** *The fire service needs to make certification mandatory before firefighters are allowed to perform certain functions, especially related to structural firefighting and driving vehicles. Those who want to provide these services should be encouraged (either by statute or policy) to seek certification at*

*increasingly higher levels to correspond to the work they are assigned to perform.*

Certification has become an accepted way of life in many fire departments—it is fully expected that every member or employee will be certified where certifications exist. However, there are departments who struggle with this issue. For them, here are suggestions to increase the value of fire service personnel certifications:

1. Recognize and accept certifications earned in other jurisdictions. Many career departments require that firefighters complete their recruit school regardless of the certifications that are held by the personnel being hired. This is a costly and redundant exercise that actually devalues certification because the certification is not respected, otherwise why would one repeat the training.
2. Tie pay increases and incentives offered to career and volunteer firefighters who become certified. This covers a very wide area in which positive incentives would move these programs forward. Many volunteer departments have LOSAP programs that could require certification for credited service.
3. Prohibit firefighters from responding to emergencies until they are properly certified to perform at that level. This is a safety issue.
4. Encourage state and federal regulatory bodies (such as OSHA) to make fire service certifications a mandatory requirement for certain positions.
5. Provide training programs to match your expectations for certifications.
6. Link promotional and highly desired assignment opportunities to certification.
7. Encourage states to restrict workers' compensation and other benefit programs to personnel who are not properly certified for the level of service they are providing.
8. Limit federal funding (for example, the Assistance to Firefighters Grants) to departments that have approved certification systems in place, or at least with respect to grants in the training category.
9. Petition state and federal leaders to set aside funding for departments to start certification programs where they do not currently exist and to promote those that do exist.
10. Encourage the increase for opportunities in the public educational systems that result in individual certifications, such as high school cadet programs.

**Recommendation # 7:** *If your service or department does not have mandatory firefighter, fire officer and other levels of professional qualification, begin the process of bringing them to your organization. Use the reasons and methods stated above to convince leadership that certification is a safety issue and a critical priority.*

**Recommendation # 8:** *If and when certification is made mandatory within jurisdictions and departments, individuals who refuse to seek certification should be removed from duties.*

## **Re-Certification**

Re-certification is the next logical extension to be achieved after a

certification system is in place and working. The NFPA Professional Qualification Standards are reviewed and modified on a five year cycle and this would seem to be a proper time sequence for re-certification purposes. It is important to remain current within your profession and to be aware of new techniques and requirements; this is a basic requirement of most professions.

**Recommendation # 9:** *When codifying professional qualification standards, do not ignore the importance of recertification on a minimum five-year basis.*

Some difficulty does exist in the manner of the non-hierarchical nature of some of the NFPA standards. For example, in the Fire Officer sequence there are levels I through IV, so one would only have to re-certify at the highest level they have achieved. But the Fire Inspector, Fire Instructor and other NFPA pro qual standards are not sequential, even if there are levels within the individual standards. For example, Fire Officer IV is not a higher level than Fire Inspector III; they are distinct and separate standards. So if one wished to be re-certified, they would most likely have to do this in a number of the different standards at the same time.

There are a number of options to re-certify fire service personnel:

1. Proficiency testing at both the cognitive and practical levels could be conducted to ensure competence. Individuals could test out using this option for re-certification purposes. National test data banks could be the resource for this.
2. A system of continuing educational requirements would be evaluated and approved for re-certification. This is used in many professions and there are several models to choose from. This provides a great deal of flexibility to the individual as to where and when they meet the requirements for re-certification.
3. Performance evaluation system in which the individual is independently evaluated in their current position to determine if they have the competence to be re-certified. Peer review and other systems are available.
4. Self evaluation re-certification systems do exist, but this approach has not been validated in the fire service

## Conclusion

The fire service would greatly benefit by having its members certified to the professional qualification standards, at all appropriate levels. Many of the safety issues that we deal with are the result of improperly trained firefighters attempting to perform skills for which they have not been trained. A safer and more professional environment would result from the widely accepted use of national certification.

The fire service is in an excellent position regarding certification and recertification because so much of the work has been accomplished. What remains now is the push

for universal implementation. There is certainly no reason why this should take more than ten years. If we know that line-of-duty deaths are often tied to incomplete or outdated training, then we must not wait to ensure that all our personnel receive the training they need to do their jobs competently and safely.

## **Recommendations**

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