



What You Thought You Knew about Standards Compliance ... in the Wake of a Tragedy

By Joe Ruvolo, Inwood Fire Department Business Manager

It's been one year since the Inwood Fire Department lost Joe Sanford, Jr. In that year, we have learned so much about ourselves as firefighters and more about the world of the volunteer fire department. That's right ... we've all been in the fire service for many years, however, no one can prepare you for the world of the unknown; for the things you think you know. Please, check your egos at the door while you read this or you can stop now because you won't get anything out of this if you don't!

Joe Sanford, Jr. was a huge man, one of the best, biggest and healthiest firefighters around with a bigger heart than you could imagine. The entire circumstances leading up to this unfortunate

accident are fodder for a bestseller, but we're just going to talk about the service part of it.

First and foremost, this was a tragic accident that could happen to any firefighter, paid or volunteer, anywhere! For this to happen to Joe and the Inwood Fire Department is impossible to believe. It's what occurred in the months and years before the fire that we, as members of volunteer fire departments, need to pay close attention to.

After the accident and during the investigation, there were many unknowns because of the ignorance and arrogance of many who were too afraid to deal with reality, thinking there would be

lawsuits and finger-pointing and someone would be blamed for Joe's death. One senior member of the department even went so far as to say, "they're going to close this place down!", meaning the fire department. All who were involved began fearing the worst and didn't want to be the one who caused "the doors to close."

More level-headed people knew the truth; that the purpose of the investigation was to first rule out criminality (which we all knew didn't exist) and second to find out what went wrong and prevent it from ever happening again ... anywhere!

Firefighting is a dangerous job. People and firefighters are going to get hurt because of fire and some will die, but we should be committed to not making the same mistakes that were made in these circumstances. In fact, we're allowed to make our own mistakes, but you're not allowed to repeat mistakes that others have made. You're supposed to learn from them.

The Incident

The fire occurred in a two-story, "balloon" wood structure with brick veneer outside walls and a full basement below. The roof construction was wood with an asphalt shingle exterior and steep climbing angles. The first-in department encountered what appeared to be a basement fire and was engaging it from the exterior. Mutual aid companies were arriving and were put to work.

There was some initial confusion as to the assignments of the incoming companies, one being Joe's. According to dispatch information, Joe should have been assigned truck duties. As firefighters, we know that the fireground is a fast-changing scenario and assignments can change rapidly, as was the case here. The incident commander believed Joe's company was or should have been the FAST Team. So, already we have a situation that is confusing at best, deadly at worst.

We'll never know what Joe was thinking, he took it with him. This began the finger-pointing and the blame game, but the issues being looked at by PESH and NIOSH began months, maybe years, before.

The information on the fire is still being vetted. Yes, there is a lawsuit. At this point, it doesn't involve the fire department except for providing medical history, training records, gear assignments and certifications, all to six different law firms engaged so far.

Can you see where I'm going now? None of this means that the fire department is immune. There could be a third-party suit in our future.

The Investigation

PESH, the New York State Labor Department Public Employee's Safety and Health division, visited Inwood shortly after Joe's funeral to begin their investigation. The information they requested was exactly what we all expected and more, but

we expected it years before the incident. We, as firefighters, all sat around tables in firehouses all over, talking about scenarios that could be expected if "we" had an accident or a death. The question is: Did we listen to ourselves?

The things we talked about all the time, the things that we read about all the time, are now happening to us, for real. The last medical evaluation; the last fit test; the last certification; the last school or how much school attended; and SCBA certification and re-certification were all part and parcel toward building a picture of whether this could have been prevented or should it have happened to Joe.

Joe left Inwood Fire Department after a disputed election and took his 17 years and his skills to a neighboring department, but after a short stay there he realized that his heart was in Inwood and he returned. When he initially left Inwood, he requested "honorary status." In accordance with the bylaws, he had time and if he returned, he could, just by simple asking. So, he returned and picked up right where he left off. However, the atmosphere at Inwood had changed.

The paramilitary structure that was there was no longer a part of the organization. "Mandatory" became a four-letter word and respect for positions, time in the organization and rank were slipping away, as it can with many volunteer fire departments everywhere. Training lapses, re-certifications and medical evaluations became "also-rans" with bowling and softball teams and attitudes like, "This is volunteer, they can't make me do anything."

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These are poisonous attitudes to our organizations and requires rooting out like the cancer that they are!

PESH found that the department or Joe was delinquent in areas where we thought we were good. In relation to Joe's responsibilities, medical evaluation, good; SCBA certification, good; fit-test within 365 days, good; firematic training in the last quarter before the accident ... not so good; SCBA annual re-certification ... not so good.

Because of the allowances in the organization's bylaws and policies, members "of age" weren't compelled or required to attend training exercises or drills. So, the quarterly training and annual re-certification on SCBA were absent. Still, not so bad. We can honestly say none of these issues played a part in Joe's accident. We all have many inside our firehouses that we could fit neatly into this category. It's a problem now because of the accident.

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PESH says members who refuse to participate in required annual training or events require “progressive disciplinary steps until mitigated.” Policy and procedures should be in place to inform the members of their requirements, delinquencies and liabilities if ignored. The chiefs are responsible for assuring those of us who engage and our loved ones that the man or woman going into fires with us is fully qualified to be there and won’t be a liability to us or themselves. But, if this was Joe’s liability, how do we mitigate this now? It’s too late.

The Problems

In relation to the department shortcomings, what we, as firefighters, believed or understood to be the “two-in, two-out” rule had been misinterpreted. Many ICs thought that the FAST team took care of that, but not so. PESH says each department engaged must assume the responsibilities for two-in, two-out, in regards their own people. It’s not just up to the host department!

*“So, what have we learned?
It is in our own best interest and the
interest of our loved ones to train.”*

FAST teams don’t cut it. Policies should reflect the requirement that each firefighter entering that building has someone outside to get them out if they get into trouble. Think about it: events where there are 100 firefighters engaged, but only one truck company. Is that FAST? And those assigned to FAST should be trained to accomplish the task. So, bringing firefighters to the scene as FAST team members who just became FAST weeks or days ago or bringing in senior members who have no annual refresher in the evolution is sheer madness! You’re better off not leaving the front ramp.

It is the responsibility of the home department to assure the host department that they bring qualified people to the emergency. When something goes wrong, it’s the home department that’s on the hook.

We, as firefighters, are the ones people call when they need help. We shouldn’t be bringing problems with us, especially when we respond to mutual aid calls. We owe it to our fellow firefighters to bring the best we have with us or stay home. We’re not making a problem better by bringing more problems or potential problems.

The Solutions

Simply put: Those in our ranks who refuse to participate or are given a pass because of bylaws should be listed as inactive or given an assignment that doesn’t allow them to be in a position to get hurt. If a member refuses or they aren’t around enough to

train, then they should be placed inactive and prevented from participating until they receive the qualification. If your bylaws say otherwise, then change them! If someone is going to be insulted, so be it. At least they’ll be alive.

But, now we uncover a fault. Chiefs are elected and they don’t want to irritate their constituency. They don’t want to be “the bad guy” or maybe they won’t get re-elected. Well, then chiefs should look at the guy in the mirror and question if they’re up to the job or they could be burying one of their own in the very near future after a situation that could have been avoided.

So, at the end of the day, where does the buck stop? At the end of this rainbow is the authority having jurisdiction (AHJ) (i.e. the fire district, village, board of directors or the city) holds the bag for what we do or don’t do as firefighters. The fines are levied against them as the “employer.” So, if you find yourself in one of these positions, be the employer. If this was your own business, would you allow your employees to do what they want? Wouldn’t you require detailed reports as to their readiness including training and alarm activity?

You should be concerned about your people as well as your bottom line. Getting people hurt or killed affects your bottom line! If insurance premiums increase 30 to 40 percent because you’re a liability, where does the money come from? The first impact is probably going to be equipment and then, if there are paid elements, personnel.

This becomes the AHJ’s double edge sword. The AHJ gets the brunt of the bad press because they cut somewhere that’s not popular with the fire department members or they increased a tax that’s not popular with the taxpayer. Now, consider the 2 percent tax cap ... the margins are getting small.

So, what have we learned? It is in our own best interest and the interest of our loved ones to train. Train like your life depends on it, because it does and it may be the life of another firefighter! If your fire department has become more of a social organization and less of a public service provider, then change it! If we have those in our organizations that think they’re above it and bylaws allow them to remain there, then stop them from riding fire trucks and give them positions where they can’t get themselves or others hurt. The Labor Law allows it!

Joe is gone now. We can’t bring him back. But, maybe we can all make something good come out of this bad event.



Joe Ruvolo is an ex-chief with the Hewlett Fire Department and remains an active firefighter after 35 years of service. He is a retired member of the NYPD after serving 20 years, 18 of which assigned to highway patrol and the special events unit. He currently works for the Inwood Fire District as its business manager and processed the Line of Duty Death of Ex-Chief Joseph Sanford, Jr., including the PESH and NIOSH investigations.
