



## How to Begin or Improve an NFPA 1582 Health and Wellness Program - Part I

A well-designed NFPA 1582 firefighter health and wellness program should do three things:

- Improve the health and wellbeing of your firefighters
- Save firefighter's lives by identifying issues before they become problems, and
- Save your department money.

This three-part series will address common questions, give suggestions on starting a program and discuss how to make an existing program better.

### Part 1: Questions to ask your provider

#### What are the goals of your NFPA program?

This should be the central question every fire department needs to ask first. Said another way, what is it that we are trying to accomplish by having a NFPA 1582 Firefighter Health and Wellness Program? There should be three answers to this question.

1. **Enhance health and wellness of your firefighters.** Both young fit firefighters and older firefighters can benefit from annual evaluations and consultation with a medical provider. Early intervention with younger firefighters prevents expensive medical issues later in careers. Things like nicotine cessation, healthy diet and meeting exercise goals can make a huge difference. Older firefighters benefit both from prevention and detection of underlying medical issues which can become more critical with age. A good program should, in a non-punitive way, help firefighters to achieve better health.
2. **Ensure that firefighters are safe to perform essential job duties.** Firefighting is demanding work. NFPA 1582 is designed to help determine that a firefighter does not have medical issues that would interfere with the safe performance of their job.
3. **Help firefighters with medical issues get back to work safely.** The goal of a good program should never be to exclude a firefighter from duty but to return them to work safely. A good program should have a pathway for the firefighter to address the medical issue and to evaluate when they are able to safely resume their job functions.

#### Who is in charge of the program?

Chapter 4.1.2 states that *"The fire department shall have an officially designated physician who shall be responsible for guiding, directing, and advising the member with regard to their health, fitness, and suitability for duty as required by NFPA 1500, Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety and Health Program."*

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Fire departments that have a relationship with a knowledgeable fire department physician who understands your firefighters, their culture and challenges know the advantage of having this kind of partner. Ideally, the physician should be on call 365 days a year to serve as a resource and help when you have return to work issues, questions regarding health and wellness programming, and medical questions.

Routinely we field questions from Fire Chiefs about firefighters returning to work after an injury or a new medical diagnosis. As physicians, we often can place a call to the treating doctor and quickly clarify if a firefighter is safely able to perform their essential job functions. We have also been able to help departments develop plans for additional educational and screening opportunities for their firefighters.

### I don't know if I can get my firefighters on board with this kind of program, can you help?

As mentioned earlier, an NFPA 1582 Health and Wellness program should be thought of as something that is there to protect and help your firefighters. Remember, the evaluations are not meant to be punitive, but rather are designed to help the firefighter identify physical fitness deficiencies and medical issues. The goal is always to improve the health of the firefighter in a non-punitive fashion.

*"The intent with incumbents with a medical condition is to rehabilitate them and only restrict them from performing those essential job tasks where their injury or illness would affect the safety of themselves or others on their crew."*  
(NFPA 1582, 2007 1582-1)

We frequently get questions about medical conditions in member firefighters that may be detected during the evaluation. During our medical consultations, we often detect conditions that may pose a medical risk to the firefighter. Many times, it is as simple as a firefighter being on a medication that is not acceptable per NFPA standards. An example of this is some of the blood pressure medicines, which can cause dehydration or not allow adequate heart rate response to exercise. The solution here is as simple as a medication change to obtain clearance.

If a more serious condition is detected the goal should be to have this condition evaluated further to determine if a risk exists and if so how to treat and manage the risk and return the firefighter safely to their duties. In these cases, we work closely with the primary care doctors or specialists to obtain clearance and return them to work. Most times, we can keep firefighters working while we sort this out. Once your firefighters realize that we are there to help them, they usually get behind the program quickly.

We have found that one of the keys to successfully implementing a new program is to spend time educating firefighters about the process and how it works. Sometimes this means a conference call with union representatives and members who are worried about how the program might affect them. We are always happy to take phone calls or emails from firefighters about the program and how it works.

### What is the best way to start a program?

The best program is one that incorporates all the recommendations of the 1582 Standard. We also realize that this type of exam may not be in everyone's budget. One way to ease into a medical surveillance program is to start out with a wellness program for your firefighters. This could be as simple as starting with a health fair: performing vital exams, body fat, blood testing for cholesterol and fasting blood sugar and health counseling. There may or may not be a physical exam the first year. Once the firefighters realize the benefits of this type of exam, you can gradually add

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the other elements of the program. There may also be incentives from your local insurance company to perform wellness exams. While this varies from department to department, and state to state, we can work with you to see if your program can qualify for a discount. If funding is an issue there are grants available for firefighter health and wellness for which your department may qualify.

### What do you do with all this personal information you collect?

Privacy is a major concern for firefighters. The medical data that we collect is used only for review with the firefighter. As a medical practice, we follow HIPAA privacy standards. We only reveal medical information when absolutely required if there is a significant safety issue. This protects the firefighter from privacy breaches and protects the department from having access to information that is privileged.

### Does the vendor really matter? These types of exams are all the same, right?

Yes, the vendor matters. From initially planning a program specific to your needs, to blood draws, to testing day, to follow up and year-round support, your vendor must fully understand and be able to implement the NFPA 1582 Standard and be able to deliver a program that meets or can exceed that Standard.

There are several key questions to ask as you seek a vendor. The first is experience. How many exams have they performed? How long have they been in business? Will they give you a list of fire department clients you can call on to ask about the program?

Ask if they follow NFPA 1582. Some vendors perform what they call an NFPA 1582 exam but tack on expensive and potentially dangerous screening tests. These are not medically indicated and are excluded from 1582 screening for good reason.

What kind of equipment are they using and does it meet the requirements of NFPA 1582. Some vendors use equipment like stationary bikes that were removed from the standard over 15 years ago. We have seen vendors using suction cup EKG leads that were phased out over 30 years ago.

Who will be performing the testing? Staff is also critical what kind of experience do they have that will ensure that blood draws are easy and painless? What experience and certifications do they have that ensure that pulmonary function testing and hearing testing is performed to the highest standards.

Most importantly who is responsible for the interpretation of the medical data? This should be a physician who knows NFPA 1582 and has extensive experience working with firefighters. Ask to see the credentials and experience of the physician who is backing up the program. Ideally, this person should have experience not only publishing firefighter articles, but also giving presentations at the local, state, and national level. Remember, this is the physician who will be making key decisions regarding the health, safety and wellness of your firefighters and ultimately your department.

By starting with these suggestions, you will be well on your way to ensuring the institution of a successful NFPA 1582 health and wellness program.

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Stay tuned for Part II when we discuss the testing equipment, test day, how to handle clearance issues, and making the most of your results.

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*SiteMed, is a physician owned occupational medicine company specializing in on-site firefighter exams. Drs. Fernandez and Walker have over 32 years combined experience in the occupational medicine industry. They welcome comments or questions at 1-888-837-4819 and through e-mail: [gfernandez@sitemed.net](mailto:gfernandez@sitemed.net) and [lwalker@sitemed.net](mailto:lwalker@sitemed.net).*

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