



# Duty to Service – Evolving Roles in the Fire Service

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WHEN I WAS ASKED by my fire chief to assume the role of department chaplain, I had a general understanding of what the chaplain's responsibilities were, and they were rather limited in scope: say an occasional prayer at dinners and meetings and lead the firematic services when we laid a firefighter to rest.

I'll admit that the first few firematic services for deceased members were challenging, as I was not known as a public speaker, but I managed to do OK.

As time went on and I became more involved in chaplaincy, other opportunities for service to the fire community evolved. I became interested in how I could be more useful in my service to others in their time of need.

An opportunity arose and I joined my county critical incident stress management team, serving as a peer counselor, then as team leader. It soon became abundantly clear to me that there is an ever-increasing need not only for CISM, but also for chaplains to become more involved in the caregiving process, as it relates to CISM.

It became apparent to me that when first responders became emotional after witnessing traumatic events in the performance of their duties, they oftentimes derived a meaningful benefit through a conversation with a chaplain who was part of the CISM team, and who usually had significant fire and/or rescue experience under his/her belt. I consider it a solemn duty to help others get through some of the worst emotional trauma that they will ever encounter.

We in the fire service have our hands full in responding to the ever-increasing number of MVAs and rescue calls – boating

incidents during the warmer months, deadly house fires, acts of terrorism, wildland brush fires, etc. There is never a shortage of difficult calls, when fire chaplains or those with a caring heart and listening ear are being called upon to aid and assist those in need.

Most fire department chiefs and officers understand the value that we as chaplains bring to our departments, not only during times of traumatic events, but also to members who may be undergoing very difficult situations in their personal lives, whether due to challenging health conditions, the death of a family member, separation or divorce, financial hardship, or other causes.

Effective chiefs take a comprehensive approach, staying active in monitoring the emotional well-being of their members, and recognizing those that may need assistance.

A chaplain is oftentimes the first resource called upon by the chief(s) to confer with a member who may be hurting and to offer assistance and counsel. Frequently, it is nothing more than a chat over coffee. We don't preach, we listen and advise, to the best of our abilities.

Many times, all someone needs is a listening ear, and an understanding heart that may be able to bring comfort and solace to this member. We should all care enough to become involved.

A chaplain who is also a member of a CISM team is further trained to administer and/or coordinate additional resources that usually help resolve or at least ameliorate the existing situation. We're often called upon to aid and assist others outside of the fire service, often because we have earned a reputation as

being a good listener, or just a person that is easy to talk to and confide in. This is truly a blessing, as it is a verification that we are effective in what we do.

As chaplains, we tend to put the cares and concerns of others above our own, sometimes to our detriment. That said, we must be careful to strike a balance between our need and desire to help others in need, and our own personal, family, and business lives. It's very easy to let things get out of balance, especially in these evolving times where we are called on more frequently.

Balance is the operative word, and if we can keep things relatively balanced, we will all be in a better position. If after some introspection you find that you can remove or reorder some components of your service in order to make room for more meaningful work, I heartily encourage you to contemplate doing so. Change is inevitable, so make it count.

If you are active as a fire department chaplain or have a caring heart and a listening ear, and you believe you are well-balanced, please consider joining your local or county CISM team as a peer counselor. We can magnify our positive effect on our fellow members and be there for them, and for our neighboring departments, when duty calls. ●

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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