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Why NFPA Matters

to Your Firefighter Training Program

Fire Departments ignore NFPA training standards at great peril; incorporating and tracking NFPA compliance is critical

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In the fire service, it is nearly impossible to turn around without bumping into some aspect of the [National Fire Protection Association](#). NFPA is everywhere. It is heavily leaned upon for fire department policy and purchase decisions. And likewise, it is a favorite pinnata in dayrooms across the country for its lack of “practical application.”

Love it, hate it or land somewhere in between, there is no escaping NFPA guidelines. They are, in essence, the law of our land. That is particularly true when it comes to firefighter training. And this universal acceptance of NFPA standards makes it critical on several fronts why firefighters must be trained to those standards and that training must be accurately recorded.

In order to understand why that is important, we need know what NFPA is and how it functions.

NFPA came into existence in 1896, driven in part by advent of electricity, its fire hazard and of fire sprinkler systems. For a deep dive into the origins of NFPA, read [“History of NFPA.”](#)

While NFPA is active in fire prevention research and community risk reduction education, the backbone of its work is codes and standards.

NFPA says its 300 codes and standards were designed to minimize the risk and effects of fire. They are set by the more than 250 technical committees, comprised of about 9,000 volunteers, that review public input and vote on revisions. The process is accredited by the [American National Standards Institute](#).

The NFPA standards development process allows for public comment at different stages. All NFPA standards are revised and updated every three to five years, in revision cycles that begin twice each year. The committee must reach a consensus in order to act on an item. Normally a standard’s cycle takes about two years to complete.

With each technical committee, NFPA tries to strike a balance of different interests, with no more than one-third of the committee from the same interest category. For example, the committees typically have subject matter experts from different size fire departments and private industry.

Where it comes to training, NFPA provide standards for how firefighters and officers should be trained as well as complete courses that meet those training standards.

By themselves, NFPA training standards are not law. They are agreed upon, consistent best practices that departments can choose to follow. NFPA does not have the approval from Congress to require or enforce its standards as does an agency like the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

NFPA standards get their teeth, however, when agencies with legal authority adopt NFPA standards as their own—allowing that agency to require and enforce the standards with the backing of law. This often plays out when state-level OSHA departments adopt NFPA regulations.

Noted fire service legal expert and attorney Curt Varone wrote about this issue in a piece published by [Firehouse Magazine](#).



“The connection between the fire service and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration is a bit strange,” he wrote. “Federal OSHA does not have jurisdiction over state and municipal firefighters. States may choose to require compliance with federal OSHA standards. Even then, it is the state, not federal OSHA, that bears responsibility for enforcing the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 requirements for public employees. Nevertheless, OSHA plays an important role in setting minimum health and safety standards for firefighters.”

Varone further cautions that fire departments need to have updated policies that reflect the current standards. Those policies must show that there is an expectation that the highest standards will be met. The idea, he writes, that not having a policy will give departments a way to wiggle out of trouble is antiquated and begging for trouble.

“Today, the ‘wiggle room’ advocated by fans of the old-school approach is nothing short of a liability trap,” he [wrote for Firehouse](#). “Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations and National Fire Protection Association standards serve as objective measures of what firefighters should do in many commonly reoccurring situations. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and others that investigate firefighter fatalities and significant events similarly make well-reasoned recommendations that have policy implications.”

NFPA standards also get teeth when an incident comes before a civil or criminal court. When trying to determine if a fire department’s members acted in ways that caused or failed to prevent injury, death or property loss, courts want to know what the industry standard best practices are and if those were followed.

So, what does all this have to do with training to NFPA standards?

First, we have a moral obligation to train firefighters to the highest standard to give them the best chance of not being injured, stricken by job-related illness, and protecting the public’s life and property. NFPA is that highest standard shared across the industry.

Think of training to NFPA standards as purchasing PPE or apparatus to NFPA standards. You wouldn’t buy turnout gear that didn’t meet NFPA standards because of the risk to the firefighter. The same holds true for training requirements.

Second, we have an obligation to the fire department and the taxpayers to protect the department from legal damages. When something goes so wrong that it ends up in court, a fire department will have to answer some pointed questions. It will need to show that it had proper standards and policies in place, and that those were enforced. If it did, the question becomes were firefighters properly trained and did someone deviate from those trained-upon standards and policies before or during the incident?



As important as comparing the actions taken with the standards and policies, are questions of training. A fire department will have to show—not tell—that it trained its people to the highest standards. Again, those standards are NFPA standards.

Matt Shrouts, a solutions engineer with Vector Solutions, says the risk of liability goes way up with inaccurate records. “Nothing puts your agency at more vulnerability than poor documentation, he says. “If you didn’t document it, it didn’t happen.”

To protect itself, a fire department needs a training platform that is based on NFPA training standards and one that accurately records what that training was, when it was done, who participated in the training and the testing results from that training.

Writing for [HGExperts.com](https://www.hgexperts.com), John Murphy, a retired deputy fire chief and attorney, said, “Yes there is a danger to train to a standard other than a national standard. In today’s litigious society, an injured firefighter will be looking to place the blame for their injuries on a deep pocket organization like yours for your failure to correctly train the firefighter to a nationally recognized standard.”

As mentioned, there are a lot of NFPA standards and codes. A comprehensive firefighter training platform will cover all the relevant NFPA standards, and—as does Vector Solutions’ Learning Management System—it will tie the

completed training to ISO requirements, getting maximum credit for the training.

There are, however, three NFPA training standards that deserve closer attention, as they are the areas most likely to land a fire department in trouble if they are overlooked.

The first, of course, is [NFPA 1001: Standard for Fire Fighter Professional Qualification](#). First adopted in November 1974, this standard was established to give a means to measure if individuals met minimum qualifications to be firefighters. The standard was updated through the years and had a complete revision in 2008.

The 35-page standard was most recently updated in 2019 and spells out what it takes to be qualified for Firefighter I and Firefighter II.

Murphy writes why it is such an important standard to follow.

“Regardless of whether compliance with an NFPA standard is voluntary or mandatory, fire and rescue departments must consider the impact of ‘voluntary’ standards on civil (tort) litigation,” he writes. “In some states, a department may be liable for the negligent performance of their duties. Even in states that protect rescue workers under an immunity statute, most state laws do not protect fire or rescue departments for grossly negligent acts.”

There is an expectation that Firefighter I and II skills training does not end at the last day of recruit academy.



In fact, some states require firefighters renew their certifications every few years much like EMTs and paramedics must renew their licenses. Even states that don't require recertification still fall under the guidelines of ISO, which sets fire department capability ranking in part based on how much specific training firefighters do each year.

Equally important is training to [NFPA 1021: Standard for Fire Officer Professional Qualifications](#). Because when something goes wrong, the first thing anyone wants to know is who is in charge here.

Like NFPA 1001, 1021 is one of the courses Vector Solution's LMS learning platform covers. In a [recent webinar](#), Tim Riley, a former training officer and one of Vector's solutions engineers, said he built training requirements that made officer candidates complete NFPA 1021 and other training measurables before taking the officer test. He put the onus on the acting officers to complete online and hands-on (ride time in the officer's seat) training and the officer to confirm that training was done right.

On the same webinar, David Haines, also a former training officer and Vector Solutions' solutions engineer, said he created an officer academy in Vector Solutions LMS with NFPA courses and other training material in a tiered format where the officer candidate couldn't move on to the next level until the preceding ones were successfully completed.

Both Haines and Riley stress the importance of including the department's policies and procedures as part of the officer training—and, of course, making sure those policies line up with NFPA requirements.

Again, developing high-quality officers for everyone's safety and effectiveness is the primary goal of any training program. But coming in a close second is reducing the department's exposure to liability.

The last area where liability and training are major factors in the fire service is emergency vehicle operations. That training is covered by [NFPA 1451: Standard for Fire and Emergency Services Vehicle Operations Training Program](#).

Do a quick web search on "crashes involving emergency vehicles" and you'll find most of the top results returned are from law firms citing fire, police and EMS crash statistics—and offering to help those involved in such crashes go after legal damages. And emergency vehicle crashes continue to be a leading cause of firefighter and medic line-of-duty injury and death.

Going back to 2010, [National Safety Council data](#) shows that there are between 10 and 25 fatalities per year from crashes involving fire apparatus—both emergency and nonemergency runs. For ambulances, the average deaths sits at near 30 per year. The U.S. Fire Administration contributed 14 firefighter line-of-duty deaths in 2020 to going to or returning from an emergency.



Vector Solutions' LMS training module on driver safety estimates there are as many as 15,000 fire apparatus crashes per year, and that that number is likely underreported. The costs to fire departments for a crash can range from \$16,000 to more than \$500,000 depending on if there were injuries or fatalities.

Writing for the [National Volunteer Fire Council](#), Chris Daly emphasizes the need for proper NFPA-based driver training and documentation.

"I have been called as an expert witness in several emergency vehicle crash-related lawsuits throughout the country and each time I am called, the first thing I ask for are the fire department's training records and policy manuals," Daly writes. "What I can tell you from having been involved in several of these lawsuits is that the departments that have a documented NFPA-compliant driver training program are almost always better suited to protect and defend themselves in a lawsuit."

IFSTA Executive Director Mike Weider also recommends drivers be trained to [NFPA 1002: Standard for Fire Apparatus Driver/Operator Professional Qualifications](#).

"Driving to and from emergency calls is the most dangerous activity a firefighter does on a daily basis, and the implications drawn from this are obvious," he said in [a safety video](#) for the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. "All drivers must be trained to the national standards, NFPA 1002 specifically, which offers theoretical and practical recommendations of knowledge needed for each apparatus type."

In short, industry experts agree on the need to train to the highest industry standards on an aspect of emergency response that poses a tremendous risk to firefighter and civilian safety—to say nothing of the costs and potential legal consequences of an apparatus-involved crash.

Incorporating and tracking NFPA-compliant training with a robust learning platform is among the most "practical applications" a fire department can do to ensure its own success.

Quick Take: Vector Solutions' LMS

This learning management system allows fire departments to establish reoccurring and unique training requirements. Departments can incorporate Vector Solutions' NFPA and outside-source training material, then assign, test and track firefighters' progress. The industry's leading online platform features more than 450 hours of fire department and EMS recertification training, including a series of courses written to the NFPA's codes and standards for 1001, 1021, 1500, 1410 and more.

Vector LMS keeps firefighters in compliance by tracking exactly how much training—hands-on and online coursework—was completed by each firefighter. It also automatically slots those completed training into the corresponding compliance requirements as set out by the department or local or state authority. Additionally, it will designate them into the appropriate ISO categories.

The platform will monitor firefighters' individual certifications for upcoming expirations and alert them and administrators of those impending dates. It also allows administrators to quickly run training reports based on the data they require. For more information, please visit www.vectorsolutions.com/fire.