



# VFIS<sup>®</sup> news

Bringing important information to emergency service organizations

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## Firefighter Rehab!

*On the afternoon of April 8, 2006, a firefighter attending a live fire training exercise at the Comox Fire Training Centre in British Columbia, Canada suffered a heart attack as a result of heat stroke and dehydration. He collapsed during a rest break while wearing full personal protective equipment. He immediately received first aid (including oxygen and AED) and was taken to a hospital less than a kilometer away, where he DIED. This firefighter was fifty-two years old, in very good physical shape, and had recently been given a clean bill of health from his doctor. He had only participated in exterior fire attack operations (vehicles, etc.) before he collapsed. He had not participated in any interior structure fire attacks, which are typically hotter than exterior fire attacks.*

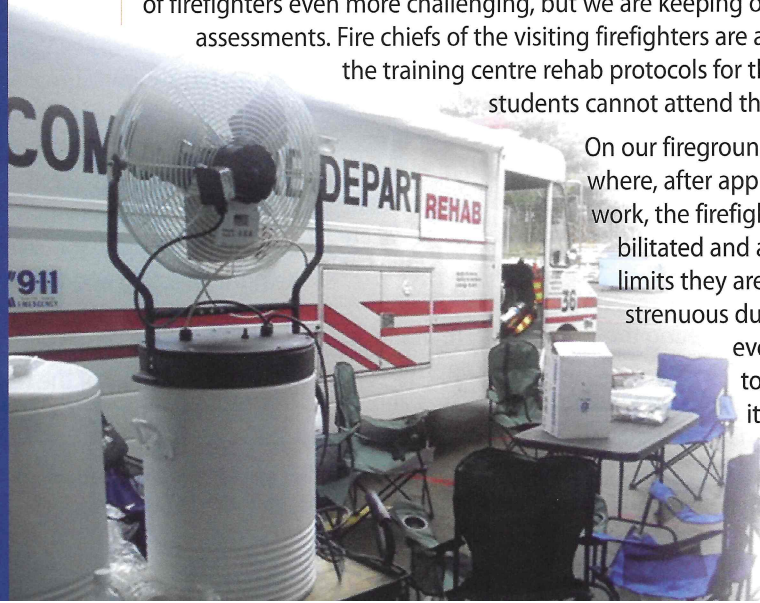
***For Comox Fire Rescue and its Training Centre this event changed everything.***

*Chief Gord Schreiner explains:*

In the past, we treated our firefighters as most other fire departments did. We worked them hard and gave them a water break every once in a while. This unfortunate death changed all that for us. We now have a very formal Firefighter Rehab policy and procedure.

In our training centre, students are assessed before they start training, and if they don't meet some very strict medical protocols they are not allowed to participate in the training. We have found that about one in ten students do not meet the accepted medical standards we have put in place. During their training day, the students are constantly re-assessed, and if they fall outside of acceptable limits, their training ends at that time for the day. This makes training and certification of firefighters even more challenging, but we are keeping our students much safer by doing these assessments. Fire chiefs of the visiting firefighters are asked to sign a form agreeing to follow the training centre rehab protocols for their students. If they don't sign, their students cannot attend the training centre.

On our firegrounds, we have adopted a similar approach where, after approximately thirty minutes of strenuous work, the firefighters are sent to a rehab area to be rehabilitated and assessed. If they fall outside of acceptable limits they are not allowed to continue with their strenuous duties. For us, rehab is now a FUNCTION of every emergency and training event. Due to the nature of our emergency business it is not practical to assess a firefighter before each incident, so we do monthly assessments.



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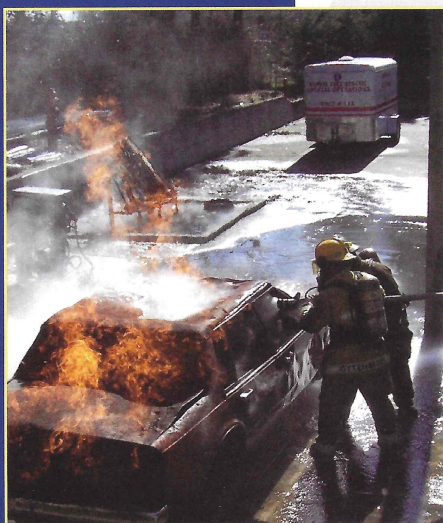
## Firefighter Rehab!

*Continued from cover*

Earlier this year, the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA), working in partnership with the International Association of Fire Fighters, studied critical health and safety issues and updated the 1992 USFA document, **Emergency Incident Rehabilitation**. This project also examined areas of emergency incident rehabilitation not discussed in the original manual.

The new **Emergency Incident Rehabilitation** manual covers critical related topics, including operational issues, human physiology, weather issues, and technology. The report addresses ways to better protect firefighters and other emergency responders through the use of proper protective clothing and improved tactical procedures.

For more information, and to download the report, please visit <http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/fireservice/research/safety/incident.shtm>.



Comox Fire Rescue researched what others were doing and devised a rehab program that would work for them. The program incorporates basics like hydration and food and includes medical monitoring of each firefighter's pulse, blood pressure, temperature, and oxygen and carbon monoxide saturations. They added equipment, including misting fans, rehab chairs, automatic blood pressure cuffs, CO/Ox meters, coolers, towels and more drinks and food on the fire apparatus.

Chief Schreiner says, "Our firefighters are our number one assets; we need to do all we can to ensure they are safe and come home from every incident or training session." A rehab program can be very simple or more complex, depending on your needs. One simple step is to ensure firefighters have fluids in the cab of the fire apparatus so they can hydrate on the way to an incident instead of during or after.

Shreiner adds, "This simple little step can greatly assist your firefighters in doing their jobs more safely, because we don't know when the next incident will happen or when our firefighters last had some fluids." According to Shreiner, a more complete program should include medical monitoring during the incidents and at all training sessions. This is a function the Comox Fire Department has taken on at the operational level.

"Many fire departments use their local EMS service to provide this function," says Shreiner, "but we wanted to take our program to the next level.

Because we are a small community we cannot always get EMS to attend our incidents, and if we do, they might [have to] leave with a patient from the incident, leave with a firefighter needing advanced medical attention, or [report] to another incident. They may leave while we are doing mop-up or salvage. We need to ensure that Rehab is always there meeting the needs of our firefighters. So we include this very important function with our staging area and staging management. It's run by firefighters, for firefighters. That way we control it; however, we still request

EMS to stand by in case a firefighter needs to go for more advanced treatment."

Chief Schreiner notes that this, of course, takes additional resources, which may be met by using mutual aid or older members who may no longer be fit enough to provide suppression duties. "I look at it a lot like RIT [Rapid Intervention Team]," Schreiner comments. "When RIT started we wondered how we would manage it; now we wonder how we ever did without it. Rehab is much the same. If you aren't doing it yet, you will be soon."

At the Comox Fire Training Centre an additional staff person has been assigned specifically to the function of firefighter rehab. While this has increased the operating costs of the training centre, Schreiner feels it is very well worth the cost. It has also added a whole new focus to firefighter health and wellness. Schreiner observes, "I have seen some of my firefighters change their diet and increase their fitness because they want to ensure they can pass the rehab protocols."

Rehab is so important that the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA) has recently included it as a recommended standard (NFPA 1584) for all fire departments. Schreiner points out that firefighting is an extremely challenging job. Firefighters need to be in very good physical shape to perform their duties. Comparing a firefighter to an elite athlete is a good evaluation. Athletes train a lot, practice their skills, stretch their bodies, and eat and drink properly, especially right before an event. A firefighter needs to do as much of this as he or she can, knowing that it is almost impossible to have just the right foods, fluids and stretching right before an incident.

Captain Corey Brooks of Comox Fire Rescue recently delivered three workshops on Firefighter Rehab to over 150 fire chiefs at the annual convention of the Fire Chiefs Association of British Columbia. Brooks says, "I was very impressed and pleased to see so many fire departments interested in this program. It shows that our industry is moving in the right direction and that we can all learn from each other. The fire service has largely been built on sharing and exchanging ideas, and we are happy to share any and all of the rehab [materials] that we have put together." 🌟

For more information, please contact Fire Chief Gord Schreiner at [firehall@comox.ca](mailto:firehall@comox.ca).