

Wellness program working out for firefighters

Injuries down, wellness up for Peoria firefighters since starting mandatory workouts

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Peoria firefighter Mike Ralston lifts weights in the workout room at Central House on Monday afternoon. Peoria firefighters are required to work out at least one hour during each 24-hour shift, and they also take part in extensive physical evaluations. The wellness program was designed to cut down on the high number of deaths associated with heart disease and the number of firefighters who die shortly after retirement.

PEORIA — Maybe it's the exposure to extreme heat, carbon monoxide, cyanide and other toxic gases and chemicals. It could be the heavy equipment and bursts of physical exertion. Or perhaps it's going directly from peaceful sleep to the adrenaline rush of a fire alarm. Whatever the reason, firefighters are particularly susceptible to heart attacks. According to the International Association of Fire Fighters, 45 percent of on-duty deaths are caused by heart disease.

Since 2007, measures to address those concerns have been a part of Peoria firefighters' collectively bargained contracts. Peoria firefighters are required to work out at least one hour during each 24-hour shift, and they also take part in extensive physical evaluations compiled by the Illinois Work Injury Resource Center in Peoria.

"When we first started it, I was skeptical," said Kent Tomblin, chief of the Peoria Fire Department. "But this is something we don't ever plan on getting rid of. We know this is a great benefit to us. "This has been a very good year for us. On strains and sprains, we have a whole lot less of them. Our sick-time usage is down, too. Healthy people make it to work more."

Once a year, firefighters report to IWIRC, which evaluates a wide range of health indicators, including blood pressure, maximum heart rate, oxygen consumption, body fat, weight, range of motion and cholesterol level.

IWIRC's Physical Abilities Statistical Analysis comparing 2007 and '08 results showed dramatic second-year improvements in several areas. In body fat, firefighters in the "athlete" category - defined as between 5 percent and 13 percent body fat for a male, or 13 percent to 20 percent for a female - increased from 46 percent to 65 percent from one year to the next.

There also were significant improvements in the areas of VO2 max, a measurement of cardiovascular fitness. The number of firefighters capable of doing 50 or more pushups jumped from 5 percent to 10 percent, and those who could do 60 or more pushups in three minutes increased from 4 percent to 9 percent. Screenings also led to the early detection of two serious health issues: one employee with a faulty heart valve and another with prostate cancer.

Tomblin expects continued statistical improvements in overall health for the next one to three years as the wellness program takes hold. "Then we'll level off," Tomblin said. "That will be the bar that we need to follow from that point."

Tomblin and Tony Ardis, president of Peoria Firefighters Union Local 50, said the wellness program became part of the contract in response to not only the high number of deaths associated with heart disease but also the number of firefighters who die shortly after retirement.

"This is about prevention, which is being talked about a lot these days in the medical field," Tomblin said. "When we see our brothers dying of heart attacks, we can't ignore it. We need to step up and do something."

Dr. Dru Hauter, a physician at IWIRC who has worked with several police and fire departments in Illinois, said Peoria firefighters have bought into the program more enthusiastically than any other department. "Firefighters have two big fears," Hauter said. "One of them, we aren't going to talk about. The other is that they aren't going to live long after retirement."

IWIRC's program eats \$94,000 from the Peoria Fire Department's 2008 budget. Tomblin said the program more than pays for itself by dramatically reducing sick and injury days. In a typical year, there are a minimum of 50 injury claims. Heading into the final four months of the 2009, Tomblin said the number was 30. Factoring in medical bills, rehabilitation and overtime it takes to replace an injured employee, Tomblin said the elimination of one long-term injury alone is worth the \$94,000 cost.

Hauter said firefighters' competitive nature fuels the success. After evaluations, he hands out "bragging sheets" that detail each firefighter's areas of strength. "We're obviously Type A personalities by nature," Ardis said. "We think, 'I just saw him bench press 270 (pounds), so I need to do 280. His body fat is 7 percent, so I want mine to be 6.' There is definitely a competitive aspect."

Sometimes, the desire to keep up leads to lifestyle changes, such as improved diets or quitting smoking. "A guy starts walking on the treadmill a little more and he's feeling better, and it takes off from there," Ardis said. New recruits will be exposed to wellness initiatives throughout their careers rather than needing to change habits along the way.

"You get with guys who are healthy and competitive, you don't want to be the one who's holding them back," said Capt. Marcus Rutledge, who has dropped about 20 pounds since the wellness program was implemented. Rutledge, 40, said he has dropped his body fat, cholesterol numbers and blood pressure. That is a result of subtle, long-term changes, such as small improvements in his diet and an increased frequency of workouts. "The farther you get away from exercising, the easier it is to just forget about it," said Rutledge, a Peoria firefighter for 19 years. "This program makes it a way of life. You work out every shift."

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